

# SECTION 56

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

## OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 56, received in June 1831, addresses a specific administrative crisis within the early Latter-day Saint movement involving the 'Law of Consecration' and missionary assignments. The revelation was precipitated by the refusal of Ezra Thayre to mobilize for a mission to Missouri due to property disputes involving Frederick G. Williams' farm. In response, Joseph Smith dictates a revelation where the Lord revokes previous commandments given to Thayre and others, establishing a theological precedent that divine commands can be altered or withdrawn based on human 'rebellion' or 'stiffneckedness.' The text issues a stern warning that salvation is contingent upon taking up one's cross and strict obedience to these evolving commandments. It concludes with a dual woe/blessing structure: condemning rich men who withhold substance, condemning poor men who are greedy and lazy, and blessing the 'poor who are pure in heart.' This section underscores the high-stakes nature of administrative obedience in early Mormonism, equating compliance with church assignments to eternal standing.

## KEY FIGURES

The Lord (Voice of the text), Joseph Smith (Prophet/Receiver), Ezra Thayre (Chastised recipient), Thomas B. Marsh (Missionary companion), Selah J. Griffin (Reassigned missionary), Newel Knight (Leader of the Thompson saints)

## DOCTRINES ANALYZED

### 1. DIVINE REVOCATION

**Assertion:** God can and will revoke previous commandments or callings based on the disobedience or rebellion of the recipients.

"Wherefore I, the Lord, command and revoke, as it seemeth me good; and all this to be answered upon the heads of the rebellious (D&C 56:4)"

**Evangelical Comparison:** In Evangelical theology, while God interacts dynamically with history, His moral law and covenantal promises are immutable. Romans 11:29 states that 'the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.' D&C 56:4 introduces a volatility to divine directives, suggesting that God's specific commands (in this case, missionary calls) are fluid and reactive to human behavior. This creates a theological framework where the believer's standing and duty are subject to constant administrative flux, rather than anchored in a finished covenant.

### 2. CONDITIONAL SALVATION VIA OBEDIENCE

**Assertion:** Salvation is explicitly denied to those who do not keep the commandments.

"And he that will not take up his cross and follow me, and keep my commandments, the same shall not be saved. (D&C 56:2)"

**Evangelical Comparison:** This text presents a 'hard' conditionality for salvation. While Evangelicals view good works as the \*fruit\* of salvation (Ephesians 2:10), D&C 56:2 positions commandment-keeping as the \*prerequisite\* for being saved. The text explicitly states that failure to obey results in the negation of salvation ('shall not be saved'), reinforcing the Mormon doctrine that salvation (often equated with Exaltation) is a merit-based reward system rather than a grace-based gift.

### 3. MORAL CULPABILITY OF THE POOR

**Assertion:** Poverty does not equal righteousness; the poor are condemned if they are greedy, lazy, or envious.

"Wo unto you poor men, whose hearts are not broken... whose eyes are full of greediness, and who will not labor with your own hands! (D&C 56:17)"

**Evangelical Comparison:** This doctrine finds significant overlap with Evangelical ethics. The text refuses to romanticize poverty, warning that the poor can be just as spiritually corrupt (through greed and laziness) as the rich (through hoarding). This echoes the Tenth Commandment against coveting and Paul's admonition in 2

Thessalonians 3:10 regarding labor. However, in the context of D&C 56, this is tied to the failure of the 'United Order' (communal living), adding a layer of specific ecclesiastical disobedience to the moral failing.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

**Theological Gap:** The fundamental gap lies in the nature of God and the nature of salvation. D&C 56 portrays a God who is reactive ('I command and revoke'), changing His decrees based on the 'stiffneckedness' of the people. This introduces a theology of instability where the believer's standing is never secure but always contingent on the latest directive. Furthermore, the explicit statement 'he that will not... keep my commandments... shall not be saved' (v2) establishes a works-righteousness soteriology that is incompatible with the Evangelical doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone (Sola Fide). The text conflates administrative compliance (missionary travel, farm disputes) with eternal salvation.

Shared Values:

Necessity of repentance; Concern for the poor; Condemnation of greed and pride; The concept of a 'broken heart and contrite spirit'

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Explicitly states salvation is contingent on keeping commandments (works).
- 2. [Major] Theology Proper (Immutability) – God is depicted as changing His mind ('revoke') based on human actions.

Semantic Warnings:

"Saved"

**In Text:** In this context, likely refers to Exaltation (the highest degree of glory) or remaining in good standing with the Church.  
**Evangelical:** Deliverance from the penalty and power of sin, granted by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8).  
**Example:** D&C 56:2 says the disobedient 'shall not be saved,' implying a loss of eternal life for failing to follow a mission call.

"Commandment"

**In Text:** Often refers to specific administrative orders (e.g., 'go to Missouri') rather than universal moral laws.  
**Evangelical:** Usually refers to God's moral law (Ten Commandments, Law of Christ).  
**Example:** The 'commandment' revoked in verse 5 was a travel itinerary for Thomas B. Marsh.

SOTERIOLOGY

**Salvation Defined:** Being 'saved' involves inheriting the earth (v20), seeing the kingdom of God (v18), and avoiding being 'cut off'.

**How Attained:** Through taking up the cross, following the Lord, and keeping commandments (v2).

**Basis of Assurance:** Assurance is low; it is based on current obedience and avoiding the 'revocation' of God's favor.

**Comparison to Sola Fide:** D&C 56:2 ('he that will not... keep my commandments, the same shall not be saved') stands in direct opposition to Romans 3:28 ('man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Take up the cross and follow the Lord (v2)
- 2. Keep the commandments to be saved (v2)
- 3. Thomas B. Marsh and Selah J. Griffin must travel to Missouri immediately (v5)
- 4. Ezra Thayre must repent of pride and selfishness (v8)
- 5. Ezra Thayre must obey the former commandment regarding his property (v8)

**Implicit Obligations:**

1. Accept the reassignment of missionary companions without complaint
2. Submit to the Prophet's authority to revoke and reissue commands
3. Labor with one's own hands (v17)

**Ritual Requirements:**

1. Repentance (v8, v14)
2. Consecration of property (implied context of v8-10)

**EVANGELISM TOOLKIT**

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**Discovery Questions:**

1. In verse 4, the Lord says He 'commands and revokes.' How does that impact your sense of security in God's promises?
2. Verse 2 says those who don't keep commandments 'shall not be saved.' How many commandments must one keep perfectly to ensure salvation?
3. Do you feel that your salvation is tied to your obedience to church assignments, as Ezra Thayre's was?

**Redemptive Analogies:**

1. Broken Heart and Contrite Spirit – This is the exact posture required for true biblical salvation—not as a work to earn it, but as the reception of grace. [Psalm 51:17, Isaiah 57:15]

**Spiritual Weight:**

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer lives under the threat that failure to obey a specific church assignment (like a mission call) results in the loss of salvation.
2. Instability [Moderate] – The 'Command and Revoke' doctrine creates an environment where God's will is perceived as volatile and reactive, leading to a lack of assurance.

**EPISTEMOLOGY**

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**Knowledge Source:** Prophetic Revelation (The voice of God mediated through Joseph Smith).

**Verification Method:** Obedience to the revelation is the test; failure to obey results in being 'cut off' (v10).

**Evangelical Contrast:** Biblical epistemology relies on the fixed Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16) and the internal witness of the Spirit confirming truth that aligns with Scripture. D&C 56 relies on the immediate authority of the prophet to dictate specific logistical moves (travel to Missouri) as the will of God.

**TEXTUAL CRITICISM**

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**Dating:** June 15, 1831

**Authorship:** Joseph Smith (dictated)

**Textual Issues:** The revelation addresses immediate logistical changes, indicating it was an 'occasional' document later canonized as binding scripture.