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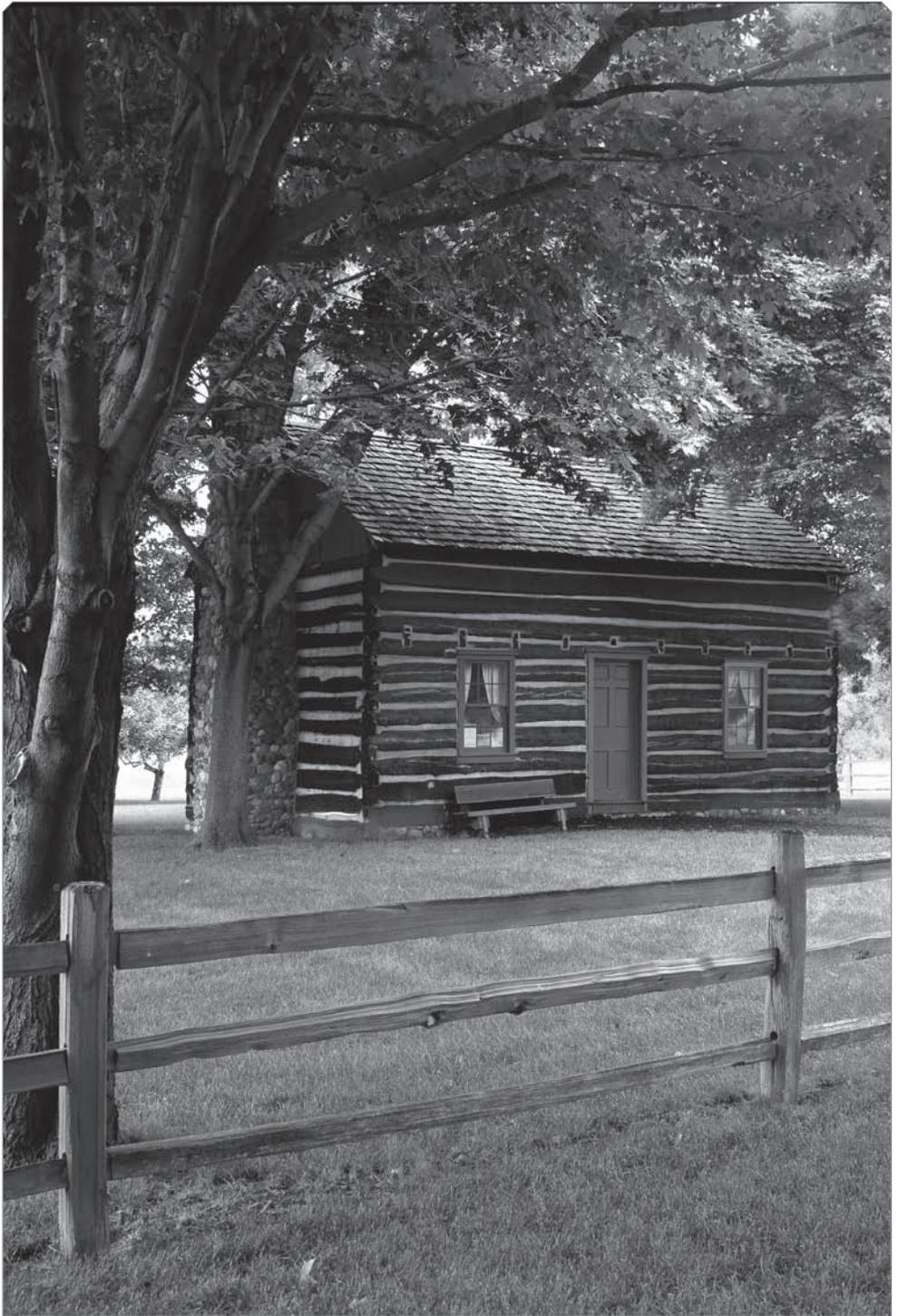
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On April 6, 1830, in the home of Peter Whitmer Sr., the Church was organized and Joseph Smith received a revelation that began, "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you" (D&C 21:1).

Doctrine and Covenants 21: History as Witness

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

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

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

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

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



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Interior of the reconstructed Peter Whitmer Sr. home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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