

Southern California Mission Center
LEADS Weekend
Mark A. Scherer, World Church Historian

Voices: Church Leaders' Observations and Commentary
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The church historian's role is to navigate a fine trajectory between historical objectivity and the church's Christian mission. This means confronting the dilemma of dealing truthfully with significant issues in the church's story, even though they would never appear in a missionary tract.

Albert Einstein maintained that truth is a moving target—eventually truth will emerge. *Telling* historical truth is as important as *knowing* it. We have nothing to fear from honest answers to historical questions. If truth creates obstacles in our journey then we are traveling the wrong road.

Sound historical methodology is a valuable interdisciplinary tool in the search for truth. The preacher cannot understand scripture without first understanding its historical context, and the theologian cannot understand “holy thought” without first understanding the “historical thinker.” Historians of religion are not theologians, even though they appear so. Religious history is a discipline that studies the beliefs, words, and deeds of those within a faith group across space and time.

Some of our church story ranges beyond the historian's task to verify, yet this is the church historian's task. It is impossible to say for sure what happened in the Kirtland House of the Lord on March 31, 1836, after pulpit veils were lowered—even with Oliver Cowdery's account of Jesus Christ appearing to him and Joseph Smith. The same “uncertainty” applies to Palmyra's Sacred Grove or whether there were actual metallic plates in the Book of Mormon story. The historian can only state that all of this is what others testified. For some, this uncertainty may be faith destroying. Indeed, they may consider it heresy even to analyze the Kirtland epiphanies, the First Vision, or the veracity of the Book of Mormon. Here the theologians must explain the testimonial components and the historians the historical.

Our denominational identity is built on a healthy “historical consciousness.” Without this, church members fall prey to anyone telling a good story. Fiction replaces fact; conflicting narratives cause confusion. When the truth emerges, as it always does, unknowing members suffer an identity crisis that is sure to follow. Let us not make excuses for our true identity. We are the Community of Christ!

A key aspect of our church story is persecution: a brutal American frontier society victimized us with “state-sponsored terrorism” demanding our extermination. Persecution is ingrained in us and paid for in lives and property. Rightfully, we can approach large segments of today's marginalized society internationally and say to them, “Come to us! We know what it means to suffer from powerful social forces because of your life's circumstances. Join us and find peace.” We have earned our sacrificial credentials. Twisting or repressing an accurate understanding of our identity means we cannot know, let alone share, who we really are because of the deafening roar of our silence or our looking away.

By May 1865, just days after the U.S. Civil War end, blacks were baptized into the Reorganized Church and some were given priesthood calls. Because no provisions existed to ordain men of color, church leaders struggled with what to do. Courageously Joseph Smith III brought Section 116, granting priesthood authority to men of color. Some members left the church, but we recovered stronger because the call was prophetic and it was the right thing to do no matter the cost.

Before the April 1972 World Conference, polygamist tribesmen were baptized in India's East Orissa province. In response, W. Wallace Smith called the church to "bear the burdens of their sin." Some members left the church, but we survived our losses and emerged even stronger because it was the right thing to do no matter the cost.

Every generation has dealt with movement-changing issues of identity, mission, and message. Today we stand on the strong shoulders of those giants. Future generations will note our courage so they can stand on our strong shoulders. Let us be giants. Historians of the future will be watching.

—*Mark A. Scherer*
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