

SECTION 98

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

OVERVIEW

Given in August 1833 during a period of intense mob violence against Latter-day Saints in Missouri, Doctrine and Covenants Section 98 serves as a divine theodicy and a manual for ethical conduct under persecution. The text begins by assuring the Saints that their prayers are heard by the 'Lord of Sabaoth' and that their afflictions will work for their good. It explicitly endorses the US Constitution as a divinely justifiable document that guarantees freedom. The core of the revelation, however, is the delineation of a specific code of conduct regarding violence and forgiveness, often termed the 'Law of Retribution' or 'Law of Justification.' The text instructs Saints to renounce war and proclaim peace but provides a specific calculus for self-defense: they must bear attacks patiently three times to receive a reward, but upon the fourth attack, they are justified in retaliation and commanded not to forgive unless the enemy repents and makes restitution. This section claims to restore a lost law previously given to ancient patriarchs like Abraham and Nephi, effectively modifying New Testament teachings on non-violence and unconditional forgiveness to fit a context of frontier survival and religious defense.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord (Speaker), Joseph Smith, Saints in Kirtland, Saints in Missouri, Nephi (referenced), Abraham (referenced)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THE LAW OF JUSTIFIED RETALIATION

Assertion: Believers must bear persecution patiently three times; on the fourth offense, if the enemy does not repent, the believer is justified in retaliation and commanded to withhold forgiveness.

"But if he trespass against thee the fourth time thou shalt not forgive him... and if he do not this, I, the Lord, will avenge thee... (D&C 98:44-45)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, derived from Romans 12:19 and Matthew 5:38-48, the prerogative for vengeance belongs solely to God, and believers are called to love enemies unconditionally. D&C 98 introduces a 'three-strike' limit to this grace. While it encourages patience initially, it explicitly authorizes human agents to execute divine justice after a specific quota of offenses is met. This creates a 'dispensational' ethic where New Testament grace is superseded by a restored 'ancient' law of war.

2. CONDITIONAL WORTHINESS THROUGH TESTING

Assertion: God intentionally orchestrates trials to 'prove' whether believers will abide in the covenant; failure to abide results in unworthiness.

"I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me. (D&C 98:14-15)"

Evangelical Comparison: This text presents a 'probationary' view of salvation where the believer's standing before God is contingent upon passing tests of obedience ('prove you'). In contrast, Evangelical soteriology asserts that a believer is 'worthy' only because they are clothed in Christ (Philippians 3:9). The D&C 98 model suggests that God's acceptance is the *result* of the testing process, whereas the Biblical model suggests testing is for sanctification, not for establishing justification or worthiness.

3. DIVINE CONSTITUTIONALISM

Assertion: The US Constitution is a divinely inspired document, and laws aligning with it are justifiable before God.

"And that law of the land which is constitutional... is justifiable before me. (D&C 98:5)"

Evangelical Comparison: D&C 98 elevates the US Constitution to a quasi-scriptural status, asserting that it 'belongs to all mankind' and is 'justifiable before me.' This reflects the specific American-centric eschatology of Mormonism. Evangelical theology affirms God's sovereignty over nations but does not canonize specific

political documents or suggest that a specific nation's laws are the standard for 'all mankind' in a theological sense.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While Evangelicalism upholds the 'Finished Work' of Christ where the believer is fully justified and vengeance is left to God, D&C 98 reintroduces a legalistic framework for ethics and salvation. The 'Law of the Land' and 'Law of War' sections create a theocratic operational code that differs significantly from the New Testament church's posture of non-resistance and martyrdom. Furthermore, the requirement to 'prove' oneself worthy through endurance (v14) fundamentally contradicts the doctrine of Sola Gratia (Grace Alone), placing the burden of final justification on the believer's performance under pressure.

Shared Values:

Sovereignty of God in suffering; Importance of prayer; Desire for peace; Moral responsibility in citizenship

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation/Worthiness is contingent on 'abiding' and passing tests (v14-15).
- 2. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Adds new laws regarding war and forgiveness not found in the Bible and attributes them to biblical figures.
- 3. [Major] Christian Ethics (Sermon on the Mount) – Authorizes vengeance and withholding forgiveness, contradicting Jesus's commands in Matthew 5.
- 4. [Minor] Kingdom of God vs. World – Sacralizes a secular constitution (v5-6), blurring the lines between the Kingdom of God and an earthly nation.

Semantic Warnings:

"Worthy"

In Text: A status achieved by abiding in the covenant and passing tests, even unto death (v14-15).
Evangelical: A status granted to the believer solely through the imputation of Christ's righteousness (Rev 3:4, by His grace).
Example: *In D&C 98, a man is 'worthy' if he endures persecution; in the Bible, the Lamb alone is worthy, and we are worthy in Him.*

"Forgiveness"

In Text: A conditional act required 70x7 for the repentant, but explicitly forbidden after the 4th offense for the unrepentant (v44).
Evangelical: A release of debt commanded by Christ, modeled on God's forgiveness of us, not contingent on the offender's future behavior (Mark 11:25).
Example: *D&C 98 commands 'thou shalt not forgive him' on the 4th offense; Jesus said 'Father forgive them' while they were still crucifying Him.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Finding 'life eternal' (v13) and being found 'worthy' (v14).
How Attained: By laying down one's life for the cause (v13) and abiding in the covenant under testing (v14-15).
Basis of Assurance: Assurance is based on the believer's endurance and obedience to commandments ('if ye observe to do... gates of hell shall not prevail' v22).
Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide by making worthiness a result of the believer's 'abiding' rather than Christ's finished work. See Romans 8:33-39 for the contrast.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Rejoice and give thanks in everything (v1)
- 2. Support constitutional law (v5-6)

3. Uphold honest and wise men for government (v10)
4. Renounce war and proclaim peace (v16)
5. Bear persecution patiently three times (v23-26)
6. Withhold forgiveness on the fourth unrepented offense (v44)
7. Warn the enemy in the name of the Lord (v28)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept persecution as a divine test of worthiness
2. Monitor the number of offenses committed by enemies to know when retaliation is justified
3. Engage in political selection of leadership based on moral criteria

Ritual Requirements:

1. Bring testimonies before the Lord (v44) - implies a formal prayer or temple procedure for seeking divine vengeance

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 44, the Lord commands *not* to forgive an enemy after the fourth offense. How do you reconcile this with Jesus's prayer on the cross for his executioners?
2. Verse 15 says if we don't abide in the covenant, we are 'not worthy' of Him. How does this fit with the idea that Christ died for the *ungodly* (Romans 5:6)?
3. The text mentions a law of war given to Abraham and Isaac (v32). Since this isn't in the Bible, how do we verify that they actually followed this law?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Lord of Sabaoth (Hosts/Armies) – Just as the text appeals to a God who hears the cries of the oppressed, the Gospel presents Christ as the ultimate advocate who not only hears but intercedes for us. [James 5:4, Hebrews 7:25]
2. The desire for Justice – The text shows a deep human need for justice to be satisfied. The Gospel answers this not by our retaliation, but by the Cross where justice was fully satisfied on our behalf. [Romans 3:25-26]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty/Fear [Severe] – The believer must constantly wonder if they have sufficiently 'abided' in the covenant to be found worthy. The threat 'ye are not worthy of me' (v15) hangs over them during trials.
2. Legalism [Moderate] – The believer is burdened with a complex calculus of offenses (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th time) to determine moral standing and the right to self-defense, rather than being led by the Spirit of love.
3. Bitterness [Severe] – By legitimizing the withholding of forgiveness after a certain point, the text allows the believer to hold onto grievances and 'bring testimonies' against enemies, fostering a spirit of judgment rather than grace.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Joseph Smith as conduit).

Verification Method: Experience of the 'trial' (v12) and the promise that prayers are 'recorded' and will be granted (v2).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the sufficiency of written Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). D&C 98 relies on ongoing, situational revelation that can modify or expand upon biblical ethics (e.g., modifying the command to forgive).

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: August 6, 1833

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: The revelation claims to quote a law given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v32) which is textually absent from the Genesis narrative.