

ARTICLES OF FAITH 1-13

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Articles of Faith | VOLUME: Pearl Of Great Price | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Originally published in the 'Times and Seasons' in 1842 as part of the 'Wentworth Letter,' the Articles of Faith were canonized by the LDS Church in 1880. They represent a systematic attempt by Joseph Smith to define the distinctives of the restored gospel against the backdrop of 19th-century denominationalism. While superficially resembling traditional Christian creeds, the text establishes radical departures from historic orthodoxy. It asserts that the Bible is only authoritative when 'translated correctly,' thereby subordinating it to the Book of Mormon and living prophecy. It redefines salvation as a process dependent on 'obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel' rather than faith alone. Furthermore, it establishes a hierarchical ecclesiology requiring specific priesthood authority and anticipates a literal Zion to be built on the American continent. For the believer, this text serves as a concise catechism of identity; for the comparative analyst, it is the foundational document establishing the 'Restoration' narrative and the rejection of Sola Scriptura and Sola Fide.

KEY FIGURES

God the Eternal Father, Jesus Christ, The Holy Ghost, Adam, Paul

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. CONDITIONAL BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Assertion: The Bible is the word of God only 'as far as it is translated correctly,' whereas the Book of Mormon is affirmed without qualification.

"We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God."

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelicalism holds to the plenary verbal inspiration of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16), regarding the original autographs as inerrant and the preservation of the text as providentially sufficient. Article 8 introduces a 'translation' loophole that allows LDS theology to dismiss biblical passages that contradict Joseph Smith's revelations as 'translation errors.' By contrasting the conditional authority of the Bible with the unconditional authority of the Book of Mormon, the text effectively displaces the Bible as the supreme rule of faith.

2. SALVATION BY OBEDIENCE AND ORDINANCES

Assertion: Salvation is contingent upon obedience to laws and the performance of specific rituals (ordinances).

"We believe that through the atonement of Christ all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel."

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicalism teaches that good works and obedience are the *fruit* of salvation (Ephesians 2:8-10), Article 3 posits them as the *cause* or *instrument* of salvation alongside the Atonement. This creates a synergistic soteriology where Christ provides the possibility of salvation (the Atonement), but the individual must actualize it through strict obedience and ritual participation (baptism, laying on of hands). This is a fundamental rejection of the sufficiency of Christ's finished work.

3. CONTINUOUS REVELATION (OPEN CANON)

Assertion: God has revealed things, is revealing things, and will yet reveal many great things.

"We believe all that God has revealed, all that he does now reveal, and we believe that he will yet reveal many great and important things..."

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical theology holds that the canon is closed and that God has spoken definitively through His Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). Article 9 establishes an open system where current revelation (via living prophets) is vital. This epistemological shift means that for a Mormon, truth is fluid and progressive, whereas for an Evangelical, truth is fixed in the completed revelation of Scripture.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of salvation and the locus of authority. Evangelicalism asserts that the Bible is the sole infallible authority and that salvation is a gift received by faith alone. The Articles of Faith assert that the Bible is flawed ('as far as translated correctly') and that salvation is a process of 'obedience to laws and ordinances.' This shifts the focus from Christ's finished work to the believer's ongoing performance and the institution's exclusive authority to administer sacraments. Furthermore, the definition of God in Article 1, while using Trinitarian language, is interpreted within Mormonism as three distinct gods (tritheism) rather than one God in three persons.

Shared Values:

Belief in God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; Moral virtues (honesty, chastity, benevolence); Religious liberty; Civic obedience; Necessity of repentance

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Article 8 and 9 deny the sufficiency and inerrancy of the Bible, adding the Book of Mormon and future revelations.
2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Article 3 explicitly states salvation comes by 'obedience to the laws and ordinances,' denying faith alone.
3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Article 5 restricts ministry to those called by specific 'authority' (LDS Priesthood), denying the priesthood of all believers.

Semantic Warnings:

"Godhead"

In Text: Three distinct personages/beings (implied here, explicit in other Smith teachings).

Evangelical: One Being existing in three co-equal, co-eternal Persons (Deuteronomy 6:4, Matthew 28:19).

Example: When Article 1 says 'We believe in God...', a Mormon visualizes a physical man (Father), a physical man (Son), and a spirit man (Holy Ghost).

"Salvation"

In Text: Often implies 'Exaltation' or eternal life in the highest degree of glory, contingent on works/ordinances.

Evangelical: Deliverance from the penalty of sin and reconciliation with God by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8).

Example: Article 3's 'saved by obedience' refers to the specific LDS concept of progressing to godhood, not just escaping hell.

"Ordinances"

In Text: Rituals essential for salvation/exaltation that must be performed by Priesthood authority.

Evangelical: Sacraments (Baptism/Communion) that are outward signs of inward grace, not prerequisites for justification.

Example: In Article 4, baptism is for the 'remission of sins' in a literal, regenerative sense required for salvation.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: A state achieved through the Atonement coupled with strict obedience to laws and participation in ordinances.

How Attained: Synergistically: Christ provides the Atonement, but man must provide the obedience and receive the ordinances (Article 3).

Basis of Assurance: There is no assurance in this text, as salvation is contingent on future and continued obedience ('enduring to the end').

Comparison to Sola Fide: Article 3 is the direct antithesis of Romans 3:28 ('justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law'). The text inserts 'obedience to laws' as the mechanism for accessing the Atonement.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Have Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ
2. Repent
3. Be baptized by immersion for the remission of sins
4. Receive the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost
5. Sustain the law and rulers
6. Seek after virtuous and lovely things

Implicit Obligations:

1. Submit to the specific priesthood authority described in Article 5
2. Accept the Book of Mormon as the word of God
3. Accept future revelations as binding

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by immersion
2. Laying on of hands (Confirmation/Ordination)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. Article 8 says the Bible is the word of God 'as far as it is translated correctly.' Who determines which parts are correct and which are translation errors?
2. Article 3 mentions being saved by 'obedience to the laws.' How much obedience is required? Have you ever broken a law after being baptized?
3. If salvation requires specific ordinances performed by specific authority (Article 4 & 5), what happens to sincere believers in Christ who haven't received these specific LDS ordinances?
4. Article 13 speaks of seeking 'virtuous and lovely' things. How does that pursuit help you when you feel you've failed to keep the 'laws' mentioned in Article 3?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for 'virtuous, lovely, or of good report' things (Article 13) – This desire for goodness is a reflection of the Image of God. However, we often fail to attain it. The Gospel offers us the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to us, satisfying our desire for virtue not by our effort, but by His gift. [Philippians 4:8 (The source of the quote) -> Philippians 3:9 ('not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ')]
2. The need for Authority (Article 5) – Humans long to know they are right with God and not just guessing. The text seeks this in human priesthood. The Gospel offers the ultimate authority of God's written Word and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. [1 John 5:13 ('I write these things... that you may know that you have eternal life')]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Perfectionism / Legalism [Severe] – By conditioning salvation on 'obedience to the laws' (Article 3), the believer is placed on a treadmill of performance. Every sin becomes a threat to their eternal status, creating anxiety and a focus on self-effort rather than Christ's sufficiency.
2. Epistemological Uncertainty [Moderate] – By undermining the Bible (Article 8) and opening the canon (Article 9), the believer has no fixed anchor. Truth can change based on the current leader's revelation, leading to a dependency on the institution rather than the immutable Word of God.
3. Exclusivity / Isolation [Moderate] – The requirement for specific authority (Article 5) isolates the believer from the broader body of Christ, fostering an 'us vs. them' mentality where only their group has the 'true' path to God.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Hybrid: Scripture (Book of Mormon + qualified Bible) and Living Prophecy (Article 9).

Verification Method: Implicitly through the 'gifts' mentioned in Article 7 (revelation, visions) and the acceptance of the prophetic call.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelicals test all truth claims against the fixed standard of the Bible (Acts 17:11). This text suggests that truth is also known through ongoing revelation and the dictates of authorized leaders, creating a subjective standard that can override biblical precedent.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: 1842 (Original publication), 1880 (Canonization).

Authorship: Joseph Smith (with likely editorial assistance from Orson Pratt or others in the Nauvoo period).

Textual Issues: The text has remained largely stable, but the theological definitions of the terms used (like 'God') evolved significantly in Smith's theology between 1830 and 1844.