

SECTION 76

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 76, often simply called 'The Vision,' represents a seminal moment in the theological development of Latter-day Saint eschatology. Received by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in 1832 while translating the Gospel of John, this text fundamentally rejects the traditional Christian binary of Heaven and Hell. Instead, it posits a nearly universal salvation where almost all humanity inherits a kingdom of glory. The text delineates three distinct kingdoms: the Celestial (for the valiant who receive ordinances), the Terrestrial (for the honorable but blinded or less valiant), and the Telestial (for the wicked who suffer temporary hell before redemption). It also introduces the concept of 'Sons of Perdition'—apostates who commit the unpardonable sin and are cast into outer darkness. Theologically, this section introduces the doctrine of deification ('they are gods') and establishes that while resurrection is a free gift of Christ, the quality of eternal life (Exaltation) is contingent upon specific rites (baptism) and personal valiancy.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Son), God the Father, Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Lucifer (Perdition), Holy Spirit

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THREE DEGREES OF GLORY

Assertion: Heaven is divided into three kingdoms (Celestial, Terrestrial, Telestial) corresponding to the sun, moon, and stars, rewarding people based on their works and acceptance of Mormon ordinances.

"And the glory of the celestial is one, even as the glory of the sun is one. And the glory of the terrestrial is one, even as the glory of the moon is one. And the glory of the telestial is one... (D&C 76:96-98)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity maintains a strict binary eschatology: eternal life in God's presence for the redeemed, and eternal separation for the unredeemed (Matthew 25:46). D&C 76 replaces this with a graded hierarchy. While it uses Paul's language of 'sun, moon, and stars' (1 Cor 15), it reinterprets these from descriptions of the resurrection body's glory into distinct destinations. This doctrine fundamentally alters the justice of God, suggesting that unrepentant sinners (Telestial) eventually receive a measure of glory after suffering for their own sins, rather than facing eternal separation.

2. DEIFICATION (THEOSIS)

Assertion: Faithful adherents who achieve the Celestial Kingdom become gods.

"Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God— (D&C 76:58)"

Evangelical Comparison: The assertion 'they are gods' (v. 58) is one of the clearest breaks from monotheism in Mormon scripture. Evangelical theology holds that God is ontologically unique, uncreated, and distinct from His creation (Isaiah 43:10). While believers are 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4) in the sense of communicable attributes (holiness, love), they never assume the essence of the Godhead. D&C 76 blurs this line, promising that exalted humans will have 'all things' subject to them in a way that parallels God's sovereignty.

3. SUFFERING FOR OWN SINS

Assertion: The wicked (Telestial heirs) must suffer for their own sins in hell before being redeemed.

"These are they who shall not be redeemed from the devil until the last resurrection... (D&C 76:85)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, Christ's sacrifice is the only propitiation for sin (1 John 2:2). If a soul suffers for their own sin, they are lost; they cannot 'pay off' the debt and then be redeemed. D&C 76 teaches a form of purgatorial universalism where the wicked suffer 'wrath' and 'vengeance' (v. 104-105) until the last resurrection, after which they are saved into the Telestial kingdom. This suggests Christ's atonement is not the exclusive means of satisfying divine justice for the wicked.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The theological gap is immense. D&C 76 moves the goal of the Christian life from 'glorifying God and enjoying Him forever' to 'becoming gods' (v. 58). It redefines the Atonement: in the Bible, Christ's death is the sole sufficient payment for sin. In D&C 76, the wicked must suffer for their own sins in hell before being redeemed to a lower kingdom (v. 85, 104-106). Furthermore, the requirement of 'valiancy' (v. 79) for the highest salvation introduces a subjective, works-based anxiety that contradicts the assurance of salvation found in 1 John 5:13.

Shared Values:

Jesus is the Savior and Only Begotten of the Father; Resurrection is universal; Satan is a real, personal adversary; Sin has consequences; God is merciful and gracious

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Claims the Bible is incomplete and requires new vision to explain the afterlife.
- 2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Celestial glory requires baptism and 'keeping the commandments' (v. 52).
- 3. [Critical] Theology Proper – Teaches humans can become gods (v. 58).
- 4. [Major] Christology – Suggests Christ's atonement is not immediately sufficient for the wicked, who must suffer wrath first.

Semantic Warnings:

"Salvation"

In Text: Resurrection to *any* degree of glory (Telestial, Terrestrial, or Celestial).
Evangelical: Deliverance from the wrath of God and eternal communion with Him (Romans 5:9).
Example: *In D&C 76:42, 'all might be saved' implies universal resurrection, not universal entrance into God's presence.*

"Eternal Life"

In Text: Exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom (Godhood).
Evangelical: Knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3); synonymous with salvation.
Example: *A Mormon may say they are 'saved' (resurrected) but not sure if they have 'eternal life' (Celestial glory).*

"Hell"

In Text: A temporary holding place (Spirit Prison) where the wicked suffer before Telestial resurrection.
Evangelical: Eternal separation from God (Matthew 25:46).
Example: *D&C 76:84-85 describes people thrust down to hell who are later redeemed.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Bifurcated: 'Salvation' is universal resurrection; 'Exaltation' is life in the Celestial Kingdom as a god.

How Attained: General salvation by grace/resurrection; Exaltation by ordinances, obedience, and valiancy.

Basis of Assurance: Low assurance; dependent on maintaining 'valiancy' and worthiness.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly contradicts Sola Fide. Verse 51-52 explicitly links the resurrection of the just to baptism and commandment-keeping, not faith alone.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Receive the testimony of Jesus (v. 51)
- 2. Be baptized by immersion (v. 51)
- 3. Keep the commandments (v. 52)
- 4. Purify themselves before Him (v. 116)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Be 'valiant' in the testimony of Jesus (v. 79)
2. Seek the 'mysteries' of the kingdom through the Spirit (v. 114-117)
3. Accept Joseph Smith's vision as authoritative testimony

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by immersion
2. Laying on of hands for the Holy Spirit
3. Sealing by the Holy Spirit of Promise

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 79, it mentions those who are 'not valiant in the testimony of Jesus' go to the Terrestrial kingdom. How do you define 'valiant' enough to ensure you don't end up there?
2. Verse 58 says those in the Celestial kingdom 'are gods.' How does that fit with Isaiah's statement that before God no god was formed, nor shall be after Him?
3. If the Telestial heirs have to suffer for their own sins (v. 104-106) before being redeemed, what does that imply about the sufficiency of Jesus's payment on the cross?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for Justice – The text reflects a human intuition that a 'good neighbor' shouldn't share the same fate as a tyrant. The Gospel answers this not with tiered heavens, but with the concept of degrees of punishment/reward *within* the binary, and ultimately, that *no one* is good enough (Romans 3:23), necessitating Christ's perfect righteousness imputed to us. [Romans 3:22-24]
2. Glory – Humans were made for glory. The Bible promises we will be glorified with Christ, not as independent gods, but as mirrors reflecting His glory. [2 Corinthians 3:18]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Perfectionism [Severe] – The requirement to be 'valiant' (v. 79) creates a perpetual fear that one is merely 'honorable' (Terrestrial) rather than fully devoted. Since the standard for the Celestial Kingdom is perfection (eventually), the believer is on a treadmill of works.
2. Epistemological Uncertainty [Moderate] – By claiming the Bible is lost/broken (Intro), the believer loses the objective anchor of Scripture and becomes dependent on the shifting revelations of modern prophets and subjective spiritual experiences.
3. Diminished Assurance [Severe] – Knowing that even 'honorable men' (v. 75) miss God's full presence creates a fear that being a 'good Christian' isn't enough; one must be a 'good Mormon' (ordinances/hierarchy).

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct revelation/vision mediated through the prophet.

Verification Method: Personal revelation via the Holy Spirit to those who 'purify themselves' (v. 116).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective, completed canon of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) illuminated by the Spirit. D&C 76 relies on subjective experience and new revelation that supersedes biblical silence.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: February 16, 1832

Authorship: Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon

Textual Issues: The text is presented as a transcript of a vision. It was later canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants. The theology here evolves significantly from the Book of Mormon, which holds a more traditional heaven/hell binary (e.g., Alma 34:32-35).