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READING CHURCH HISTORY
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My fellow teachers: In the six months since I accepted this invitation, there has been a flurry of excitement about Church history. New histories and biographies are being published at an unprecedented rate. Heretofore unknown documents bearing the names of early Church leaders are coming forth. Experts are studying their authenticity. Scholars are debating their meaning.

In the process, the news media are having a field day. Controversy makes good copy, especially when it concerns a church with some doctrines that diverge sharply from those of mainstream Christianity. As a fervent and fast-growing group of believers who persistently disdain the comfortable fraternity of ecumenical Christianity, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a subject of abiding fascination for the news media.
The resulting publicity has stimulated attacks on the Church by seemingly religious persons. None of this should surprise us. As the Savior taught his followers:

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.

If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. (John 15:18-19.)

I will not comment on the content of any of the recent Church histories nor biographies. Nor will I discuss the important issue of how scholarly history or faithful history should be written. Instead, I have chosen to speak on how Church history should be read, especially the so-called "history" that comes in bits and pieces in the daily or weekly news media.

At the outset, I stress that my remarks are not directed at any particular book or article or at any group of books or articles. I will be suggesting general principles for the guidance of Latter-day Saint readers of Church history and biography. I hope to be helpful to you as teachers, and through you to your students and to members of the Church generally.
Some of these general principles should cause readers and viewers to apply the discount of skepticism to media stories about developments in Church history. Other principles apply to all writings on Church history and biography. These general principles concern (1) scientific uncertainties, (2) lack of context, (3) truths and half-truths, (4) bias, (5) balance, and (6) evaluation.

Since I am speaking to readers and viewers who are members of the Church, my discussion will also include references to the special help we can receive from the Holy Ghost, whose mission is to give us knowledge (D&C 121:26), to "enlighten [our] mind" (D&C 11:13), and to "guide [us] unto all truth..." (John 16:13).

1. Scientific Uncertainties

Some recent news stories about developments in Church history rest on scientific assumptions or assertions, such as the authenticity of a letter. Whether experts or amateurs, most of us have a tendency to be quite dogmatic about so-called scientific facts. Since news writers are not immune from this tendency, news stories based on scientific assumptions should be read or viewed with some skepticism.
Here is a case in point. Last month the police in West Valley City, Utah, discovered the bones of a human skeleton protruding from the bank of a canal. After a preliminary examination, they announced as a scientific fact that the bones belonged to an adult male who had been dead from 1 to 20 years. The police said he was probably the victim of foul play because they had found a spent bullet in the grave. The press reported these facts, television ran visual stories, and the case had some notoriety.

A few days later, the original scientific evaluation was revised. Now, the experts concluded that the skeleton was that of a woman and that the bones were hundreds of years old. This Indian woman had been buried before the canal was dug. High water levels in recent years had eroded the bank of the canal, causing her bones to protrude. What of the spent bullet? Someone had probably been shooting a .22 caliber weapon in the area, and the bullet was in the grave by coincidence. Foul play was ruled out, and the case was closed. (Deseret News, July 13, 1985, p. B-7, columns 1-3; Salt Lake Tribune, July 13, 1985, p. B-1.)

This example suggests that the news media--print and electronic--are not reliable sources for historical facts based on scientific uncertainties. This is understandable. Most of the news media go to their readers or viewers on a daily or
hourly basis, often under great pressure to scoop their competition. As a result, they frequently cannot obtain irrefutable scientific verification of the facts they will report. Furthermore, limitations of time and space mean that they cannot explain their scientific foundations in sufficient detail for the reader or viewer to understand their implications. The contents of most media stories are dictated not by what is necessary to a full understanding of the subject but by what information is currently available and can be communicated within the limitations of time and space.

As a result, the news media are particularly susceptible to conveying erroneous information about facts, including historical developments that are based on what I have called scientific uncertainties. This susceptibility obviously applies to newly discovered documents whose authenticity turns on an evaluation of handwriting, paper, ink, etc. Readers should be skeptical about the authenticity of such documents, especially when we are unsure where they were found or who had custody of them for 150 years. Newly found historically important documents can be extremely valuable, so there is a powerful incentive for those who own them to advocate and support their authenticity. The recent spectacular fraud involving the so-called Hitler diaries reminds us of this, and should convince us to be cautious.
2. Lack of Context

Another reason why news stories are unsuited to communicate historical understanding is that their format is such that they invariably report such facts out of context. An individual historical fact has meaning only in relation to other events. Outside that context, a single fact is almost certain to convey an erroneous impression.

I saw an example of this in a program I viewed in my capacity as Chairman of the Board of the Public Broadcasting Service. A group of media executives and military leaders were discussing a hypothetical case involving U.S. military support of a small nation that was trying to put down a Communist-inspired uprising.

Guerrillas were attacking a village that had cooperated with U.S. military advisers. U.S. troops were defending the village, and U.S. news media were covering the conflict. As the 50 U.S. troops attempted to withdraw by helicopter, an old woman from the village ran toward a group of soldiers at the evacuation pad carrying a bundle and shouting. One of the U.S. riflemen shot her dead just a few steps short of the perimeter. The whole incident was captured on film.
The question for discussion was whether the television network should show that incident on its evening news. The incident would reflect discredit on the military and would be highly inflammatory in the current public debate on the merits of our government's policy in that small nation. Its showing could swing public opinion.

At the same time, all conceded that readers and viewers could not understand the significance of this killing without seeing it in the context of what this beleaguered infantry platoon had encountered in that village for several weeks. They had been under continuous attack. There had been numerous attempts to infiltrate their lines. Persons dressed as civilians had hurled explosive charges, causing casualties. Every rifleman was exhausted and jumpy. Although the bundle carried by the dead woman proved to contain only her clothes, a weary rifleman could well have concluded that she was attempting to get close enough to hurl an explosive charge into the group of soldiers waiting to board the helicopter. None of this was picked up by the TV camera, whose narrow field of vision only recorded the shooting of an old woman, running alone across a vacant field.

The TV executives advised that the maximum "news hole" for a single story on the evening news, 30 to 40 seconds, made it impossible to provide the viewer with the context for this
shooting. TV news could not provide perspective. It could only report an incident. Should this "juicy news story," as they called it, be withheld because its inevitable effect would be to convey an erroneous impression of fact on an important issue of public policy? Most of the media executives said they would carry the story. It was "news."

Even in matters where context is a prerequisite to understanding, the news media tend to compete in terms of immediacy rather than accuracy. As a result, when the media report historical facts, they may provide information but they rarely provide illumination.

President Gordon B. Hinckley described another kind of lack of context in his talk at October Conference two years ago. His example applies to all writings on church history and biography:

We have those critics who appear to wish to cull out of a vast panorama of information those items which demean and belittle some of the men and women of the past who worked so hard in laying the foundation of this great cause. They find readers of their works who seem to delight in picking up these tidbits, and in chewing them over and relishing them. In so doing they are savoring a pickle, rather than eating a delicious and satisfying dinner of several courses.
We recognize that our forebears were human. They doubtless made mistakes....But the mistakes were minor, when compared with the marvelous work which they accomplished. To highlight the mistakes and gloss over the greater good is to draw a caricature. Caricatures are amusing, but they are often ugly and dishonest. A man may have a blemish on his cheek and still have a face of beauty and strength, but if the blemish is emphasized unduly in relation to his other features, the portrait is lacking in integrity. 

I do not fear truth. I welcome it. But I wish all of my facts in their proper context, with emphasis on those elements which explain the great growth and power of this organization. (Gordon B. Hinckley, "Be Not Deceived," Ensign, Nov. 1983, p. 46.)

In short, readers need to be sensitive to the reality that historical and biographical facts can only contribute to understanding when they are communicated in context.

3. Truths and Half-truths

Satan is the great deceiver, the father of lies (see John 8:44). This is not because Satan tells only lies. His most effective lies are half-truths or lies accompanied by the truth. A lie is most effective when it can travel incognito in
good company, or when it can be so intermarried with the truth that we cannot determine its lineage. As the Lord revealed in the Doctrine and Covenants, truth is a "knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come; And whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning" (D&C 93:24-25).

Suppose, for example, we referred to Paul as "an apostle who went about to destroy the Church." Or suppose we referred to King David as a "prophet who was an adulterer." As students of the Bible we can recognize the elements of truth in each statement. Yet we know that each statement, by itself, conveys a lie. This example shows how easily a deceiver can discredit an individual by mingling events from different periods in his life. None of us is immune from that kind of deception. Youthful folly and the mistakes of inexperience can easily be used to discredit a person and detract from later accomplishments. In this manner, the deceiver can attempt to undercut the repentance and forgiveness made possible by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In this manner, the adversary can attempt to discredit the principle of eternal progress that is central to the Gospel plan.

Satan can even use truth to promote his purposes. Truth can be used unrighteously. True facts, severed from their context, can convey an erroneous impression. Persons who make
true statements out of an evil motive, such those who seek to
injure another, use the truth unrighteously. A person who
preaches the truths of the gospel "for the sake of riches and
honor" (Alma 1:16) commits the sin of priestcraft. Persons who
reveal truths that they hold under obligations of
confidentiality, such as medical doctors or lawyers, or bishops
who have heard confessions, are guilty of wrongdoing. And a
person who learns some embarrassing fact and threatens to
reveal it unless he is paid off commits a crime we call
blackmail, even if the threatened disclosure is true.

The fact that something is true is not always a
justification for communicating it. While instructing the
Corinthian Saints not to partake of meat offered in sacrifice
to idols, the Apostle Paul explained:

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not
expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things
edify not" (1 Cor. 10:23).

By the same token, some things that are true are not edifying
or appropriate to communicate. Readers of history and
biography should ponder that moral reality as part of their
effort to understand the significance of what they read.
Any contest between deception and truth pits Satan against the Holy Ghost. The scriptures teach us that "Satan hath sought to deceive you that he might overthrow you" (D&C 50:3), whereas, "the Holy Ghost . . . will show you all things that ye should do" (2 Ne. 32:5). "And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:5).

As members of the Church, we have the Gift of the Holy Ghost. If we will use our spiritual powers of discernment, we will not be mislead by the lies and half-truths Satan will circulate in his attempts to deceive us and to thwart the work of God.

A. Bias

Readers and viewers also need to be sensitive to the bias of the writer or the publisher. That bias may be religious or irreligious, believing, skeptical, or hostile.

In the latest issue of Brigham University Studies, Dean Richard H. Cracroft describes one aspect of bias, with particular reference to Church-member historians:

Too often, Mormon writers, particularly those of what Edward Geary has called "Mormondom's Lost Generation," have attempted to write from a position of apparent faith, only
to reveal their axe-grinding differences with Mormonism in a prose fraught with art but very little Mormon heart; thus they belie the very traditions they are attempting to re-create. (Book Review, BYU Studies, Spring 1984, pp. 243-44.)

The bias of a partially committed Latter-day Saint author can be particularly misleading to LDS readers, especially if the author bills himself as LDS. Yet, a spiritually sensitive Latter-day Saint can discern such bias. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained this in an 1832 letter to W. W. Phelps in Missouri:

... it is in vain to try to hide a bad spirit from the eyes of them who are spiritual for it will shew itself in speaking & in writing as well as all our other conduct, it is also useless to make great pretentions when the heart is not right before God, for God looks at the heart, and where the heart is not right the Lord will expose it to the view of his faithful saints. (Dean Jessee, The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, pp. 263-64.)

An author's bias on the miraculous aspects of religion can be quite evident in the way he portrays sacred experiences. For example, here are six different ways of recounting Joseph
Smith's First Vision, presented in order from the most positive to the most negative.

1. **Reporting the event as having happened.** Two LDS historians wrote this account:

   "Within the light the astonished young man saw two persons who resembled each other. They seemed to be standing above him in the air, the brightness of their presence defying all description. One of them called him by name, then pointed to the other and said, 'This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!'"  

2. **Relating the event in the witness's own words while disclosing the author's belief that the witness's account is truthful.** In his introduction, another LDS historian stated that he would take this approach:

   "Believing Mormons like myself understand the origins of the Book of Mormon quite differently from others. How can a description of Joseph Smith's revelations accommodate a Mormon's perception of events and still make sense to a general audience? My method has been to relate events as the participants themselves experienced them, using their own words"
where possible. Insofar as the revelations were a reality to them, I have treated them as real in this narrative." (Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, p. 3.)

3. **Stating that the person who reported the event believed that it happened.** Two other LDS historians treated the First Vision in this manner:

"Faced with Joseph Smith's account of a subjective religious experience in a literal historical setting, writers of the past have either accepted it as fact or, more commonly, rejected it as falsehood or delusion. There has been no appropriate middle ground, as in the case of, say, Gandhi or Luther, where all parties could agree that an experience was valuable and an evidence of personal genius even if not a literal divine manifestation. The tools of secular scholarship are crude and inadequate instruments for measuring mystical theophanies. . . . What the historian can do is to analyze as fairly as possible Joseph Smith's own account of his experiences." (Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, p. 5.)
4. Relating the event, but implying that it probably did not happen. A non-LDS historian took this approach. The tip-off is his use of the word story:

"As he prayed, the heavens opened, and two personages appeared in a shaft of light. 'This is my beloved Son, hear ye Him,' spake the elder of the two. Then the other personage told Joseph that he should join none of the churches, for all were wrong. . . . That was the story the boy told his friends and family. Members of his family listened and believed. The neighbors scoffed and branded Joseph a falsifier, a visionary, even a victim of Satan. But he would not deny his story or change it." (Anderson, Desert Saints, pp. 7-8.) (Emphasis added.)

5-6. Ignoring the event or distorting it, or stating that it did not happen.

[No illustrations]

Bias can also be exercised in decisions on what news stories to publish and what to omit. This kind of bias is difficult to detect, but it can be discerned over a period of time. For example, it is striking that we read so many stories in the media about the discovery of letters or historical facts
that supposedly contradict or discredit early leaders of the Church, but no news accounts of letters that support those leaders.

For example, the May 20, 1985, issue of Time Magazine carried an article titled, "Challenging Mormonism's Roots: Newly found letter raises questions about the Church's origins." Time gives the names of several individuals, identified as members of the Church, who are quoted as saying that they have left the Church or encountered "an incredible crisis of faith" as a result of these letters. Have you ever seen an article in a national news magazine about someone who has joined the Church or been strengthened in their faith by some publication or spiritual experience? Or, have you ever seen a national news magazine report a disclosure--scientific or otherwise--that has strengthened faith in the Church? There are such disclosures. Study the 1985 Catalog of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), "A Scripture Research Library," and you will find scores of articles published in the last decade by respected scholars in many different fields that support the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and strengthen faith in the Restored Church. Isn't there more than a suggestion of bias in the fact that the news media have ignored all of these, and then expended so many lines on supposedly negative disclosures?
5. Balance

Balance is telling both sides. This is not the mission of official Church literature or avowedly anti-Mormon literature. Neither has any responsibility to present both sides. But when supposedly objective news media or periodicals run a feature or an article on the Church or its doctrines, it ought to be balanced. So should a book-length history or biography. Readers of supposedly objective authors and publishers have a right to expect balance in writing about the Church or its doctrines. Some such writing is balanced, but much is not. In this arena, readers should beware of writings that imply balance but do not deliver it.

A good example of balanced treatment of an LDS historical issue occurs in a book review in a recent issue of Chronicles of Culture, published by the Rockford Institute, on whose board I serve. In reviewing four recent books on the origins of Mormonism—two by Mormons, Arrington and Bushman, and two by non-Mormons, Shipps and Taves*—the author identifies his

potential bias by revealing that he is LDS. Then, he writes
with what I believe to be admirable balance. These passages
give the flavor:

Because of the sweeping nature of his claims, it is
difficult to halt between two opinions of Joseph Smith. It
is no help that his status—prophet or fraud—depends upon
the authenticity of several events in which very few shared
directly; three others testified that they had seen Moroni
and the plates; eight men swore they had seen the plates.
In this regard, Shipps observes, Mormonism parallels early
Christianity, which began with "the story of the
resurrection of Jesus without supporting it with objective
evidence obtained from persons outside the incipient
Christian community." The consequence is that "despite the
availability of an enormous body of primary source
material, early Mormonism has proved to be almost
impervious to objective study." . . .

But the most anachronistic feature of Mormonism may be
its continuing openness to the miraculous. Bushman makes
the point that since the 18th century most Christian
denominations have rejected the possibility of supernatural
events not recorded in the Bible. Mormons offend
fundamentalists and agnostics alike by violating this
Enlightenment-Christian synthesis with their talk of
angels, healings, prophecy, and revelation in our time. Caring little for the contemporary "authenticity" of existential doubt, Mormons individually affirm that their faith has been miraculously confirmed by a witness from the Holy Ghost received in answer to prayer.

The ways of explaining Mormonism's anomalies remain irreconcilable. Skeptics continue to see adherents as the dupes of both first-century and 19th-century impostures; many traditional Christians suspect heresy and worse; while Latter-day Saints testify that they follow prophets of God and the Holy Spirit. Short of the Judgment, public agreement seems possible only on the undeniable proposition that Mormons are set against the spirit of the age. (Chronicles of Culture, July, 1985, p. 20.)

Balance needs to be guided by relevance, especially in the narrow confines of a newscast or a newspaper article. For example, an account of a military leader's strategic triumphs can be balanced in a relevant way by an account of his military blunders. But military triumphs are not properly balanced by negatives irrelevant to military prowess, such as the fact that the subject was arrested for shoplifting as a youth. Balance for the sake of complete understanding is justifiable; balance for the sake of matching positives with negatives is not. That kind of news reporting is too common. For example, last month
a television news feature on the 30th anniversary of Disneyland gave that institution some well-deserved praise, and then concluded with what seemed to me to be irrelevant negatives. Even Disneyland has its problems, the reporter declared. Last year the employees struck for higher pay, and several years ago they were sued when they stopped two gay men from dancing together. The inclusion of negatives that are irrelevant or trivial is evidence of bias, not balance.

6. Evaluation

My final category concerns not what actually happened or what an author says about it, but how the reader analyzes and reacts to the report. I call this evaluation. It has two dimensions, intellectual and spiritual.

In terms of the intellectual, readers and viewers clearly need to be more sophisticated in evaluating what is communicated to them. For example, we often hear it said that when two witnesses give two different accounts of the same event, "one has to be lying." Not so. It is rare for two witnesses to observe the same event from exactly the same point of observation at exactly the same time. This fact accounts for some differences in testimony. But even assuming identity of time and place in observation, different accounts of what happened can be attributable to at least five reasons other
than the fact that (1) one witness is lying: (2) both are
lying, (3) one perceived incorrectly, (4) both perceived
incorrectly, (5) one remembered incorrectly, or (6) both
remembered incorrectly.

Another source of differences in the accounts of different
witnesses is the different meanings that different persons
attach to words. We have a vivid illustration of this in the
recent media excitement about the word "salamander" in a letter
Martin Harris is supposed to have sent to W. W. Phelps over 150
years ago. All of the scores of media stories on that subject
apparently assume that the author of that letter used the word
"salamander" in the modern sense of a "tailed amphibian."

One wonders why so many writers neglected to reveal to
their readers that there is another meaning of "salamander,"
which may even have been the primary meaning in this context in
the 1820s. That meaning, which is listed second in my Random
House Dictionary of the English Language, is "a mythical being
thought to be able to live in fire." Modern and ancient
literature contain many examples of this usage. For examples
see the research notes by F.A.R.M.S., circulated at this
symposium.

A being that is able to live in fire is a good
approximation of the description Joseph Smith gave of the Angel
Moroni: a personage in the midst of a light, whose countenance was "truly like lightning" and whose overall appearance "was glorious beyond description." (Joseph Smith History 1:30, 32.) As Joseph Smith wrote later, "the first sight [of this personage] was as though the house was filled with consuming fire . . . ." (History of the Church, Vol. 4, p. 536). Since the letter only purports to be Martin Harris' interpretation of what he had heard about Joseph's experience, the use of the words white salamander and old spirit seem understandable.

In view of all this, and as a matter of intellectual evaluation, why all the excitement in the media, and why the apparent hand-wringing among those who profess friendship or membership in the Church? The media should make more complete disclosures, but LDS readers should also be more sophisticated in their evaluation of what they read.

For Latter-day Saints evaluation also has a spiritual dimension. This is because of our belief in Moroni's declaration that "by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:5). That promise assures spiritually sensitive readers a power of discernment that will help them evaluate the meaning of what they learn.
In connection with our spiritual powers of evaluation, we need to remember that the Spirit of the Lord will not guide us if our own attitude is one of fault-finding. That principle applies to readers and writers. The scriptures abound with the commandment that Christians should abstain from evil-speaking. (See Eph. 4:31; 1 Peter 2:1; D&C 20:54; D&C 136:23.) We should stress the positive, and seek to strengthen one another in all our communications (see D&C 108:7). President Gordon B. Hinckley gave valuable counsel on that subject in a General Conference address several years ago:

We live in a society that feeds on criticism. Faultfinding is the substance of columnists and commentators, and there is too much of this among our own people. It is so easy to find fault, and to resist doing so requires much of discipline. But if as a people we will build and sustain one another, the Lord will bless us with the strength to weather every storm and continue to move forward through every adversity. (Gordon B. Hinckley, "Five Million Members—A Milestone and Not a Summit," Ensign, May, 1982, p. 46.)

Criticism is particularly objectionable when it is directed toward Church authorities, general or local. Jude condemns those who "speak evil of dignities" (Jude 8). Evil-speaking of the Lord's anointed is in a class by itself. It is one thing
to depreciate a person who exercises corporate power or even
government power. It is quite another thing to criticize or
depreciate a person for the performance of an office to which
he or she has been called of God. It does not matter that the
criticism is true. As President George F. Richards of the
Council of the Twelve said in a conference address in April
1947:

When we say anything bad about the leaders of the
Church, whether true or false, we tend to impair their
influence and their usefulness and are thus working against
the Lord and his cause. (CR, April 1947, p. 24.)

The young warrior David recognized that we are never
justified in any gesture or act against the Lord's anointed.
Saul, the wicked king, was pursuing David without cause and
seeking to take his life. While King Saul slept with his
troops around him, David and one of his soldiers stealthily
crept to his side. Declaring that God had delivered him into
their hands, David's companion was about to kill Saul with his
own spear. "Destroy him not," David ordered, "for who can
stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be
guiltless?" (1 Sam. 26:9).

The Holy Ghost will not guide or confirm criticism of the
Lord's anointed, or of Church leaders, local or general. This
reality should be part of the spiritual evaluation that LDS readers and viewers apply to those things written about our history and those who made it.

I have reviewed various general principles that should guide readers and viewers of stories and articles about church history and biography. I have spoken of scientific uncertainties, lack of context, truths and half-truths, bias, balance, and evaluation. I have also spoken of the spiritual powers of discernment available through the Gift of the Holy Ghost, which Latter-day Saints should use in their efforts to understand these subjects. As Nephi taught his people:

Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men, save their precepts shall be given by the power of the Holy Ghost (2 Ne. 28:31).

Our individual, personal testimonies are based on the witness of the Spirit, not on any combination or accumulation of historical facts. If we are so grounded, no alteration of historical facts can shake our testimonies. Our Heavenly Father gave us powers of reason, and we are expected to use them to the fullest. But he also gave us the Comforter which he said would lead us into truth, and by whose power we may know the truth of all things. That is the ultimate guide for
Latter-day Saints who are worthy and willing to rely on it. By the same token, we know that we are not saved by our own powers or by any earthly force or favor. Salvation and exaltation come by the precious blood of Christ, by the mercy of God by the plan He has prescribed, and by the priesthood he has restored. May we have the faith necessary to lay hold on that atonement and work out our exaltation under that plan, as preached by this, his only true Church, is my humble prayer, which I offer as I bear testimony to you of the reality of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and of the restoration of the fulness of his gospel in these latter days . . . .