

SECTION 68

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 68, received in November 1831, represents a pivotal moment in the ecclesiological and theological development of early Mormonism. It was originally addressed to four elders but expanded to apply to the whole church. The text makes three primary theological assertions that diverge sharply from traditional Christianity. First, it radically expands the definition of 'scripture' (verse 4) to include any words spoken by elders when moved by the Holy Ghost, effectively creating an open canon that places contemporary utterance on par with the Bible. Second, it establishes a complex priesthood hierarchy, claiming that 'literal descendants of Aaron' possess a legal right to the office of Bishop, thereby attempting to restore Old Testament Levitical structures alongside the Melchizedek Priesthood. Third, it institutionalizes the 'age of accountability,' commanding parents to baptize children at age eight. Uniquely, it places the spiritual guilt of the children upon the parents if this instruction is neglected, creating a high-stakes theological burden on family units. The text concludes with instructions on Sabbath observance and warnings against idleness in Zion.

KEY FIGURES

Orson Hyde, Luke S. Johnson, Lyman E. Johnson, William E. McLellin, Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. OPEN CANON AND LIVING SCRIPTURE

Assertion: Any word spoken by an elder when moved by the Holy Ghost is scripture, the will of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation.

"And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture... shall be the voice of the Lord (D&C 68:4)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the canon of Scripture is closed (Jude 3, Revelation 22:18), and while the Holy Spirit illumines believers, their words are never equated with the infallible Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). D&C 68:4 obliterates the distinction between the inspired biblical text and the contemporary preaching of church leaders. This doctrine serves as the epistemological foundation for Mormonism's ability to supersede biblical teaching with modern revelation.

2. SEALING POWER

Assertion: Elders are given power to seal individuals up unto eternal life.

"To you shall be given power to seal them up unto eternal life. (D&C 68:12)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelicalism teaches that the Holy Spirit is the seal of the believer's inheritance, guaranteeing salvation based on Christ's finished work. This text delegates that sealing authority to human agents (elders), suggesting that a priesthood holder controls the final destiny or assurance of the believer, rather than it being solely a function of faith in Christ.

3. PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR SIN

Assertion: If parents do not teach their children to be baptized at age eight, the sin falls upon the heads of the parents.

"And inasmuch as parents have children... that teach them not... the sin be upon the heads of the parents. (D&C 68:25)"

Evangelical Comparison: While Christians are called to raise children in the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), the Bible does not transfer the guilt of a child's sin or lack of faith onto the parent. This doctrine introduces a 'vicarious guilt' mechanism where a parent's spiritual standing is negatively impacted by the ritual status of their child, creating immense psychological pressure and a works-based family dynamic.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the text uses Christian terminology (gospel, baptism, Holy Ghost), the definitions are fundamentally altered. The most critical gap is the authority structure: Verse 4 elevates human utterance to the level of God's Word, destroying the Sola Scriptura safeguard. Furthermore, the soteriology is heavily mediated; salvation requires specific priesthood ordinances (v12, v20) and is threatened by the failures of one's parents (v25), contradicting the Evangelical understanding of immediate, unmediated access to God through Christ alone (1 Timothy 2:5).

Shared Values:

Importance of evangelism; Belief in the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Ghost mentioned in v8, though defined differently elsewhere); Moral instruction of children; Sabbath observance

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Explicitly states that contemporary words of elders are 'scripture' and 'the voice of the Lord.'
- 2. [Major] Christology / Sola Fide – Delegates the power to 'seal up unto eternal life' to human agents, implying Christ's work is insufficient without priesthood mediation.
- 3. [Major] Individual Responsibility (Ezekiel 18) – Assigns the guilt of sin to parents for the failures of their children regarding baptism.

Semantic Warnings:

<p>"Scripture"</p> <p>In Text: Any word spoken by an elder when moved by the Holy Ghost (v4).</p> <p>Evangelical: The closed canon of the Old and New Testaments (2 Timothy 3:16).</p> <p>Example: <i>In this text, a modern sermon can be 'scripture'; in Evangelicalism, only the Bible is Scripture.</i></p>
<p>"Bishop"</p> <p>In Text: A specific priesthood office tied to the Aaronic lineage or High Priesthood, presiding over temporal affairs.</p> <p>Evangelical: An overseer/pastor (episkopos) qualified by character, not lineage (1 Timothy 3).</p> <p>Example: <i>The text claims a 'legal right' to the office based on bloodline (v16), whereas the Bible bases it on character.</i></p>
<p>"Saved"</p> <p>In Text: Requires belief, baptism, and potentially 'sealing' (v9, v12).</p> <p>Evangelical: Justification by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9).</p> <p>Example: <i>Verse 9 links salvation directly to the act of baptism.</i></p>

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Belief, baptism, and being 'sealed up unto eternal life' (v9, v12).

How Attained: Through faith, repentance, and mandatory ordinances (baptism) administered by authorized priesthood holders.

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is derived from the 'sealing' power of the priesthood (v12) and adherence to covenants.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Verse 9 ('he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved') is often used to argue for baptismal regeneration, contrasting with the Evangelical view that baptism is a fruit of salvation, not a cause (Luke 23:43 - thief on the cross).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Go into all the world and preach the gospel (v8)
- 2. Baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (v8)
- 3. Parents must teach children doctrine and baptism by age eight (v25)
- 4. Observe the Sabbath day (v29)
- 5. Labor diligently; do not be idle (v30)

6. Pray in the season thereof (v33)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the words of presiding elders as the voice of God (v4)
2. Submit to the judicial authority of the First Presidency (v22-23)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism at age eight (v27)
2. Laying on of hands for the Holy Ghost (v25)
3. Ordination of Bishops (v15)
4. Anointing of literal descendants of Aaron (v20)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. Verse 4 says the words of elders are 'scripture' and 'the voice of the Lord.' If an elder today contradicts the Bible, which 'scripture' do you follow?
2. In verse 25, it says the sin is on the parents' heads if they don't teach baptism. How does that make you feel as a parent, knowing your spiritual standing is tied to your child's actions?
3. Verse 12 speaks of men having power to 'seal' others up to eternal life. How does this fit with Ephesians 1:13, which says the Holy Spirit is the one who seals us?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for 'Sealing' – This reflects a deep human longing for security and permanence in relationship with God. [Ephesians 1:13-14 offers the true sealing: 'In him you also... were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance.']
2. Parental Concern – The burden of parenting is heavy, but Christ offers to carry our burdens rather than adding guilt. [Matthew 11:28 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty / Epistemological Instability [Moderate] – By equating current leaders' words with scripture (v4), the believer is forced to constantly shift their beliefs to match the current leadership, creating anxiety when leaders contradict the Bible or past leaders.
2. Dependency on Human Mediation [Severe] – The believer cannot approach God directly for assurance but must rely on priesthood holders to 'seal' them (v12) or validate their standing, creating a spiritual bottleneck.
3. Parental Guilt / Fear [Severe] – Verse 25 places the spiritual weight of a child's choices directly on the parent. If a child leaves the faith, the parent carries the 'sin' and guilt, leading to shame and desperate control dynamics in families.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation through the Prophet and the 'moving of the Holy Ghost' upon elders.

Verification Method: Signs following the believer (v10) and the authority of the First Presidency (v22).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests all spirits against the closed canon of Scripture (1 John 4:1, Acts 17:11). This text suggests that the subjective experience of the speaker (moved by the Holy Ghost) validates the message as scripture, removing the objective standard of the Bible.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: November 1, 1831 (Expanded in 1835).

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated).

Textual Issues: The 1831 version was significantly altered for the 1835 publication to include more developed theology on the First Presidency and High Priesthood, which did not exist in the same form in 1831. This is a case of retroactive theology being inserted into earlier historical records.