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Making a Case for Church History

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Currently there is avid interest in Latter-day Saint history and the related discipline of Mormon studies. This is a welcome development, as it has resulted in a noticeable increase in public discourse and in the publishing of content dealing with both academic fields. I believe it is a development stimulated not only by the compelling nature of the subject matter but also by the stature of the participating scholars. Good scholars are always an important measure of the quality of the culture from which they spring. If Latter-day Saint scholars—particularly historians—will keep their faith and the sense of direction provided by the Lord’s plan of salvation and His living prophets, they will be blessed to do their work aided by the Spirit of the Lord. If this occurs, the Spirit will give life to their productive efforts, and both the scholarly and nonscholarly communities will continue to be fascinated with Latter-day Saint history, culture, and doctrine. And those who seek the truth will eventually know where to find it.

On a personal note, I feel compelled to acknowledge that more than forty-two years ago I enrolled in several history courses while attending Brigham Young University. Despite my rather modest attainments as a history student,

my love of history—especially the history of the Latter-day Saints—has grown stronger and stronger through the intervening years. The once-small collection of Church history volumes I purchased following my mission to Germany in the early 1960s has since grown to fill many bookshelves, and I happily spend much of my spare time reading and studying Church history. My patient wife frequently pleads with me not to go so close to a bookstore that my irresistible bibliophilic impulses will get the best of me!

Small wonder, then, that when President Gordon B. Hinckley called me in April 2005 to be the Church historian and recorder, I felt both delighted and daunted. To find the particulars of one's Church calling and duties set forth in revelations given by the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith, and to contemplate the contributions of the men who preceded me in this office, is humbling to say the least. The first administrative directive of this dispensation may have been the Lord's command on the very day the Church was organized that "there shall be a record kept among you" (D&C 21:1). These words set something wonderful in motion. They are worth pondering when considering the foundational role Church history should play in the institutional Church as well as in the individual lives of Latter-day Saints.

As Church historian and recorder, I feel no obligation more keenly than to help infuse Church members with a sense of the practical spiritual benefit and the eternal importance—not to mention the joy—of acquiring a knowledge of Church history. For this reason, I have titled this paper "Making a Case for Church History." Part of the appeal of such a title surely comes from my legal training. But more important, it seems in keeping with the Lord's way of encouraging His children to do the things they ought to do. With our moral agency always in mind, the Lord speaks of influencing our choices by inviting, enticing, and persuading us to do good (see Moroni 7:13–16; D&C 121:41–42). My hope is to offer some convincing reasons why the study and enjoyment of Church history is an important part of a full life in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Lord Values Church History

It seems to me that the strongest case I can make for Church history is to point out that the Lord Himself regards it as something of great value. From the earliest days of the Church, He has directed Church leaders to create and preserve a rich historical record. I have always found appealing the simple

thought that what the Lord and His inspired leaders regard as important, we ought to regard as important—else what's a prophet for?

Several latter-day revelations speak to the subject of Church history. In them the Lord clearly says He wants "a record kept" (D&C 21:1), and the record is to be kept "continually" (D&C 47:3). The record is to include "all things that transpire in Zion" (D&C 85:1) and is to chronicle the "manner of life" and the faith and works of the Latter-day Saints (D&C 85:2). It is to be written "for the good of the church, and for the rising generations that shall grow up on the land of Zion" (D&C 69:8). Those who keep the record—provided they are faithful—are promised "it shall be given [them] . . . by the Comforter, to write these things" (D&C 47:4).

These carefully revealed details of the Lord's program for Church history seem to reflect the importance He places on this history. So does the timing of the command to keep a record: it was given even before the Lord began to reveal the essential details of Church organization, procedure, and doctrine.

The Prophet Joseph Smith took these directions from the Lord very seriously. He went right to work to keep the Church's history. This was typical of him. He was always resolute in his obedience to God's commands. In the midst of many pressures in Kirtland in 1834, his history recorded, "No month ever found me more busily engaged than November; but as my life consisted of activity and unyielding exertions, I made this my rule: *When the Lord commands, do it.*"¹

Joseph wasn't without help in beginning the work of Church history. His efforts in translating the Book of Mormon educated him in many ways. Because record keeping is an unmistakable theme of that unique book, the Prophet's sensitivities to the value of history must have been awakened. He learned of Nephi's heroic efforts to obtain the brass plates, which contained "the record of the Jews" (1 Nephi 3:3); Joseph would have perceived that their contents had a marked effect on the entire course of Nephite civilization. Joseph must have also taken note of the careful way other prophet-historians in the Book of Mormon attended to record keeping. In addition, he would have pondered the plight of the people of Zarahemla. Without an adequate historical record, their language had become corrupted, and they had lost faith in their Creator (see Omni 1:17).

Even though he was instructed and motivated, the actual work of record keeping wouldn't have been easy for Joseph Smith. By training and inclination, he was neither a writer nor a historian. The mental and spiritual exertions

required to create an acceptable historical record would have been taxing. A further complication was his demanding role as the Prophet and leader of the fledgling Church. His days were filled with official duties of all kinds, constant visitors, weighty decisions, vexatious lawsuits, and other distractions. Joseph's frustrated exclamation concerning record keeping contained in an 1832 letter to William W. Phelps speaks volumes: "Oh Lord God," he wrote, "deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language."²

Yet in spite of his limitations, over the all-too-short span of the Prophet's adult life a steady stream of revelations, translations, letters, journals, discourses, and histories emerged under his hand or at his direction. He truly was the father of Latter-day Saint history. It is fitting that Joseph Smith himself was a major subject of the record he was commanded to keep: "And in it," said the Lord, "thou [Joseph] 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" (D&C 21:1). An important theme in Church history will always be Joseph Smith's role in drawing us to Heavenly Father through His Son Jesus Christ.

In this connection, it is appropriate to note that currently about twenty-five historians and editors in the Church History Department are toiling full-time five days a week as participants in the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Their stated objective—to be accomplished over an approximately twenty-year period—is "to publish every extant document written by [Joseph] Smith or by his scribes in his behalf, as well as other records that were created under his direction or that reflect his personal instruction or involvement."³ Think of it: it will take twenty-five scholars working five days a week over twenty years to get their arms around the documentary output of a busy and often distracted Church President who was neither trained for nor inclined to record keeping and whose productive years totaled at most about sixteen! Can there be any doubt but that the power of the Lord rested upon Joseph Smith throughout his earthly ministry?

The historical enterprise Joseph Smith launched was faithfully carried on by the prophets who succeeded him. Three of them—Wilford Woodruff, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Howard W. Hunter—even served for periods of their lives as the Church historian and recorder. As a result, an unmatched

record of the Church's history has been kept, is being kept, and will be kept in the future.

On June 20, 2009, President Thomas S. Monson dedicated the new Church History Library. This beautiful and spacious edifice was constructed during the previous three years at a prime location east of the Conference Center in downtown Salt Lake City. It is a superior facility containing both a library and archives. It provides an optimum preservation environment and needed security for the Church's priceless historical collections. It will become the mecca of Church history to which interested people from all corners of the world will come. It will also stand as a symbol of the undeviating commitment of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve to the Lord's command that "there shall be a record kept among you" (D&C 21:1). Because of the value the Lord and His inspired servants place on the keeping of that record, I invite every Latter-day Saint to make learning Church history a lifelong pursuit.

A Knowledge of Church History Provides a Godly Perspective

A continuing involvement with Church history will affect our perspective on life. Although in the book of Isaiah the Lord tells us His thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways (see Isaiah 55:8), He nevertheless wants them to be. Like every loving and right-thinking parent, He wants us to mature and grow in all ways and thereby become like Him. An important step in that process is for Him to help us acquire His unmatched perspective and to begin to see life as He sees it. Acting out of such a perspective, we can make wiser choices and hasten the development of the attributes we must acquire to become like God and live again with Him.

At least two passages of scripture say that "all things are present before [the Lord's] eyes" (D&C 38:2; Moses 1:6; see also D&C 130:7). Thus, the Lord is simultaneously aware of all things—past, present, and future. This insight helps us understand why He has defined truth as a "knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come" (D&C 93:24). In our quest to become like God, knowing of "things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come" provides us with a view of life that is Godlike. This is of critical importance.

The prophet Alma recognized the value of such a perspective. His incomparable sermon in Alma 5 (punctuated by a series of soul-stirring questions) begins with the query, "Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the

captivity of your fathers?” (Alma 5:6). Here, the starting point for Alma’s efforts to motivate Church members to greater faithfulness was to direct their minds back to the past. This approach is in keeping with the frequent use of the word *remember* in the holy scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon. Prophetic admonitions to remember are usually calls to action: to listen, to see, to do, to obey, to repent.

Alma then proceeds in his sermon to ask questions of the members that deal with “things as they are,” with “Have ye spiritually been born of God?” (Alma 5:14) being one of the key inquiries. And then, rounding out the desired godly perspective of life that includes a view of the past, present, and future, Alma asks, “Do you look forward with an eye of faith, and view this mortal body raised in immortality, and this corruption raised in incorruption, to stand before God to be judged according to the deeds which have been done in the mortal body?” (Alma 5:15).

The importance of the eternal perspective taught by Alma is reflected in the ceremonies of the Church’s temples as well. In the temple we have repeatedly rehearsed for us important details of our past, the critical nature of our present existence, and the glorious destiny that awaits us if we love God and our neighbor and are true to our covenants.

Most important, the temple experience—like our personal engagement with Church history—impresses us with the significant place and role of the Savior in the history of mankind. His is the ruling hand in the affairs of humankind and of His Church. He is literally the Beginning and the End of history, and He gives purpose and meaning to everything in between. He is the Author and the Finisher of our faith, the Creator, Redeemer, and final Judge of all. The highest purpose of Church history—or any history—is to help us receive a witness of these truths and live accordingly.

Church History and the Power of Stories

A thoughtful reader of God’s word will quickly discern that much scripture is expressed in narrative or story form. This is because most scripture is history, and the way to make history come alive, as historian Barbara Tuchman said in two words, is to “tell stories.”⁴ Being the master teacher, our Father in Heaven knows well the teaching and staying power of stories. So do composers of songs for Primary children. That is why we all still remember the words to “Tell Me the Stories of Jesus” and “Book of Mormon Stories”!⁵ The case I am making for the value of Church history in our lives would not be complete

without saying something about the benefit and power of historical narratives or stories.

The Church began with Joseph Smith’s simple story. I feel its canonized form in the Pearl of Great Price is the single most powerful and wonderful historical composition we have.

I remember some years ago reading an account of the conversion of a former professor at Brigham Young University, the late Arthur Henry King. He was a brilliant British scholar and rhetorician who joined the Church at midlife in the 1960s. Speaking of his conversion and the missionaries who taught him, he said:

I am glad that the first thing they did was to give me the pamphlet on Joseph Smith’s vision. The style of the Joseph Smith story immediately struck me. He spoke to me, as soon as I read his testimony, as a great writer, transparently sincere and matter-of-fact. . . . When Joseph Smith describes his visions, he describes them not as a man who feels that he has to make the effort to persuade. He simply states what happened to him, and does it in a way that gives it credence. I am in this church because of the Joseph Smith story; my fundamental act of faith was to accept this as a remarkable document.⁶

For some years, when the gospel is introduced to a virgin nation and language, it has been Church policy that one of the first items of Church literature to be translated and provided for the use of missionaries and members is the Joseph Smith story. Like no other Church, ours rises or falls on the strength of its history, especially its founding stories.

When President Gordon B. Hinckley was interviewed several years ago for a public television documentary on the Church, he said of the Joseph Smith story, “It’s either true or false. If it’s false, we’re engaged in a great fraud. If it’s true, it’s the most important thing in the world.”⁷ President Hinckley’s simple logic was actually profound. The truth of our doctrine and our claim to priesthood authority as Latter-day Saints are rooted inescapably in our history. If the stories of angelic visitations by Moroni; John the Baptist; Peter, James, and John; Elijah; Elias; and others are not true, our claim to be the one true Church is unsustainable. History—in story form—is truly the foundation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Not all the stories that make up our history are of the epic proportion of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Some remarkable stories come from the lives of ordinary Latter-day Saints. History is life, and from ordinary lives come stories that reinforce what we more ordinary people believe, what we stand for, and what we should do in the face of adversity.

Consider, for example, this excerpt from the personal history of Thomas Briggs, a British convert who suffered throughout his life with chronically poor health. Thomas joined the Church at age sixteen, came to Utah in 1864, and in 1865 was living with his family in Bountiful, Utah:

We had a very severe winter and the spring of 1865 was very late. I rented some land on shares from Thomas Fisher, and planted it to potatoes, and I also rented a piece of land from Brother Anson Call, on which I planted onions, beets, and carrots, also a little cane to make molasses. The main thing we had to eat was bread, and occasionally I would go to the mountains for wood, then haul it to Salt Lake City and sell it for what I could get. I had two running sores on my leg, and Ephraim, who was now eleven years of age, was the only help I had. The weather was very good, all our crops grew very fast, everything looked prosperous, and when Fall came we rejoiced to think that we had been blessed so much. We had two fat pigs in the pen, and I was able to haul considerable wood to the city. I was getting pretty well acquainted and a man in the city told me if I would haul him five loads of good maple wood he would give me \$100.

One day Ephraim and I started out for a load of wood, and when we were about a mile from home Brother Prescott stopped us, and said, "Brother Briggs, I am very sorry to tell you, but all of your stuff is burned up, your stable, and all that you had in the corral is gone." I asked him if everyone at home was all right and he said they were. I told him that last fall I came to Utah with nothing, and I had nothing now, and that I always dedicated everything to the Lord and if he thought fit to make a burnt offering of it, well and good. When I arrived home everything looked pretty bad. I comforted my wife the best I could. I then went to work with a stronger will than ever. I asked my Heavenly Father to give me strength of body, and prayed that He would help me through as He had many times before.⁸

A story like this can provide inspiration and balm for the soul.

The accounts of those who have gone before us can often teach us how to behave. Consider this statement from the journal of George Q. Cannon, who had associated intimately with the prophet Brigham Young, including serving as his counselor from 1873 until Brother Brigham's death in 1877:

To describe my feelings upon the death of this man of God, whom I loved so much and who had always treated me with such kindness and affection, is impossible. His family, because of his partiality and affection for me and the desire which he always manifested to have my company when I was at home, to eat with him, to spend my evenings with him, and when we visited the settlements on preaching excursions, to have me stop where he stopped, called me his last wife. I have endeavored to appreciate these manifestations of affection and love, and now that he has gone I feel exceedingly thankful that I had these up to the last—that nothing occurred to alienate his feelings from me. On my part, he was in my eyes as perfect a man as I ever knew. I never desired to see his faults; I closed my eyes to them. To me he was a prophet of God, the head of the dispensation on the earth, holding the keys under the prophet Joseph, and in my mind there clustered about him, holding this

position, everything holy and sacred and to be revered. Some, I am satisfied, now as I write this in Washington, Jan. 17, 1878, have thought that I carried this feeling too far; but I know this, that in revering him as the prophet of the Lord, in obeying him, in being governed by his counsel, in bearing testimony to his teachings and his character I have been blessed of the Lord, peace has been in my heart, light has rested upon me, and the Lord has borne witness to me that my course was pleasing to Him. Now that Brother Brigham has gone I rejoice in this. I never criticised or found fault with his conduct, his counsel or his teachings at any time in my heart, much less in my words or actions. This is a pleasure to me now. The thought that ever was with me was: If I criticise or find fault with, or judge Brother Brigham, how far shall I go; if I commence, where shall I stop? I dared not to trust myself in such a course. I knew that apostasy frequently resulted from the indulgence of the spirit of criticising and fault-finding. Others, of greater strength, wisdom and experience than myself, might do many things and escape evil consequences which I dare not do.⁹

For those who tend to murmur and nitpick at the Prophet and other leading Brethren, this wonderful expression of loyalty and devotion speaks for itself.

Stories can provide context that enriches and helps us better understand the revelations received in our day. Consider, for example, the story behind the fourth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Most full-time missionaries commit this section to memory and frequently recite it at missionary gatherings, but few may have considered the historical setting in which it was received. The revelation was given through Joseph Smith to his father, Joseph Smith Sr., at Harmony, Pennsylvania, in February 1829. What was Father Smith doing more than one hundred miles from Palmyra in the dead of winter? What were Joseph and Emma's circumstances at that time?

Joseph and Emma had married in January of 1827 and had received the gold plates in September of that same year. Seeking peace to be able to translate, they went to Harmony in late fall of 1827 and settled near the home of Emma's father, Isaac Hale. Isaac had not been pleased with Emma's marriage to Joseph and was skeptical of Joseph's character.

Joseph was learning how to translate the plates when Martin Harris arrived in Harmony in February 1828 and began to serve as scribe. By mid-June of 1828, Joseph and Martin had completed 116 pages of text. Harris's uncertainty about Joseph's authenticity led to the well-known incident of the lost 116 pages. What is not as well known is that at the time Harris left to take the 116 pages to Palmyra, Emma gave birth to her first child, a son, after an exhausting labor. The son died the day he was born, and Emma nearly died herself.

After a brief time, Joseph went to Palmyra to check up on Martin Harris. When he learned that the 116 pages had been lost, he was distraught. "O, my



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God!" he exclaimed, "All is lost! all is lost! What shall I do?" His mother, Lucy Smith, later described what she termed "that day of darkness." "To us, at least," she said, "the heavens seemed clothed with blackness, and the earth shrouded with gloom." When Joseph went back to Harmony in July of 1828, his parents' concern for his welfare must have been acute.¹⁰

Once in Harmony, Joseph and Emma translated a little, but the practical need to prepare for winter occupied their time and effort. The Hales refused to assist with Joseph and Emma's obvious physical needs, so in early winter Joseph and Emma called on their good friend Joseph Knight Sr. in Colesville and revealed their predicament. They secured a little food and other necessities, but it must have been a humbling moment. Joseph seemed at this point to be struggling against considerable odds, without clear direction.¹¹

Because Joseph's parents had heard nothing from him in nearly two months, and because they were mindful of the great distress he had been under in July over the loss of the 116 pages, they visited him in Harmony in February of 1829.¹² It was there and in the context of these discouraging and seemingly hopeless circumstances that Joseph received what is now section 4 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The revelation was directed to his beloved father but may well have been given as much for Joseph's benefit. "Now behold,"

said the Lord, "a marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men" (v. 1). That bold declaration must have been as welcome and needed a message as ever reached Joseph's ears. He appears to have been rejuvenated after his parents' visit, and the work of translation began again in earnest. Can you see what a knowledge of the history that surrounds section 4, or any of God's directives, can do for our ability to appreciate and heed His counsel?

One does not have to go far back in time or search only on the American continent to find moving stories from Church history. Our religion is now a worldwide movement, and Church history is being made every day in almost every land.

Between 2001 and 2004 my wife and I were able to associate with Helmi Luschin, the widow of Immo Luschin, through our Church service in Europe. Immo was the Church's lead German translator for more than forty years. He was a brilliant linguist and a strong-willed and wonderful man. He and his beloved Helmi met after the Second World War. Since both were interested in learning English, they courted by writing each other a letter in English each day and coming together after work in the evenings to read Shakespeare.

Helmi told us that shortly after she and Immo were married in the Catholic Church, he said to her one day, "We'll be together in heaven."

"Well," she replied, "I've never heard of that."

He then said, "If they don't have it when we get there, they'll invent it for us!" A few years later the full-time missionaries knocked on the Luschins' door in Gratz, Austria. Brother Luschin's first question was "What does your Church teach about marriage and family?" The rest, as they say, is history.

A Personal Experience

As I conclude the case I have been making for studying Church history, I realize I might have stressed many other benefits. For me personally, however, the most significant blessing of my engagement with Church history is the spirit I feel when I read a pioneer journal, visit a Church history site, or view a page from the original Book of Mormon manuscript. It is during these times that the peaceful whisperings of the Spirit assure me that Joseph Smith really saw what he said he saw and that the Church he helped found is true and of God.

This feeling has never been more poignant than it was in November 2007 as my wife and I fulfilled an assignment to attend the Palmyra New York Stake conference. Since we had presided over the New York Rochester Mission from 1993 to 1995, we were thrilled to be sent back to a people and place

we love. We arrived in Rochester on Friday evening and arose early Saturday morning so that we could visit the Smith farm and Sacred Grove before my official conference duties began.

It was a cool but clear November morning with the trees in brilliant fall colors as we arrived. We walked into the Sacred Grove as we had done dozens of times with new and departing missionaries during our mission. There were no other visitors that day, so Kathy and I walked deep into the grove and sat on a bench in blissful silence, watching an occasional leaf fall and listening to the morning songs of the birds.

As we sat together on that little bench in that sacred setting, my heart filled with love and appreciation for my wife and for the Restoration of the gospel that gives such purpose and meaning to our relationship and to our efforts to preside over a wonderful and ever-growing family. In the spirit of that moment, I turned to Kathy and did something I have not done often enough during our marriage: I bore my testimony just to her. I told her I knew that somewhere near where we were sitting, Joseph Smith had seen God and Christ and had been called as a prophet to restore the only true Church. I told her I appreciated her faith in those truths and her willingness with me to stake the entire course of our adult lives on the veracity of Joseph Smith's story. When I finished, Kathy bore her testimony to me. It was one of the finest moments of our married life and the most persuasive and personal experience I might share about the Spirit emanating from the stories, people, and places of Church history.

May we all be blessed to continue our love affair with the past so that we can take full advantage of the present and be prepared for our heavenly future. This is my hope and my prayer. **RE**

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Notes

1. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 2:170; emphasis in original.

2. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, p. 4, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library.

3. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), xv.

4. David McCullough, citing Barbara Tuchman, acceptance speech, November 15, 1995, National Book Awards.

5. *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 57, 118–19.

6. Arthur Henry King, *The Abundance of the Heart* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 25.

7. Gordon B. Hinckley, interview, January 2007, *The Mormons*, PBS, April 2007, www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/hinckley.html.

8. Kate B. Carter, comp., *Our Pioneer Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1960), 3:284–85.

9. George Q. Cannon, Journal, August 29–30, 1877, Church History Library. Although this passage is recorded under the dates of August 29 and 30, 1877, Cannon actually wrote it on January 17, 1878.

10. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 121, 124; Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 53, 58–68.

11. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 70.

12. Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 124.