



On April 6, 1830, in the home of Peter Whitmer Sr., the Church was organized and Joseph Smith received a revelation that began, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1).

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Doctrine and Covenants 21: History as Witness

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On the day the Church of Christ was organized in 1830, Joseph Smith received a revelation which began, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1). Even though the Bible and Book of Mormon emphasize the importance of record keeping and history writing for covenant peoples of an earlier time, Joseph Smith had received from God no specific indication before April 6, 1830, that preserving the past would play a significant role in the Restoration of the gospel in the present dispensation. In Doctrine and Covenants 21, the Lord defines record keeping as one of the core functions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Subsequent revelations magnify and elaborate on this responsibility (for example, D&C 47, 69, 85, 123, and 128); in this revelation, however, the primary purpose of it was to witness to the divinely ordained roles of Joseph Smith. The present essay examines the witness function of history and its consequences for the Church as expressed in Doctrine and Covenants 21.

With reference to the Church’s record, the revelation continues, “And in it thou [Joseph Smith] shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and

the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ, being inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundation thereof, and to build it up unto the most holy faith” (vv. 1–2). These verses declare that keeping the Church’s record is not an end in itself but a means of witnessing to God’s mouthpiece on earth. The divinely ordained roles to which the Church’s record must witness are listed roughly in the order that Joseph had performed them to date: “seeing” the Father and the Son and other heavenly messengers, translating the Book of Mormon “by the gift and power of God,” receiving new revelations from God, bearing a special witness of Christ, and organizing and leading the Church of Christ. These verses also direct the Church through its record and the Prophet’s leadership to build up the faith of its members and establish them as a holy people.

Verse 3 reinforces the need for the record to be accurate by specifying a crucial historical fact, the date on which the Church was organized: “In the year of your Lord eighteen hundred and thirty, in the fourth month, and on the sixth day of the month which is called April.” The record does not preserve all essential facts from early Church history. Nevertheless, from the time of this revelation, Church leaders have been increasingly successful in recording the crucial information and preserving the key records of the Church’s being built up “unto the most holy faith.”

The revelation next instructs Latter-day Saints how they are to build their “most holy faith” in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: “Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his [Joseph’s] words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me; for his words ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith” (vv. 4–5). The Church cannot “give heed” to the Prophet’s “words and commandments” unless they are preserved and made accessible to present and future generations (see also 1 Nephi 4:14–15; D&C 69:7–8). Commandments usually come in the form of words, but they come in other forms as well, and many of Joseph’s written and spoken words served other purposes than as commandments. Together, “words and commandments” complement each other and comprehend a broad range of divine instruction that the Prophet revealed to the Latter-day Saints. This passage further clarifies that Joseph’s “words and commandments” are not simply a reflection of his own gifts and capacities. Instead they are to be received by the Church “as if from mine [Christ’s] own mouth.” In other words, Joseph is not just another mystic, divine, inspired teacher, luminary, religious innovator, or church leader. Rather, he and his successors each serve as the Lord’s



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Interior of the restored Peter Whitmer Sr. home.

mouthpieces on earth at any point in time. The Church’s record is expected to bear clear and unequivocal witness of this truth.

Remarkable blessings are promised to the Church for witnessing to Joseph’s divinely ordained roles and following his words and commandments: “For by doing these things the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good, and his name’s glory” (v. 6). While the full extent of these blessings may not be easily comprehended, modern revelation contains few promises to the Saints that are grander than these: overcoming the kingdom of Satan, being freed from the powers of darkness, and receiving a myriad of unspecified heavenly blessings. It is also clear that the magnitude of these blessings is disproportionate to the requirements of keeping a faithful record and heeding the prophets’ words and commandments.

The Lord next bears his own personal witness of Joseph Smith: “For thus saith the Lord God: him have I inspired to move the cause of Zion in mighty power for good, and his diligence I know, and his prayers I have heard. Yea, his weeping for Zion I have seen, and I will cause that he shall mourn for her no longer, for his days of rejoicing are come unto the remission of his sins, and the manifestations of my blessings upon his works” (vv. 7–8). Complementing the Church’s record that bears witness of Joseph’s divinely ordained roles, the Lord’s own witness asserts his success in performing these roles. The Lord states that Joseph has been inspired, diligent, humble, purified, and divinely blessed in his efforts. While the Lord acknowledges that Joseph has been neither perfect nor infallible, he makes it clear that his sins, whatever they might have been, have been remitted because of his faithfulness and will not obstruct the successful completion of his ministry.

The Lord next provides an additional promise to those who work alongside Joseph to establish his kingdom: “For, behold, I will bless all those who labor in my vineyard with a mighty blessing.” Specifically, the faithful will be given the capacity to “believe on his [Joseph’s] words” and by doing so will receive “the Comforter,” which will bring them to Christ, whose Atonement will effect a “remission of sins unto the contrite heart” (v. 9). In short, keeping a record, bearing witness, following the prophet, and building up the Church all work together to bring mankind to Christ so that he can redeem them.

Later, the Lord speaks again of the Prophet: “Wherefore it behooveth me that he should be ordained by you, Oliver Cowdery, mine apostle; this being an ordinance unto you, that you [Oliver Cowdery] are an elder under his [Joseph Smith’s] hand, he being the first unto you, that you might be an elder unto this church of Christ, bearing my name—and the first preacher of this church unto the church, and before the world, yea, before the Gentiles; yea, and thus saith the Lord God, lo, lo! to the Jews also. Amen” (vv. 10–12). In other words, priesthood keys and an explicit commission authorize and sustain the revealed pattern of record keeping, witnessing, obeying, and kingdom building.

In summary, this revelation not only inaugurates the record-keeping enterprise of the Church in the latter days, it also defines it as an essential part of the Restoration of the gospel. Specifically, the revelation declares that the Church’s record must bear a clear, compelling, and comprehensive witness of Joseph Smith’s divine callings so that Church members will be inspired to follow his prophetic directions. In turn, the Lord will bless the Latter-day Saints

in remarkable ways, for their and the world’s salvation. The sacredness of this responsibility requires that it be performed within a priesthood context and under the direction of priesthood keys.

Subsequent revelations amplify and refine but do not supplant this inspired foundation of the Church’s history-writing and record-keeping functions. **RE**



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On the evening of September 21, 1823, the angel Moroni appeared to the boy Joseph Smith.
This appearance occurred in the Smiths' log home, now reconstructed.

Return to the Joseph Smith Family Farm

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Holzapfel: *Thank you for joining me at the Smith family farm site. Could you tell me about your first visit to the Smith farm and Sacred Grove?*

Enders: I first came here as a missionary in July 1961 at pageant time. That was the first time I had the privilege of seeing the Smith farm and the Sacred Grove. At the time, the busy Stafford Road ran right down through the farm. Near the road was a large area with electricity where there was a platform and a little pulpit. The missionaries would gather there and speak. Of course, it was a very beautiful place.

An elderly missionary couple lived in and had responsibility for the Smith home. That couple had some wonderful and interesting interpretations about the place. They thought that Joseph had his own room where Moroni appeared to him privately; after all, there were thirteen rooms in the frame home. Of course, in time we would learn that Moroni's appearance really did not take place in the frame home but in the log home instead. This is supported by statements such as Oliver Cowdery's, who said that when the Smith family retired that September evening, all went to sleep and Joseph was there beside his brothers.

Holzapfel: *After your mission what is your next connection to the farm?*

Enders: I began to come out here on a very frequent basis—two to five times a year—in 1977, when I became a member of the Historical Department’s historic sites team. In those earlier years of the 1970s and ’80s, I worked with the missionaries and directors of the Smith farm in taking care of the site. I became aware that the grove needed some help. So we pushed for and were able to get a cultural landscape study done in the 1990s by a very confident horticultural firm in Syracuse, New York. They outlined a program and hired a fellow named Robert Parrott to manage the land. Since then I have been extremely pleased with the way the land has become more natural and healthy. Since those years in 1977 it has been a privilege to be here on a frequent basis.

Holzapfel: *And you were involved in the decision to rebuild the frame house and some of the outbuildings.*

Enders: We usually stand on the shoulders of other people. Very good people who preceded me in the Historical Department already had a lot of involvement, Larry Porter and Milt Backman in particular. And based on their studies and other sources we found, we began to gather data about the site long before it was considered a possibility for historic site restoration.

In 1982, after the summer archeological dig, G. Homer Durham said to me, “We want you to start giving the site some considerations.” So I was able to take the grain that had been planted in the furrows by those wonderful men I mentioned and begin to gather other data. I think that together we have all learned some new things about the Smith family. We know more about their occupancy of the hundred-acre farm and the log home site, their purchase of the property, how they developed it, their work as day laborers, how they worked among the neighbors, their involvement in the community, and how they were accepted or not accepted.

Speaking of the Smiths’ reputation, I cannot help but think of William Smith’s statement: “We never knew we were bad folks until Joseph told his vision” (quoted in *Deseret Evening News*, January 20, 1894, 11). I think that is an accurate statement. Of course, the data suggest that the Smiths were a good family, but all hell broke loose once Joseph received the plates.

Holzapfel: *Larry, tell us about your involvement with this area.*

Porter: The Religious Studies Center, under the direction of Truman G. Madsen, was conducting research on Mormonism in the area, with emphasis on any materials relating to Joseph Smith. And Richard L. Anderson had an

assignment from Elder Marion D. Hanks to identify just where the Peter Whitmer Sr. log home was on his farm—not just the approximate area, but the exact spot. Knowing that I was coming to work on my dissertation in the area, Richard Anderson contacted Elder Hanks, who wanted to identify the very location where the Whitmer home had stood at the time the Church was organized. Richard said to Elder Hanks, “Can’t we include him on the team and give him the aegis to find what he can?” Elder Hanks agreed.

Under Dr. Anderson’s direction, we were researching the historical backdrop and interviewing all the people who had been farm tenants or missionaries at the farm there in Fayette. When my family and I came out to New York, Elder Hanks had arranged for us to stay in the existing home at the Martin Harris farm in Palmyra. I soon discovered that, although much had been said about that cobblestone house being the former home of Martin Harris, the two-story Harris frame home had actually burned down in 1849, and the cobblestone home was a William Chapman replacement built on the old foundation.

We also discovered here at the Smith farm that the Manchester frame home was not the home where the angel Moroni had appeared to Joseph. Some people were upset to find out that it was the log house in Palmyra Township where that event took place and could not have occurred in the frame home. People had purposely been married in the room where they supposed Joseph Smith met with the angel Moroni in the frame home, and that disclosure was naturally upsetting.

And finally, we found out at the Whitmer farm that the John Deshler home was not the original Whitmer log cabin that had been merely plastered and boarded over. That Greek Revival home was built about 1842—it was



Don Enders (left) shares thoughts about the First Vision in the Sacred Grove with Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Kent P. Jackson, and Larry C. Porter.

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there in 1852—and appears as an L-shaped home on a map from that year. I was there when the Church contractor, Clyde Larson, cut through the wall to put in a diorama on the east side of the Deshler home depicting the organization of the Church. He found just lath and plaster; there were no logs in that home. The Deshler home was subsequently moved over against the east side of the property line, and the visitors' center and the Fayette Branch Chapel were constructed on the site where the Deshler home had stood. Later, the careful research of related documents, some excellent oral history from Samuel Ferguson, the former president of the Palmyra Branch, and the obtaining of some exact measurements from William Lee Powell, the tenant farmer in the 1940s, prepared the way for Dale Berge and his archeological crew from the Nauvoo Restoration Project to excavate the Whitmer homesite in 1969.

Holzappel: *How many times have you been here at the Smith farm?*

Porter: I honestly cannot tell you how many times. I have been here and at the grove countless times. When I came here in 1969, the Sacred Grove was a place of peace and repose after a long day of research. I would just drop in on my way home. I once met a man here in the Grove from Rochester who was not a member of the Church. He said he felt closer to God in this location than in any other place on earth. And I certainly agreed with him that this is sacred ground.

In 2005 and 2006 my wife and I were assigned to serve in the New York Rochester Sites Mission and lived probably three hundred yards from where we are standing. When we first arrived in the mission, this was the first place we came and we knelt down and had a prayer together. And when it was time to leave the mission, we departed from the grove. During the time we were here, at six o'clock every morning—rain or shine, forty-two degrees or zero, in spring, summer, or winter—Sister Porter and I would walk these very trails and enjoy the grove.

Our love and appreciation for the place centered on its being the location of the First Vision. Later, Bob Parrott, the grove's caregiver and resident forester, taught us about the elms, the black cherry and the bitternut hickory that grew there; he taught us about the trillium, the Jack-in-the-box, and the Queen Anne's lace and all of the flora and fauna of the grove. We learned to have a double appreciation for this beautiful setting.

Holzappel: *Larry, could you provide some background on how you located the exact site of the original log home of Joseph Smith Sr. here on the Stafford Road in Palmyra Township?*

Porter: In 1969 I visited the Palmyra Town Hall. As I was reading along in the Old Town Record Book, I saw something that made me take a second look. It was the minutes of a highway survey. Let me share just a couple of lines from that record with you: "Minutes of the survey of a public Highway beginning on the south line of Township No. 12 2d range of townships in the town of Palmyra three rods fourteen links southeast of Joseph Smith's dwelling house." How fortunate that on the thirteenth day of June, 1820, Isaac Durfee and Luman Harrison, commissioners of the highways, came down with the old town compass and laid out a line for a road from the south line of Palmyra Township back to the village of Palmyra. And they shot an azimuth on the Joseph Smith dwelling house! I did a double take as I read that, realizing I could virtually find the exact location of the Smith house by recreating the azimuth and measuring three rods and fourteen links from the middle of the Stafford Road.

Dale Berge of the BYU Anthropology Department, later commenced a dig here in 1982 sponsored by the BYU Religious Studies Center. T. Michael Smith and Don L. Enders were part of the Berge Crew on that occasion. That year LaMar Berrett and I came out and spent a day on the dig. We found a bone-handled fork. It was very satisfying to be here as part of that crew for a



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Upstairs of the reconstructed Smith log home. The angel Moroni would likely have appeared to the seventeen-year-old in the upper room of the original dwelling.

short time. T. Michael Smith and Don Enders, now of the Church History Department in Salt Lake, finished digging the remainder of the site in 1997. Later, Don Enders and others were instrumental in seeing that a log home was raised on this site.

Holzappel: *Some of the Prophet's detractors have said that Joseph Smith fabricated parts of his history. They claim there was no log home here in 1820, meaning the Smith family was not even living here at the time of First Vision.*

Porter: Actually, we know the home was here on June 13, 1820. That was the date when the highway commissioners came down and did their surveying of Stafford Road. Pomeroy Tucker remembered a Smith log house in this location in 1818. Orasmus Turner remembered in 1819-1820 that there was a log house in that proximity. Thomas L. Cook placed the log home on the west side of the road in this same period. So these records help confirm that the log home was in fact here at the time of the First Vision.

Holzappel: *What information was available to help in reconstructing the log cabin?*

Enders: Contemporary sources suggest that the Smith log home was divided into two rooms on the main floor. Later a bedroom wing was added, with an upstairs garret divided into two additional rooms. Based on the archeological evidence, it appears that this description of the home is indeed accurate. In fact, the archeological work also gave us additional data. For example, all of the brick from the chimney was in the south end of the structure's ruins, which suggests that the fireplace was there.

Other documents help paint a picture of the Smith home. For example, a man named Stephen Harding was raised for a time here in the Palmyra area. In about 1829, during a trip back here to his boyhood home, Harding came to visit the Smith family. His description of the home basically suggests it had two rooms on the ground level. He said that he was taken in to the "best" room, which was where Oliver Cowdery would read to him from the Book of Mormon manuscript at night. At one point, the single candle they were using began to flicker, Joseph Smith Sr. said, "I think I know where another one is. I will go get it." He came back a bit later and said, "Well, I guess the rats have eaten it." This helps give us an idea of the family's living conditions. Many homes of that period were quite open, and access for vermin was pretty good.

We also have an account that describes Joseph Smith Sr. bounding up the steps to the upper floor. This means there were stairs, not a ladder, to the second level. These and other bits of information were very helpful in

reconstructing the home. The suggestion that there were two rooms in the upper level probably means there was one bedroom for the boys and one for the girls. It is very likely that you would go up the stairs into the boys' section first; that way the boys would not be traipsing through the girls' space, which needs to be a little more private. And it is likely that Moroni appeared there in the boys' room.

Perhaps that night Joseph sat up or lay quietly in the bed. Perhaps he was thinking about what he wanted to achieve, feeling confident that he would again be able to connect spiritually with God. We know he sought forgiveness of his sins. I think he had some awareness or knowledge of the promise made in the Sacred Grove, that the fullness of the gospel would be entrusted to man. He had gone along this three and a half years probably wondering, the fullness of the gospel? What is that? When will it be restored? What role will I play? And from Joseph's account, his question is answered by one of the very first things that Moroni says to Joseph that night in the log home: "I am a messenger sent from the presence of God. I have come to instruct you. The fullness of the gospel is in a book."

Holzappel: *This home was indeed the site of many important events in Church history.*

Enders: Yes, and also for the Smith family. It is interesting to see how the family grew and developed during their time here. The day after Moroni's first visit to Joseph, according to Lucy, Moroni appeared again and asked Joseph if he had told his father about the visitation of the prior evening. Joseph said no. Then, according to Lucy, the heavenly messenger asked, "Why did you not tell your father?" And Joseph's response was, "I was afraid he would not believe me."

Now, is it possible that Joseph's parents believed his account of the First Vision, which revealed God and Christ as separate beings, totally contradictory to Christian perspective, and Joseph thought his father would not believe in the appearance of an angel? I do not think so; it does not work. I think that right from the beginning Joseph Sr. was probably skeptical, or at least aloof, when it came to Joseph's vision. That may be why Joseph was worried about telling his father about Moroni. However, when Joseph was instructed to go tell his father, he did so, and his father said that it was of God.

So the family needed time to grow. Another perception I had for a very long time was that the Smith family were immediate converts. Maybe I am a Gentile, though, because I have now come to a different conclusion. Following

the First Vision, Joseph returns to the home, weakened by the experience, and leans up against the mantle. His mother says, “Joseph are you all right?” Joseph replies, “Never mind, Mother. I am well enough off.” By “never mind,” I think Joseph means, “I’m not going to tell you why I feel the way I do,” and I do not believe he told his mother. I do not believe he told his Father, and I do not believe he told Alvin or any of the other members of the family. In fact, we learn from Joseph’s 1832 account that *none* believed in his heavenly vision, including the minister. In fact, Lucy and several of the children were active in the Presbyterian Church until about September 1828.

There is perhaps one other thing that suggests the family learned about the gospel quite gradually. When Joseph returned from the hill that day having seen the plates, what did he tell his family, according to Lucy’s record? It seems to me that it is all cultural material. Lucy said the family had the most extraordinary discussions about what kind of animals the ancient Americans rode, about their warfare, their buildings, and so forth. Apparently Joseph was not in a position to tell them about the restored gospel in September 1823. That would come later in the unfolding process, not only here in Palmyra but on through Ohio and into Missouri.

So what did the family know about the record initially? I imagine they sensed the Book of Mormon was going to have a role in a reformation of Christianity, but not a total restoration. If Joseph even had any inkling of its importance in 1823, it does not look like he was sharing it.

Then, right there in this house one evening in 1830, just before the Book of Mormon came off the press, Lucy retired to bed. As she lay thinking about past times, her mind was full and invigorated. She was thinking about her youth and about her sisters who had died and about different things that have happened in the family. As she thought about the Moroni experience and other things that had happened, for the first time the light came on and she asked, “Am I the mother of a prophet of God?” After some time of growth and development, Lucy finally understood what her son was about.

Holzappel: *Let’s talk about when the First Vision occurred. Joseph said it took place on a beautiful spring morning. Many assume it was in April, but does this date match up with the weather patterns of upstate New York?*

Porter: Here, April is a little early for spring, and into May is still pretty cool.

Enders: I have gathered some weather records from the naval station at Sotis Point, which was established in the War of 1812. It is at least fifty miles

north of Palmyra. Those weather records do suggest some warm weather patterns that year, but we have to be careful with those records.

Holzappel: *How about the location of the First Vision? As Joseph left the log home early that spring morning, which direction did he go?*

Porter: I think that he probably went west, to the area Church members know as the Sacred Grove. In 1905, President Joseph F. Smith visited this site. He walked and talked with William A. Chapman, who then owned the farm. Chapman claimed that neither he nor his father had laid any axe to the root of these trees here in the grove, out of deference to what happened here. They left the silent grove as it was, because Chapman’s father claimed this was where Joseph Smith had his vision.

Enders: It is hard for me to believe that Joseph went west from the home. Had he done that, he would have had to walk over an area of major water drainage. In the early spring the grasses there were shoulder high and would have wet Joseph right to the bone. And then he would have to cross over into another drainage system. I was there before they put in a culvert. In the early spring, the water expanded out there two hundred feet in some places. How could Joseph have gotten across that to get into this woodland?

But ultimately, the exact location does not matter. I know Joseph Smith had the experience. Where it occurred, I do not know. But the Spirit of the Lord broods over this place. I have felt it much in my life. This woodland is part of the sacred ground where the Father and the Son appeared, whether it happened fifty yards, one hundred yards, or just twenty-five feet from here. President Gordon B. Hinckley once said that this was the most sacred place on earth, except for where the Lord conducted his earthly ministry.

Holzappel: *Yes, sometimes we are perhaps too fascinated in finding the exact site. Whether in Palestine or anywhere else, locating the exact site seems to be a proclivity for humans who want to find even just a square inch of holy land. But the importance of this farm is to recall the event. It is fun to do archeology and research to get the story as best as we can, but the event is what we are celebrating here.*

Enders: What we are trying to do with the archeology and the Restoration is re-create the setting as much as possible. We want the visitor to gain an appreciation of the humility of this young man, which took him into the woodland, where he knelt and prayed and the vision occurred. That literal, genuine, physical appearance truly occurred.