

The Triumph and Glory of the Lamb: Doctrine and Covenants 76 in Its Historical Context

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“The Vision” is a dramatic witness to the expansiveness of Christ’s saving work.



The Resurrected Christ, by Wilson J. Ong, courtesy of Church History Museum

Known to many early Latter-day Saints simply as “the Vision,” the Church has long treasured **Doctrine and Covenants 76** as a revelation of profound doctrinal significance. It frames our view of life after death and the eternities. It expands our sense of human possibilities. It raises our hope for **immortality** and eternal life. Most significantly, it establishes the Lord **Jesus Christ** as the reason for that hope.

even so, the revelation challenged early Latter-day Saints because it overturned traditional **Christian** ideas about the afterlife. President Brigham Young (1801–77), for instance, admitted to being troubled by the revelation when first encountering it. “My traditions were such,” he confessed, “that when the Vision came first to me, it was directly contrary and opposed to my former education. I said, ‘Wait a little.’ I did not reject it, but I could not understand it.”¹

Understanding why the early Saints found the revelation to be such a departure from traditional conceptions can help us better appreciate the Vision as the gift it is. Moreover, coming to understand its historical and theological context helps underscore its central message, which is also the Restoration’s essential claim: that Jesus Christ is the Savior and Redeemer of the world. **Doctrine and Covenants 76** is a dramatic witness to the expansiveness of Christ’s saving work.

Theological Debates and the Smith **Family**

Drawing on biblical passages, traditional Christian communities were convinced of an afterlife where faithful believers would dwell with God in heaven. Even so, Christians disagreed about how one got to heaven or what existence there might entail. Among the most prominent early American Christians were those who traced their theological heritage to John Calvin (1509–64), the French Protestant reformer. Many Calvinists believed that before the world’s Creation, God “predestined” some for salvation in an act of divine favor, or grace. Some Calvinist theologians hesitated to declare with certainty who would be in heaven, leaving the question to God. Even so, many ordinary believers embraced a sovereign God who saved His creations in a heaven populated by only a select few. By 1800, the United States’ religious scene was diverse and changing, but Calvinists were among the most numerous and influential Christians.



Calvinist teaching depicted a sovereign God who saved His creations in a heaven populated by only a select few.

Photo illustration by Veronica Naranjo

Some American Christians disagreed with these main currents of Calvinist teaching, however. A grassroots movement known as Universalism came to different conclusions. For Universalist preachers, God's power must be viewed in tandem with other divine attributes, such as His matchless patience, mercy, and love. Given these attributes, they argued, what would keep God from eventually saving *all* His creations? For the Universalists, Christ's sacrifice effectively contradicted what they considered to be a dim, anxiety-ridden, and hope-sapping Calvinist position on heaven. Critics argued back that Universalists ignored divine justice, discounted biblical passages related to hell, and downplayed moral responsibility with the idea of universal salvation.²

Joseph Smith Jr.'s family was not untouched by these theological disputes. For instance, his grandfather Asael Smith adopted Universalism. In 1799, Asael wrote of his religious convictions to his family, poignantly conveying the logic of Universalism in the language of

CHRIST'S grace: If you can believe that CHRIST [came] to save sinners, and not the righteous, Pharisees, or self-righteous, that sinners must be saved by the righteousness of Christ alone, without mixing any of their own righteousness with His, then you will see that He can as well save all, as any."

Asael's convictions influenced his son Joseph Smith Sr. as well. Joseph and his brother Jesse joined their father in petitioning the Tunbridge, Vermont, USA, town clerk for an exemption from ecclesiastical taxes in 1797 as members of the "Tunbridge Universalist Society." While never as committed a Universalist as his father, Joseph Sr. nevertheless seemed before 1830 to share his father's hesitations about institutional Calvinism. He read the **Bible** and experienced inspired dreams but kept regular church attendance at arm's length. He attended a Methodist church in Vermont with his wife, Lucy Mack Smith, but stopped after his attendance sparked sharp disapproval from his father and brother.

Later, Lucy joined a Presbyterian church in New York with several of the Smith children. When Joseph Sr. declined to join, Lucy felt concerned about the state of her husband's soul. She had experienced a vivid spiritual witness of Christ's Atonement in 1803, was later baptized, and associated with various ministers and churches. By 1811, Lucy worried that Joseph Sr. would reject organized religion altogether.³

Thus, Joseph Smith Jr. and his siblings were brought up in a home with varied religious influences. Their parents' experiences with spiritual manifestations (dreams and the like) marked them as religious seekers. The Prophet famously rehearsed his religious confusion in his retrospective history, now canonized as "Joseph Smith—History," but it is clear that his parents were yearning for spiritual certainty, much as he was. Tellingly, they joined their son's restored Church and found with other early Saints the spiritual home they had long been seeking.⁴



of Joseph Smith Sr., by Robert T. Barrett

A Revelatory Forerunner

With this historical context in place, it is clear that the Restoration's early revelations came amid these heated controversies between the Calvinists and Universalists. In particular, the revelation now appearing as **Doctrine and Covenants 19** indirectly addressed the Universalist controversy and thus functions as something of a theological forerunner to the more expansive doctrinal contributions of **Doctrine and Covenants 76**.

In **Doctrine and Covenants 19:1–4**, the Lord announces Himself as “Alpha and Omega” and describes Himself as “endless.” There follows an explanation of endlessness, with special attention to the endlessness of divine judgment and punishment.

what emerges from **verses 4–12** is a dramatic departure from Calvinist readings of the “endlessness” of God’s punishment, however. In those verses, God’s punishment is endless not because of its duration but because it issues from Him: “I am endless, and the punishment which is given from my hand is endless punishment, for Endless is my name” (**verse 10**). This revelation subtly upended the traditional Christian concept of “hell” by potentially limiting its duration. A temporary period of suffering for the wicked was a far cry from mainstream Calvinist understanding, in other words, and it resonated with Universalist convictions concerning the eventual salvation of all God’s children.

The Vision

If the Lord’s revelation in **Doctrine and Covenants 19** potentially shrank the traditional Christian hell, His revelation in **Doctrine and Covenants 76** dramatically expanded the traditional Christian heaven. The net effect was an almost perfect inversion of Calvinist conceptions of the afterlife. Whereas generations of American Christians had envisioned a massive hell and a comparatively small heaven, early Latter-day Saints were heirs to a different vision: a heaven filled with almost the entire human family. Though the Vision directly engaged theological debates in Joseph Smith’s own culture, it has proven powerfully relevant in our day as well.

In what became **Doctrine and Covenants 76**, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon narrated their shared visionary experience of February 16, 1832. During that multi-hour vision, several other Church leaders looked on as the Prophet and his counselor described what they saw. (The Vision was prompted by the Prophet’s inspired translation of the New Testament, when he and Sidney were pondering the significance of **John 5:29**.) It remains unclear whether they wrote the revelation in pieces after each individual vision or at the conclusion of the experience in its entirety. According to the text, they were commanded to record the experience while “yet in the Spirit” (**D&C 76:113**).



The Ohio home of John and Alice Johnson, where the Vision (76) was received.

Photograph by Valerie Ann Anderson

Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon bore witness to what they saw. The first of the visions was of the Son of God Himself. “We beheld the glory of the Son on the right hand of the Father ... and saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshipping God, and the Lamb” (**verses 20–21**). Then they provided one of the prized testimonies in all of the Restoration’s sacred literature:

“And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

“For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father” (**verses 22–23**).

What follows might seem out of place if read in isolation from the rest of the revelation. After the soaring language regarding Jesus Christ, the narrative plummets to describe “an angel of God ... who rebelled against

the Only Begotten Son. The vision of Satan spans five verses, with chilling effect: “Wherefore, he maketh war on the saints of God, and encompasseth them round about” (**verses 25–29**). Immediately thereafter follows a similarly harrowing description of those who suffer “themselves through the power of the devil to be overcome, and to deny the truth and defy my power” (**verse 31**). These “sons of perdition” are detailed in **verses 30–36**.

Again, it might seem odd to crash from sublime heights to such depths were it not for what follows. In fact, those verses, **38–44**, may constitute the Vision’s central message. Before the descriptions of the three degrees of heavenly glory, which modern Saints often take as the stunning doctrinal contribution of the Vision, come what are—at least in historical context—possibly the more revolutionary teachings.

In short, the sons of perdition are a small exception to the glorious rule that nearly all of God’s children will enjoy a degree of glory in the next life. **Verse 37** stresses that perdition’s sons are “the *only* ones on whom the second death shall have any power” (emphasis added). **Verse 38** adds that they are “the *only* ones who shall not be redeemed in the due time of the Lord” (emphasis added). Finally, **verse 39** concludes that all “shall be brought forth by the **resurrection** of the dead, through the triumph and the glory of the Lamb.” To underscore the magnitude of the Lamb’s “triumph and glory,” the language of the Prophet and his counselor again soars in testimony:

“And this is the gospel, the glad tidings, which the voice out of the heavens bore record unto us—

“That he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness;

“That through him all might be saved whom the Father had put into his power and made by him;

“Who glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands, except those sons of perdition. ...

“Wherefore, he saves all except them” (verses 40–44; emphasis added).

Without a clear sense of the religious contexts in which the Smith family and other early Saints lived, we might not grasp the powerful effect of these passages. The verses describing the degrees of glory tease out the details of Christ’s saving work. Viewed from the early Saints’ perspective, the varied, individualized, and multi-tiered heaven of **Doctrine and Covenants 76** is notable not so much in its segmented layers but in its breathtaking scope. Near-universal salvation in one of God’s kingdoms of glory is unquestionably the revelation’s priceless legacy.



Illustration by Robert T. Barrett

Modern Saints understandably focus attention on the revelation’s heavenly “degrees” and tend to emphasize the description of celestial glory in **verses 50–70**. These verses provide Latter-day Saints a critical

theological category in addition to salvation: exaltation. Doctrines related to exaltation found full expression in the Prophet's last years and form some of the most distinctive LDS teachings. **Doctrine and Covenants 76** is thus one of the texts grounding the LDS belief that women and men can become like their Heavenly Parents, an idea many traditional Christians find controversial in the extreme.

In the Vision, however, the idea is both proclaimed and *contained* by emphasis on Christ's saving work. In **verse 55**, those who inherit celestial glory are described as those "into whose hands the Father has given all things." In **verse 58**: "They are gods, even the sons of God." Few Latter-day Saints at the time noted any particular shock at these verses, but within a few years, the Prophet's subsequent teachings prompted Church leaders and writers to view these passages more literally and expansively.

As if to anticipate possible misapplication of them, however, **verse 61** offers an interpretative caution: "Wherefore, let no man glory in man, but rather let him glory in God, who shall subdue all enemies under his feet." A few verses later, that same point is made again, this time with reference to Christ's Atonement. In a final stirring reference to the exalted, those who inherit celestial glory are described as "just men *made perfect through Jesus* the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood" (**verse 69**; emphasis added).⁵



Gethsemane, by Michael T. Malm © 2016

Taken together, these unforgettable passages from the Vision amount to a distinctive yet recognizable doctrine of salvation. Like the early Universalists, we look forward to an expansive heaven where nearly all human beings are potentially encircled within the bounds of Christ's saving work. Additionally, those who "overcome by faith," who are "washed and cleansed from all their sins," and who are "sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise" will be exalted and become like their divine Parents (**verses 52–53**). They will be priestesses and queens, "priests and kings," and will "dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever" (**verses 56, 62**). That the Latter-day Saints see exaltation in terms well beyond what most traditional Christians understand as "salvation" is clear enough. Even so, modern Saints inherit from **Doctrine and Covenants 76** the conviction that even as we cling to a sense of human

potential unique among the world's Christians, we view that potential ever and always in terms of the gifts earned for us through “the triumph and the glory of the Lamb” (**verse 39**).

Notes

1. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:281; spelling, capitalization, and punctuation have been modernized.
2. For an overview of early American religion, see Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century*, 4th ed. (2015).
3. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” 52–53, josephsmithpapers.org.
4. For more on the Smith family and the Asael Smith letter, see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (2005), chapter 1. For Lucy Mack Smith's perspectives, see “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” josephsmithpapers.org.
5. For Latter-day Saint teachings on becoming like God, see “Becoming like God,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.