

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 31 · 2019 · Pages 285 - 302

I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church

Davis Bitton

Offprint Series

© 2019 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org. You may subscribe to this journal at InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription.

I DON'T HAVE A TESTIMONY OF THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Davis Bitton

***Abstract:** In this masterful presentation, accomplished historian Davis Bitton addresses the role of history and belief. Testimonies, he asserts, are born of belief and spiritual witnesses, not from historical events. It is quite possible to know all about Church history and still remain a believing member.*

[Editor's Note: This essay was presented at the 2004 FAIR Conference.¹ In preparation for publication it has been lightly copy edited and some citations and annotations added.]

I don't have a testimony of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That is why I can be a historian and also a believing Latter-day Saint. I will expand on this idea, but first let me address some related questions.

Do All Well-informed Historians Become Anti-Mormons?

The critics would have you believe that they are disinterested pursuers of the truth. There they were, minding their own business, going about their conscientious study of Church history and — shock and dismay! — they came across *this*, whatever *this* is, that blew them away. As hurtful as it is for them, they can no longer believe in the Church and, out of love for you, they now want to help you see the light of day.²

1. Davis Bitton, "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church," FairMormon website, <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2004/>.

2. This characterization closely parallels the experience of Jeremy Runnels and the mission statement of the CES Letter Foundation. See Jeremy Runnels, "About the Author," CES Letter website, <https://cesletter.org/#about>.

Let's get one thing clear: There is nothing in Church history that leads inevitably to the conclusion that the Church is false. There is nothing that requires the conclusion that Joseph Smith was a fraud. How can I say this with such confidence? For the simple reason that the historians who know most about our Church history have been and are faithful, committed members of the Church. Or, to restate the situation more precisely, there are faithful Latter-day Saint historians who know as much about this subject as any anti-Mormon or as anyone who writes on the subject from an outside perspective. With few exceptions, they know much, much more. They have not been blown away. They have not gnashed their teeth and abandoned their faith. To repeat, they have found nothing that forces the extreme conclusion our enemies like to promote.

We need to reject the simple-minded, inaccurate picture that divides people into two classes. On one hand, according to our enemies, are the sincere seekers of truth, full of goodness and charity. On the other hand, in their view, stand the ignorant members. Even faithful Latter-day Saint scholars must be ignorant. Otherwise they are dishonest, playing their part in the conspiracy to deceive their people. This is the anti-Mormon view of the situation.

Can we see how ridiculous this picture is? It is a travesty on both sides. Many Latter-day Saints may not know their history in depth. But some of them know a good deal. As for Latter-day Saint scholars, as a group they compare favorably with any similar group of historians. It will not do to charge them with being dishonest. I happen to know most of them and have no hesitation in rejecting a smear of their character.

On the other hand, your typical anti-Mormon is no disinterested pursuer of the truth. If you are confronted with a "problem," some kind of "non-faith-promoting" take on Church history, chances are good that your willing helper can lay no claim to doing any significant research in Mormon history. Oblivious to the primary sources, unread in the journal literature, the critic has picked up his nugget from previous anti-Mormon writers and offers it to you as though it is a fresh discovery. Most of the time it is anything but new. It is a stock item in a litany of anti-Mormon claims that serve their purpose.

Why does the charge accomplish anything? Because they don't tell you how stale it is and of course will not let you know where answers have already been provided. To you it is new or may be new. Falling into the trap, you think you have been deceived by the Church, and here is something seriously damaging to the restored gospel. Like peddlers

of snake oil from time immemorial, the critic is willing to take full advantage of the situation.

How many historians who are deeply familiar with the sources on Church origins still find it possible to remain in the fold? We might start with names like Richard Bushman, James B. Allen, Glen L. Leonard, Richard L. Anderson, Larry Porter, Milton Backman, Dean C. Jessee, and Ronald W. Walker, all of whom are thoroughly familiar with the issues and sources. Joining their ranks are historians like Ronald Esplin, Grant Underwood, Richard Bennett, Steven Harper and Mark Ashurst-McGee. Many others also fit the description. I offer only a sampling of faithful, knowledgeable historians.

I do not claim that all historians are believing members of the Church. That would be patently absurd. From the beginning, disbelieving historians have written accounts of the events. There have also been historians like Hubert Howe Bancroft, who simply put the truth question on the shelf. No one denies such approaches are possible. But there is also a long tradition of important work by Latter-day Saint scholars. In other words, those who know most about Church history do not simply and inevitably join the ranks of disbelievers and Mormon-haters. It is quite possible, apparently, to know a great deal about Church history and still be a practicing, believing Latter-day Saint.

Why do I spend time insisting on this simple, obvious fact? Because our opponents want to leave the opposite impression. And because for many Latter-day Saints it is sufficient to know that faithful historians who are thoroughly familiar with the issues do not accept the interpretations and conclusions of the would-be destroyers of faith. I have not entered the argument over any of the specific issues. My point is simpler than that. It is simply this: *Competent historians who have devoted many years of study to the issues have not felt compelled to abandon their faith in the restored gospel.*

Expectation

May I reminisce just a little? The year was 1979. Leonard Arrington and I had just published a one-volume history of the Church entitled *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*. The story behind the story is that this work was intended primarily for the non-Latter-day Saint audience. To reach that audience we had to have a national publisher. But Alfred Knopf or any other publisher of the same stature would not, we realized, allow us to publish a propaganda tract for the Church. To communicate with a general reading audience, we had to use

terminology that would be understood, meaning that we had to avoid in-house terms and expressions that may be appropriate for our manuals and other books written for Church members.

To pass muster with our publisher, we could not write history that would be too triumphalist or celebratory. We knew we were walking a narrow line. Some Church members may not have liked our book. On the other hand, we were quite surprised, but of course pleased, to find that our book even led to some conversions — or, more exactly, provoked the interest and the openness that allowed a conversion to occur. I will never forget how jubilant we felt one day when we received the report from our publisher that *The Mormon Experience* had been ordered by 600 different libraries.

During that euphoric time, Leonard and I attended autograph parties, we were interviewed, and we gave quite a few talks. In one interview we were asked to describe the relationship between faith and history. Here is Leonard Arrington's answer:

I have never felt any conflict between maintaining my faith and writing historical truth. If one sticks to historical truth, that shouldn't damage his faith in any way. The Lord doesn't require us to believe anything that's untrue. My long interest in Mormon history (I've been working in it for 33 years) has only served to build my testimony of the gospel and I find the same thing happening to other Latter-day Saint historians as well.³

My own answer went like this:

What's potentially damaging or challenging to faith depends entirely, I think, on one's expectations, and not necessarily history. Any kind of experience can be shattering to faith if the expectation is such that one is not prepared for the experience. ... A person can be converted to the Church in a distant part of the globe and have great pictures of Salt Lake City, the temple looming large in the center of the city. Here we have our home teaching in nice little blocks and we all go to church on Sunday, they believe. It won't take very many hours or days before the reality of experiencing Salt Lake City can be devastating to a person with those expectations. The problem is not the religion; the problem is the incongruity between the expectation and the reality.

3. "An Interview with Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton," *Sunstone* 4 (July August 1979): 41.

History is similar. One moves into the land of history, so to speak, and finds shattering incongruities which can be devastating to faith. But the problem is with the expectation, not with the history. One of the jobs of the historians and of educators in the Church, who teach people growing up in the Church and people coming into the Church, is to try to see to it that expectations are realistic. The Lord does not expect us to believe lies. We believe in being honest and true, as well as chaste and benevolent. My experience, like that of Leonard, has not been one of having my faith destroyed. I think my faith has changed and deepened and become richer and more consistent with the complexities of human experience.

We are examples of people who know a fair amount about Latter-day Saint history and still have strong testimonies of the gospel.⁴

We must have realistic expectations. That is true at many points in life — in choosing a profession, in entering a marriage, in joining an athletic team, in moving to a new location.

Think not when you gather to Zion,
 Your troubles and trials are through,
 That nothing but comfort and pleasure
 Are waiting in Zion for you.
 No, no, 'tis designed as a furnace,
 All substance, all textures to try,
 To burn all the “wood, hay, and stubble,”
 The gold from the dross purify.⁵

When Eliza R. Snow penned those words, they were good advice for the emigrants leaving Europe to join the Saints in the West. Similar counsel is sometimes needed by students of our Latter-day Saint history. “Think not when ye study Church history,” we might sing, “that everyone was always smiling, that the women were always dressed in freshly laundered, starched pinafores, that the men spoke softly, grammatically, and always politely, or that the children were well mannered angels.” Think not! In other words, get real!

I suppose this is a message to those Church members who have such tender eyes and ears that the real history of real people comes as shock

4. Ibid.

5. Eliza R. Snow, “Think Not When You Gather to Zion,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1948), 21.

and awe. “Oh, no,” they whine. “This can’t be true.” Or, quick to judge, they attack the historian, accusing him or her of lacking spirituality or coveting the praise of the world. My message in many such cases is, “Please! Don’t speak until you know what you are talking about.” Or if that sentence is too long, try this: “Grow up.”

Let me tell you about a thought experiment. It goes approximately like this: I approach an episode of Church history or skim it over so that I know the approximate contours. I then ask myself three questions. First, what is the minimum I must find here if it is to be consistent with the truth of the restoration? Very often the answer is blank, because that large issue is simply unaffected.

Second, what, from the point of view of a believing Latter-day Saint, is the worst thing I could find? Here I let my mind run free. I pull all the stops. For example, in my imagination, Joseph Smith could have planned out ahead of time just what he wanted his family to think. So he goes into the woods. He waits a certain interval of time. Then, pretending and acting, he rushes home and acts like he has seen a vision. As a second example, there were meetings in the Kirtland Temple just prior to its dedication. In my imagination, someone came in with a plentiful supply of hard liquor. Everyone there had a drink and then another and then another. Soon they were feeling no pain. Some started singing in nonsense syllables. Others, unable to walk a straight line, said things like “I can top that. What I see is angels swooping around the room.” And so on. In other words, I am seeing the whole scene as a ridiculous drunken spree. You get the idea: it is a version of the worst-case-scenario approach.

I am now prepared for my third question: What do I actually find when I consider the evidence? I can say that never do the events match the worst-case scenario — or even come close. My imagination had prepared me to face the music, if you will, and to discover behavior that was not all perfectly pious. But every time I go through this exercise, I end up with the same conclusion. Yes, there were different personalities, mistakes were made, and so on. But there is nothing here so disabling that I must collapse in a swoon with the certain knowledge that Mormonism is rotten, bad, false, lacking in authenticity.

Of What Do You Have a Testimony?

A number of years ago, I was asked to speak to a combined priesthood group in the Federal Heights Ward. At the conclusion of my remarks, someone asked the following question: “What effect has your extensive study of Church history had on your testimony?” I wasn’t really prepared for the

question. The first words out of my mouth were: “*I never had a testimony of Church history. My testimony is in the gospel of Jesus Christ.*”

Let me anticipate a question that is bound to occur to some. Are there not some historical events that are essential to the Restoration? How, in other words, can I be indifferent to the following claims?

- Joseph Smith had a vision in the Sacred Grove.
- Metal plates were found, kept in his possession for a period of time, shown to witnesses, and translated.
- Heavenly beings restored keys and priesthood authority.
- Many spiritual manifestations occurred at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple.

The list could be lengthened, but let us stop with those. These are “historical” events, if you will; events that occurred in historical time. But not a single one of them is subject to proof or disproof by historians. If I have a testimony of these events, it is not because of my advanced historical training or many years of delving in the primary documents of Church history.

My friend and colleague at the University of Utah who taught Utah history for many years was David E. Miller. He taught a course in Utah history that was popular among all kinds of students. After summarizing the First Vision, he said, “Now you can’t prove things like this by historical evidence. You also can’t disprove them.” Bearing no testimony but also using no ridicule, Professor Miller quoted what Joseph Smith said and then moved on to follow the history of the people who accepted the Prophet’s leadership.

Short of being present during these transcendent manifestations — and, let us say, recording them with a camcorder — all we can do is quote what people said about them. If any of us have a testimony of their historicity, it is not because of the kind of evidence that would stand up in a courtroom. It is because we believe other witnesses. It is because we have our own spiritual confirmation. I am not required to let historians determine for me what I will believe.

When I say I don’t have a testimony of Church history, I mean that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not subject to scrutiny by the feeble tools of the historian. The creation, the fall, the redemption, the “merciful plan of the great Creator” — all these are simply not subject to proof or disproof by looking over old documents.

On the other hand, the people who believed and accepted those doctrines are proper subjects for historical inquiry. In their achievements and failures, their high points and low, their trials and triumphs, in all

the “crooked timber” of their humanity,⁶ these are imperfect people on the Lord’s errand. They stumble and fall, they pick themselves up, they complain and lose their tempers, they become discouraged, they sometimes abandon ship. No one ever said the history of the Church was the history of perfect people. In fact, the Church, as I understand it, is for “the perfecting of the saints” (Ephesians 4:12).

What was the religion they had subscribed to? If the Latter-day Saints in 1840 or 1870 or 1950 or 2004 were instructed by their leaders to lie, cheat, and steal, to be thoroughly bad people, let’s hear about it. Such a case cannot be made by any fair-minded investigator, but I don’t doubt for a minute that those capable of making disgraceful, defamatory “documentaries” like *The God Makers*⁷ would like people to believe the worst of the Mormons. The makers, promoters, and distributors of such scandalous misrepresentation are possessed of a spirit — but it is not the spirit of fairness, not the spirit of charity, not the spirit of truth.

Consider the inexhaustible resource of material unscrupulous anti-Mormons can draw upon from 17 decades of Church history. With people joining the Church from different backgrounds and with the human differences that inevitably manifest themselves, there will be examples of just about everything. You want a member of the Church who was not always in perfect control of his life and who made mistakes? That’s too easy. As J. Golden Kimball might have said, “Hell, we can come up with embezzlers, grave robbers, cross-dressers, plagiarists, forgers, and if you need someone who can recite the Protocols of Zion while hanging from his knees on a flying trapeze, we can probably oblige you.”

Dipping into the huge reservoir of human beings, plucking examples that suit their purpose, anti-Mormons delight audiences already disposed to viewing Church members as eccentric, unenlightened people. Their job is to make Mormons and their religion appear ridiculous and evil. As someone said about the shameful Michael Moore documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, “Any skilled filmmaker ... could fashion a movie making any American look like a pinhead. That’s easy to do. Just get a bunch of video, some people who hate the guy, some

6. See Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: Murray, 1990).

7. Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, *The God Makers: A Shocking Exposé of What the Mormon Church Really Believes* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997).

factoids that may or may not be true, heat it up with sardonic rhetoric and serve. Presto, *Fahrenheit 9/11*.”⁸

Your dedicated anti-Mormon has a repertoire of horror stories. If we think of our critic as an escapee from the reportorial staff of the *National Enquirer*, we may be on the right track. First, we cannot be at all sure that the allegation is true. Think flying saucers landing on the Church Office Building but seen only by one highly favored witness. Even if the negative incident can be substantiated, our critic studiously avoids addressing the question of how *representative* it is. The Lafferty brothers on death row in the Utah State Penitentiary — there, according to some, are typical Church members. The critic may make the argument less ridiculous by saying, “Yes, they are extreme, but” — and here we need the low, chilling music used in terror movies — “they show what Mormonism *can* lead to!”⁹

Does it occur to critics who revel in such hate speech when directed against members of the Church, and the readers who chortle with delight as they read it, that their own group might not emerge spotless if studied through the worst possible examples?

I do not have a testimony of the history of the Church. In making this declaration, I have no need to deny that our Church history is peopled with many inspiring individuals. What they preached and taught can be studied. In the course of enhancing my historical understanding I often find reinforcement for my faith. But I uncouple the two — testimony and history. I leave ample room for human perversity. I am not wed to any single, simple version of the past. I leave room for new information and new interpretations. My testimony is not dependent on scholars. My testimony in the eternal gospel does not hang in the balance.

One thing such a distinction does for me is to disencumber me from a crippling sense of the kind of history I must write. I can tell it as it is. More precisely, since none of us believe in completely “objective” reporting, I can give my best effort at presenting what I find. I don’t have to be running scared all the time, fearful that I may say something or quote something that will shake up poor little Sister Blavatsky or new convert Brother Jones. I won’t take delight in affronting them, but I should be

8. Bill O’Reilly, “‘Fahrenheit’ more like cartoon than movie,” *The Post Star*, Jun 28, 2004, https://poststar.com/opinion/commentary/fahrenheit-more-like-cartoon-than-movie/article_40f217da-98fa-547f-ad94-0cd1b6fbd0bc.html.

9. This assertion is not novel, but it is the entire premise put forward by Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of a Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

able to study my subject and give my best effort in understanding the personalities and the events.

So I study the colonization of the Little Colorado in 1876. What a terrible assignment that was! The leader of the colonists was Lot Smith, a veteran of the Utah War. Tough and strong in his leadership, Lot Smith did not please everyone. He was no namby-pamby. But my history reports what I discover, trying to be fair to all. For, you see, *I don't have a testimony of Church history*.

I study marriage among Church members in the second half of the 19th century. Was there more polygamy than I had been led to believe? So be it. I report what the best evidence supports. Were there more than a few examples of unhappy plural wives and more divorces than we realized? So be it. I report what I find. I don't lean all the way in the other direction, mind you, but I report what I find. For, you see, *I don't have a testimony of Church history*.

Did many of Joseph Smith's neighbors sign affidavits describing him in unfavorable terms? Well, so be it. I report that fact. In order properly to evaluate these, I consider the agenda of the man who gathered them, compiled them, and often wrote them for the signature of people. I certainly weigh into the balance the testimony of others who describe Joseph in very different terms. We are trying to get at the truth here, or as close to it as we can. But *I don't have a testimony of Church history*.

What Kind of History Do We Need?

For practically all the questions that seem to trouble people or that are used in an effort to dislodge members from their faith, satisfactory answers are available. The sincere truth-seeker is not forced to accept the sensational allegations of enemies as the final word. Obviously The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a number of informed, articulate defenders. I commend the members of the FAIR organization as well as others who have entered the fray.¹⁰

In many instances, the answers they provide are decisive, leaving the critic with no leg to stand on. There is always work to do — new questions

10. It is interesting that a trained, published, career historian like Davis Bitton would find something to compliment in the efforts of organizations such as FAIR (now FairMormon), yet Jeremy Runnells specifically rejects such efforts in the CES Letter. "It is my hope that [the CES director will] have better answers than many of those given by unofficial apologists such as FairMormon and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute (formerly FARMS)." Jeremy T. Runnells, *CES Letter* (Las Vegas, NV: CES Letter Foundation, 2017), 6.

and some that require answers more profound than the initial defenders have come up with. But obviously we are not tongue-tied and helpless. The hope of the detractors, of course, is that they will reach people who are unaware of what the defenders have already made available. Sadly, when much of the population is made up of nonreaders, a well-placed fiery dart of the adversary might be fatal.

When I was in graduate school, one of our seminars included a unit on the Counter-Reformation, or the Catholic Reformation, of the 16th century. For more than 30 years of university teaching, I introduced undergraduate and graduate students to the subject. I am confident my students will agree that our approach was fair, for we tried to understand this complex subject from within, allowing those who participated in it to speak for themselves. I used this same perspective in the study of a variety of subjects. Would that those who teach and study the history of the Church would do the same.

As an undergraduate, I had read a reasonably good chapter in a standard textbook, where the Counter-Reformation was pretty much depicted as a belated response to the Protestant challenge. Some of its manifestations — the rise of the Jesuits, the Council of Trent, even the lamentable massacre of St. Bartholomew's Eve in France — could easily be interpreted as further evidence of the corruption of Roman Catholicism. The old Protestant historiography did this.

The popes were often presented as the “bad guys” of Christian history. Names like Alexander VI, Julius II, Leo X were well-known symbols of the immorality, corruption, and worldliness of the Renaissance papacy. In connection with my graduate seminar, I read Leopold von Ranke's three-volume history of the popes.¹¹ On one level, it was an instructive example of the use of newly available sources such as the *relazioni* of the Venetian ambassadors. “Hmm,” I thought, “maybe things are not as simple as I had thought.”

I also read several volumes in Ludwig von Pastor's *History of the Popes*,¹² a huge work in 18 volumes, the product of a lifetime of research and writing. Pastor's *History of the Popes* was a real eye-opener. I will not make the mistake of describing this work by a Catholic historian as “objective.” What Pastor does is to use internal church documents to

11. Leopold von Ranke, *The History of the Popes, Their Church and State and Especially of Their Conflicts with Protestantism in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. E. Foster (London: Bohn, 1853-56).

12. Ludwig von Pastor, *History of the Popes, from the Close of the Middle Ages* (London: Hodges, 1891-1953).

describe in detail the successive challenges confronted by the popes, the letters and reports they had to go on, the urging of different advisors, sometimes the false starts and backtracking of papal policy.

Studied in this way, some popes were good, some were bad, most were somewhere in-between. Most were doing the best they could under the circumstances. The closer one gets to their minds, through careful scrutiny of the documents available to them and the letters and speeches that came from them, the less one is inclined to defame them. Studied in this way, the popes simply cannot be credibly portrayed in the cartoon-like terms of their adversaries. I don't recommend Pastor as the last word, but his great history is still instructive and must be known by anyone presuming to treat the subject.

Conclusion

Some of you have already anticipated my conclusion. This is the kind of history — or at least one kind of history — we need in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Speaking from a background of reading many diaries and minutes of meetings as well as letters and reports on which decisions were based, I can confidently say that such history, in addition to being closer to the reality of actual experience, enhances appreciation for the dedicated, sincere men and women who made decisions and moved the work along. You don't have to agree with them. You don't have to consider them inspired or vested with God's authority. That is a separate question. But in the face of such history you simply cannot portray them as evil or as simpletons.

Since all history is affected to one degree or another by the faith position of the historian, I rejoice when any topic is treated by someone who is both a believer and a good historian. Ideally, the result will be so conscientious, so willing to face the facts and consider the complexity of the events, that the resulting article or book will command attention. Let me say that I also welcome non-Mormon historians and will praise their works when they deserve it.

Consider a current example: The Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 has been a cause *célèbre* ever since. Anti-Mormons loved to describe the event in excruciating detail, conveying the impression that *this* was Mormonism, pure and simple. Instead of the smiling, clean-cut young people with name tags, the *real Mormonism*, lurking behind the facade, is the massacre and other events like it. So the anti-Mormons would have you believe. That is the subtext of the repeated tellings of the event by critics of the Church. The anti-Mormon writer is not satisfied

with describing the event. The horrifying group murder is used as a foundation for larger conclusions — the perfidy of Brigham Young, the intrinsic cruelty of the Mormon religion, the depravity of its doctrines, or, as with Jon Krakauer's recent book,¹³ the narrowness, self-righteousness, and violence of all religion.

How should the faithful Latter-day Saint respond? I think it is perfectly permissible for a Latter-day Saint to say, "I don't know anything about that. What I do know is that it is not part of my religion. I have never heard it defended or advocated. I do not have a testimony of the Mountain Meadows Massacre."

But we are talking about what historians can do. The best response to bad history, it has been said, is good history. More than a half century ago, Juanita Brooks wrote one such work of good history.¹⁴ During the past two or three years, new attackers have entered the fray, recounting the events in all their horror but now laying the responsibility squarely on Brigham Young. Individuals of means subsidize works of this kind and, not surprisingly, there is an audience out there ready to read and publicize. In response, reviews have been written, some of them gleefully reveling in anything that discomfits their Latter-day Saint neighbors, some of them savoring the violent and sensational while betraying no in-depth understanding of Church history, some of them with penetrating criticisms exposing core legal and methodological flaws in the recent books.

In addition to book reviews in the scholarly journals, three historians have undertaken an exhaustive study. Richard Turley, Ronald Walker, and Glen Leonard are in the final stages of preparing a book¹⁵ that promises to be thorough, using more sources than anyone else uses. It will be comparative. It will place the event in its wartime context. It will examine alleged provocation. Where mistakes were made, as they obviously were, they will not be swept under the rug. Henceforth it will be the book that anyone who presumes to write on the subject simply must come to grips with. Bad or superficial history will be shown for what it is by superior history.

Is this not a model? One can think of a series of controversial and problematical episodes in our Church history. With newly available

13. Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of a Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

14. Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, 2nd ed. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

15. Richard Turley, Ronald Walker, and Glen Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

sources, with fresh questions, they are ripe for reexamination. This is not an exciting, original idea that no one else has ever thought of. Some articles and books have already done what needs to be done. But there is much yet to do.

Not that conscientious, scholarly history will satisfy the anti-Mormons. They have another agenda. Our worthy opponents will not cease to mine Mormon history for anything negative they can use. If many Latter-day Saints simply ignore these attacks, I am not surprised. After all, they have careers to pursue, families to raise, callings in the Church to perform. Without becoming hugely upset over incidents in our Church history, they have work enough to do ere the sun goes down.¹⁶ But we also have historians both professional and amateur. They also have a work to do.

I don't mind calling on our apologists, including those present here today, to write good history. You need not embark on a huge multivolume project. It can be a study of one incident or one problem, eventuating in an article or a two-page response. But if it is a historical question, let our treatment be good history. Simply treat a given topic in a way that satisfies any honest reader and in a way that meets the accepted standards of scholarship.

Some of our apologists are already doing this. They have defined a historical problem with precision, examined all the evidence, subjected it to the necessary critical analysis, and presented their findings. Those with the requisite training, skills, and time will continue to do this, making a contribution and perhaps even producing some major works of history. The evil-doers fume and fret, falling back on their tiresome tactic of labeling the work as *apologetic*.¹⁷ But if they are not brain-dead, what they are really thinking is, "Hey, these guys are good. This is good history."

How Important Is History?

I have been speaking as a historian. What about converts in Mongolia and Ghana? Do they know, or should they know, the Church's 19th century history in any depth? What about those nonreaders being produced by the government schools in this country? Will they know the details of Latter-day Saint history? What about the young missionaries preaching

16. "I Have Work Enough to Do," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 224.

17. The CES Letter consistently characterizes historical explanations that Runnells doesn't agree with as being from apologists (many, many instances), "unofficial apologists" and even "gaslighting revisionist apologists." Runnells, *CES Letter*, 11, 30, 52, 72, 127.

the gospel throughout the world? Are they shining bright because they have read history books for ten hours a day during their teenage years? How much do they know? How much should they know?

Someone makes decisions as to what to include in the missionary instruction lessons. As I read through that material, I see no emphasis on history. Seminary and institute students throughout the world take courses. In some of them, they get a certain amount of Church history, especially as background to the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. In their Gospel Doctrine Sunday School classes, Latter-day Saints throughout the world study sequentially the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Only in the Doctrine and Covenants course is some historical background sometimes included, and even there the emphasis is on the spiritual and doctrinal content. Finally, at present and for the past few years, priesthood and Relief Society classes devote a year of study to one of the presidents of the Church. Some historical background is provided, but once again the emphasis is on the doctrinal teachings. The message that comes across to me loud and clear from lesson manuals and missionary lessons is simple: *Our testimony is not in the history of the Church.*

So our eager anti-Mormon comes to us with his version of Church history. He has probably picked up his example from other anti-Mormons. He is pretty sure his Latter-day Saint neighbor will not know about it. His eyes are bright with anticipation. “Gotcha! What do you say to that! In view of that, how can you possibly be a Mormon?” If he doesn’t say these things, he implies them.¹⁸

Here is where the faithful Latter-day Saint should take the wind out of the sails of his critic. Instead of collapsing or emitting a wail of distress, you smile. You shrug your shoulders. You say things like this. “Hmm. I wonder if that’s true.” “I haven’t heard what might be said on the other side.” “You know what? That probably interests you a lot more than it does me.” “That isn’t part of my religion. I have never heard it taught in any of the classes and have not read it in any of our manuals.” *“I don’t have a testimony of the history of the Church.”*

18. The CES Letter goes one step further — it promises a manual to “help guide individuals and families through this critically important and dangerous — but liberating — time” after leaving the Church. “Having the advantage of both personal experience as well as the experiences of thousands of others who likewise have gone through the same process, Jeremy is in the unique position to not only help but to guide and coach individuals” as they exit the Church. Runnells, *CES Letter*, 133.

Some of us might deplore the fading of Church history from the curriculum. In the meantime, of course, you can still read on your own, individually or in study groups. To my knowledge, no one is forbidding such study.

Admittedly, knowledge of Church history is not essential to our eternal salvation. But I do think it is natural and very satisfying to learn as much as we can about it. We study history, any history, as part of our human quest for self-understanding. As I read about the Latter-day Saints and their activities, in the past as well as the present, I can be inspired, amused, bewildered, surprised, proud — and sometimes a little ashamed. More often than not, I am amazed at the perseverance, the tenacity, the determination to stay the course through good times and bad. Without even trying, I instinctively identify with the Saints. Imperfect as they were and are, the Latter-day Saints are my people. But my testimony is not in them, and I hope theirs is not in me

Brigham Young once made a statement about Joseph Smith that our enemies smack their lips over. Missing its point completely, how they love to misuse it! Here is what Brother Brigham said:

I recollect a conversation I had with a priest who was an old friend of ours, before I was personally acquainted with the Prophet Joseph. I clipped every argument he advanced, until at last he came out and began to rail against “Joe Smith,” saying, “that he was a mean man, a liar, moneydigger, gambler, and a whore-master;” and he charged him with everything bad, that he could find language to utter. I said, hold on, brother Gillmore, here is the doctrine, here is the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the revelations that have come through Joseph Smith the Prophet. I have never seen him, and do not know his private character. The doctrine he teaches is all I know about the matter, bring anything against that if you can. As to anything else I do not care. If he acts like a devil, he has brought forth a doctrine that will save us, if we will abide it. He may get drunk every day of his life, sleep with his neighbor’s wife every night, run horses and gamble, I do not care anything about that, for I never embrace any man in my faith. But the doctrine he has produced will save you and me,

and the whole world; and if you can find fault with that, find it. He said, "I have done."¹⁹

What do you think Brother Brigham meant? Was he giving carte blanche to Church members, saying that it didn't matter how they behaved? Was he here giving his true feelings about Joseph Smith and actually describing him? Give me a break! If President Young's meaning isn't obvious, let me translate it. The truth of the gospel and the divinity of Joseph Smith's calling as prophet of the restoration do not depend on his behavior as a human being and do not require perfection in his life.

Did Brigham really think that Joseph was a moral reprobate? That is the way some brilliant anti-Mormons use this quotation. Ridiculous! Listen to this:

Who can justly say aught against Joseph Smith? I was as well acquainted with him, as any man. I do not believe that his father and mother knew him any better than I did. I do not think that a man lives on the earth that knew him any better than I did; and I am bold to say that, Jesus Christ excepted, no better man ever lived or does live upon this earth. I am his witness.²⁰

But — and this is an important truth — President Young did not want his testimony to center on Joseph Smith as a person.

Let's consider a statement by President George Q. Cannon:

Do not, brethren, put your trust in man though he be a Bishop, an Apostle or a President; if you do, they will fail you at some time or place; they will do wrong or seem to, and your support be gone; but if we lean on God, He never will fail us. When men and women depend on God alone and trust in Him alone, their faith will not be shaken if the highest in the Church should step aside. . . . Perhaps it is His own design that faults and weaknesses should appear in high places in order that His Saints may learn to trust in Him and not in any man or woman.²¹

I do not have a testimony of Church history. In this declaration, I join Nephi, who said: "O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust

19. Brigham Young, "The Gospel Like a Net Cast Into the Sea, Etc.," *Journal of Discourses*, ed. G.D. Watt (London: Latter-Day Saint's Book Depot, 1857), 4:77-78.

20. Young, "A Knowledge of God, Etc.," *Journal of Discourses*, 9:332.

21. George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, rev. ed. (1957; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 249.

in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh” (2 Nephi 4:34).

Davis Bitton (February 22, 1930 – April 13, 2007) earned his BA in history from BYU, and both an MA and PhD from Princeton. He taught history at the University of Texas at Austin, UC Santa Barbara, and for 29 years at the University of Utah. He was a charter member and president of the Mormon History Association and served for a decade as Assistant Church Historian working with Leonard Arrington. He won numerous awards for his writing and publications relative to Church history.

