

# SECTION 54

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 2013 | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

## OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 54 was received in June 1831 amidst a crisis of community and property. Leman Copley, a convert from the Shakers, had previously covenanted to consecrate his farm to the Church to settle the incoming Saints from Colesville, New York. When Copley reneged on this agreement and evicted the Saints, Newel Knight sought guidance from Joseph Smith. The revelation declares the covenant 'void' due to Copley's transgression and pronounces a woe upon him. Conversely, it promises mercy to those who have kept their covenants. The text commands the displaced Saints to flee the area immediately to avoid enemies and journey westward to Missouri ('the borders of the Lamanites'). It underscores the fragility of communal covenants when participants are unfaithful and reorients the community toward a new gathering place in Zion, emphasizing patience in tribulation and the imminent return of Christ.

## KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Joseph Smith (The Prophet), Newel Knight (Recipient/Leader), Leman Copley (The Covenant Breaker, unnamed in text but contextually central)

## DOCTRINES ANALYZED

### 1. CONDITIONAL COVENANT VALIDITY

**Assertion:** Covenants made with God can become void and ineffective if the human participant breaks their promise.

*"And as the covenant which they made unto me has been broken, even so it has become void and of none effect." (D&C 54:4)*

**Evangelical Comparison:** In this text, the validity of the covenant appears dependent on human adherence; when Copley sinned, the covenant became 'void.' In Evangelical theology, particularly regarding salvation, the New Covenant is unilateral in its security—it rests on the finished work of Christ (Hebrews 9:15). While human disobedience has consequences, it does not nullify God's covenantal faithfulness to His elect (2 Timothy 2:13). This text implies a fragility to divine covenants that places the burden of maintenance on the human agent.

### 2. MERIT-BASED MERCY

**Assertion:** Mercy is a conditional blessing granted to those who successfully keep commandments and covenants.

*"But blessed are they who have kept the covenant and observed the commandment, for they shall obtain mercy." (D&C 54:6)*

**Evangelical Comparison:** The text states that those who 'kept the covenant' are the ones who 'obtain mercy.' This reverses the biblical order of salvation found in Titus 3:5 ('Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us'). In Evangelicalism, mercy is the cause of obedience, not the result of it. Here, mercy functions as a reward for successful performance, which redefines the term from 'unmerited favor' to 'covenantal blessing for obedience.'

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

**Divergence Status:** Yes

**Theological Gap:** The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of the covenant. D&C 54:4-6 establishes a bilateral contract: if the human breaks it, the contract is void, and mercy is withheld. This creates a system of probation where standing with God is constantly at risk based on performance. Evangelical theology posits a unilateral Covenant of Grace established by Christ, where He fulfills the terms on behalf of the believer. In D&C 54, the believer must 'keep the covenant' to get mercy; in the Bible, the believer receives mercy to be empowered to live for God.

**Shared Values:**

Necessity of repentance; Humility before God; Patience in tribulation; Belief in the Second Coming

### Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – Mercy is conditioned upon works (keeping the covenant), denying that grace is unmerited.
2. [Major] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – The stability of the covenant rests on human faithfulness rather than Christ's sufficiency as the Mediator.

### Semantic Warnings:

#### "Mercy"

**In Text:** A blessing obtained by keeping covenants and commandments (v6).

**Evangelical:** Compassion shown to an offender who has no claim to it; unmerited favor (Ephesians 2:4-5).

**Example:** *In D&C 54:6, mercy is the result of obedience. In Titus 3:5, mercy is the cause of salvation despite a lack of obedience.*

#### "Covenant"

**In Text:** An agreement that becomes void and of no effect if broken by the human party (v4).

**Evangelical:** In the New Testament context, a binding promise secured by the blood of Christ, which remains faithful even when humans are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13).

**Example:** *The text says the covenant is void because it was broken; Biblical theology says the New Covenant is eternal (Hebrews 13:20).*

## SOTERIOLOGY

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**Salvation Defined:** Implicitly linked to 'obtaining mercy' and finding 'rest to their souls' (v10).

**How Attained:** By repenting, becoming humble, and specifically 'keeping the covenant' (v6).

**Basis of Assurance:** Assurance is based on personal fidelity to the covenant; if one breaks it, it becomes void.

**Comparison to Sola Fide:** The text explicitly links obtaining mercy to 'observing the commandment' (v6), which is a rejection of justification by faith alone (Romans 3:28).

## MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

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### Explicit Commands:

1. Stand fast in the appointed office (v2)
2. Repent of all sins and become humble (v3)
3. Flee the land of Thompson, Ohio (v7)
4. Appoint a leader and a treasurer (v7)
5. Journey westward to Missouri (v8)
6. Seek a living 'like unto men' temporarily (v9)
7. Be patient in tribulation (v10)

### Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the nullification of previous arrangements due to others' sins
2. Maintain strict obedience to obtain mercy
3. Accept Joseph Smith's directive to relocate families immediately

### Ritual Requirements:

1. Consecration of properties (implied context of the broken covenant)

## EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

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### Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 6, it says those who keep the covenant obtain mercy. How does that fit with the idea that mercy is for those who *\*can't\** keep the law perfectly?

2. Verse 4 says the covenant became void because it was broken. Does God have any covenants that depend on His faithfulness rather than ours?
3. If mercy is a reward for obedience, what is left for the person who fails?

#### **Redemptive Analogies:**

1. The Broken Covenant – Leman Copley failed to keep his promise, causing suffering. This illustrates that humans are covenant-breakers by nature. We need a Covenant Keeper (Jesus) to stand in our place. [Hebrews 7:22 (Jesus as the surety of a better covenant)]
2. The Need for a Home – The Saints were homeless and seeking a place. Jesus promises to prepare a place for us, not based on our journeying, but on His going to the Father. [John 14:2-3]

#### **Spiritual Weight:**

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer is taught that mercy is contingent on their ability to keep the covenant. This creates a cycle where one must be good enough to be forgiven, rather than forgiven to be good.
2. Instability/Insecurity [Moderate] – The text shows that one person's sin (Copley) can uproot an entire community and void a covenant. This implies a spiritual ecosystem where one's standing is fragile and dependent on the group's performance.

### **EPISTEMOLOGY**

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**Knowledge Source:** Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith acting as the mouthpiece of God).

**Verification Method:** Obedience to the prophet's voice is the test of validity; the outcome (mercy) verifies the truth.

**Evangelical Contrast:** Evangelicals test prophecy against Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:21, Acts 17:11). Here, the immediate command of the prophet supersedes previous arrangements and drives the community's movement.

### **TEXTUAL CRITICISM**

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**Dating:** June 10, 1831

**Authorship:** Joseph Smith (dictated)

**Textual Issues:** The revelation was a direct response to a specific local crisis (Leman Copley's eviction of the Saints), illustrating the 'occasional' nature of D&C revelations.