

SECTION 86

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

OVERVIEW

Received in December 1832 while Joseph Smith was revising the Bible (the Joseph Smith Translation), Doctrine and Covenants Section 86 offers a distinct eschatological and ecclesiological framework for the nascent Latter-day Saint movement. The text reinterprets Jesus's Parable of the Wheat and Tares (Matthew 13) to validate the core Mormon doctrine of the 'Great Apostasy.' It claims that after the death of the original apostles, the 'great persecutor' (Babylon) sowed tares, effectively driving the true church into the 'wilderness' and stripping the earth of priesthood authority. The revelation identifies the current era as the time when the 'wheat' (the children of the kingdom) is beginning to be gathered again. Crucially, it establishes a theological basis for Joseph Smith's authority not merely through calling, but through 'lineage' and 'flesh,' identifying him and his associates as 'lawful heirs' of an ancient priesthood. It concludes by charging these priesthood holders to be 'a savior unto my people Israel,' foreshadowing the vicarious temple work that would become central to Mormon soteriology.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord, The Apostles (Sowers), Satan/Babylon (The Persecutor), Angels (Reapers), Joseph Smith and associates (Lawful Heirs)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THE GREAT APOSTASY

Assertion: The original Christian church was overcome by Babylon and Satan, driving the true authority into the 'wilderness' until the modern era.

"The tares choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness. (D&C 86:3)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity holds to the indefectibility of the Church—that while errors and corruption occurred, the 'gates of hell' never prevailed against the body of Christ, and the Gospel was never lost. D&C 86 asserts a total institutional failure ('driven into the wilderness') necessitating a complete restoration of authority, rather than a reformation of doctrine.

2. LINEAL PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY

Assertion: Priesthood authority is transmitted through biological lineage ('heirs according to the flesh') and has been hidden with Christ until restored.

"Ye are lawful heirs, according to the flesh... with whom the priesthood hath continued through the lineage of your fathers (D&C 86:8-9)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text reverts to an Old Testament paradigm of authority via physical descent ('lineage of your fathers'). Evangelical theology maintains that under the New Covenant, spiritual adoption is purely by faith in Christ, and priesthood is universal to all believers (1 Peter 2:9), not restricted to a specific genealogical line or hierarchical office.

3. HUMAN SAVIORHOOD

Assertion: Priesthood holders are commanded to function as 'saviors' to Israel.

"Through this priesthood, a savior unto my people Israel. (D&C 86:11)"

Evangelical Comparison: While likely referring to a 'deliverer' role or the later LDS doctrine of proxy temple work ('saviors on Mount Zion'), this terminology blurs the distinction between the Redeemer and the redeemed. Evangelicalism strictly maintains Solus Christus—Christ alone is the Savior, and believers are witnesses, not saviors.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in Ecclesiology and Priesthood. D&C 86 posits that the gates of hell *did* prevail against the church, necessitating a 19th-century restoration. It shifts the basis of authority from the 'priesthood of all believers' (based on Christ's high priesthood) back to a semi-Levitical concept of 'lawful heirs according to the flesh.' Furthermore, it elevates man to the role of 'savior' (small 's'), diluting the uniqueness of Christ's redemptive work.

Shared Values:

Belief in a final judgment (harvest); Existence of Satan/spiritual warfare; The metaphor of believers as wheat

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Ecclesiology / Indefectibility of the Church – Claims the church was driven into the wilderness and overcome by Babylon (Apostasy).
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Restricts authority to 'lawful heirs according to the flesh'.
3. [Major] Sola Fide / New Covenant Theology – Reverts to biological lineage as a basis for spiritual standing ('heirs according to the flesh').
4. [Critical] Solus Christus – Attributes the title/function of 'savior' to human beings.

Semantic Warnings:

"Priesthood"

In Text: The exclusive authority to act in God's name, passed down through specific lineage and ordination.

Evangelical: The status of all believers who have direct access to God through Christ (1 Peter 2:5-9).

Example: *In D&C 86, priesthood is something you 'hold' by lineage; in the NT, priesthood is who you 'are' in Christ.*

"Savior"

In Text: A role for priesthood holders to deliver or redeem others (specifically through temple work).

Evangelical: The unique title of Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5).

Example: *D&C 86:11 commands men to be a savior; Acts 4:12 says there is no other name by which we must be saved.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implied as gathering with the wheat and participating in the priesthood restoration.

How Attained: Through the 'restoration of all things' and the priesthood ordinances.

Basis of Assurance: Being a 'lawful heir' and continuing in goodness.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text focuses on lineage, priesthood authority, and 'continuing in goodness' rather than resting in the finished work of Christ received by faith.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Let wheat and tares grow together until the harvest is fully ripe (v7)
2. Continue in my goodness (v11)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the narrative that the historic Christian church was apostate/lost
2. Recognize Joseph Smith's authority as a 'lawful heir' of ancient priesthood
3. Prepare to act as a 'savior' (perform ordinances) for others

Ritual Requirements:

1. Priesthood ordination (implied by the emphasis on lineage and heirs)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus promised the gates of hell would not prevail against His church. How does D&C 86's claim that the church was 'driven into the wilderness' fit with Jesus' promise?

2. The text mentions being 'lawful heirs according to the flesh.' How do you reconcile this with John 1:13, which says children of God are born 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh'?
3. Verse 11 calls priesthood holders a 'savior unto my people.' How does this relate to the biblical teaching that Jesus is the 'one mediator' (1 Timothy 2:5)?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire to be 'Wheat' – We all desire to be found as true 'wheat' and not 'tares.' The Bible says this transformation happens not by our lineage or works, but by being born again through the imperishable seed of God's Word. [1 Peter 1:23]
2. Heirs of God – The text appeals to a desire for belonging and inheritance. The Gospel offers us the status of 'heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ' through adoption by the Spirit, not physical ancestry. [Romans 8:15-17]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Isolation/Elitism [Moderate] – The belief that the vast majority of Christian history was a 'wilderness' of apostasy creates a heavy burden of isolation. The adherent must believe they are the sole possessors of truth in a world of darkness.
2. Performance/Lineage Anxiety [Mild] – Linking spiritual authority to 'flesh' and 'lineage' can create anxiety about one's worthiness or family history, rather than resting in Christ's merit.
3. Messianic Burden [Severe] – The command to be a 'savior' to others places an impossible burden on the believer. They become responsible for the eternal welfare of their ancestors (via temple work), a weight only Christ can bear.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith speaking for God).

Verification Method: Acceptance of Joseph Smith's role as the restorer and 'heir'.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelicals interpret Matthew 13 via hermeneutics and consistency with the rest of the Canon, not by new revelation that alters the parable's meaning or application.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: December 6, 1832

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: The text modifies the sequence of Matthew 13. In Matthew, tares are gathered first to be burned. In D&C 86:7, wheat is gathered first. This change supports the LDS doctrine of the 'gathering of Israel' occurring before the final judgment.