

The Joseph Smith Papers and My Christian Discipleship

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I started working for the Joseph Smith Papers Project in 2014 as a historian assigned to volumes in the Documents series. In the years that followed, I joined the project's leadership team as associate managing historian and produced, wrote, and hosted the project's five podcast series. When many of my fellow members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints find out that I spent a decade immersed in the work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, they ask about my faith. Over the years, I have responded repeatedly to some version of this question: How has your work on the Joseph Smith Papers affected your testimony? They want to know if such a deep dive into the history of Joseph Smith and the Church has weakened or strengthened my faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

The answer to that question is easy to give but harder to explain. My testimony is unequivocally stronger because of my work on the Joseph Smith Papers, but it is also more complex. It is that last point that typically elicits follow-up questions, some having assumed that a more complicated testimony is somehow inherently a weaker testimony. In fact, my testimony is stronger because my understanding of Church history is now more complex.

Of course, by more complex, I do not mean to suggest that people need to overthink the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is simple; it is meant to be simple. Simple testimonies can be strong testimonies. Yet, Latter-day Saints should not be afraid of complexity in the history of the Restoration of the gospel, as long as they understand its place in their pursuit of faith. As I researched and waded through the Church's

complex history and through the lives and faith of the first Latter-day Saints, I found that the events of the Restoration were carried out by a perfect God working with imperfect people. Although imperfect people relied on imperfect processes, the messiness of these historical events does not make the Restoration any less real. On the contrary, to me, it makes the events of the Restoration all the more miraculous and the mercy and kindness of God toward his children all the more apparent. To illustrate what I mean, I will briefly share three lessons that I learned about Christian discipleship from my decade of work on the Joseph Smith Papers.

Prophetic Authority and Humility

My deep study of Church history has influenced the way I think about prophets and prophetic authority. When Latter-day Saints say they have testimonies of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it also means they have testimonies of prophets. I believe in prophets, past and present; I believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet. However, spending so many years working on his surviving papers has complicated—in a good way—my understanding of what prophetic authority is and the humility it takes to sustain a prophet.

As Latter-day Saints, we generally recognize and accept that prophets are not perfect. But recognizing that truth is one thing and comprehending its practical application is another. How do we recognize that prophets are fallible men called to a divine work and still sustain them? How do we maintain our faith when a prophet says something that is hard for us to hear or with which we do not instantly agree?

To this end, I turn to one of my favorite documents in the Joseph Smith Papers, a discourse by the Prophet from October 29, 1842. On this occasion, Joseph Smith greeted a boat full of recent converts who had just arrived in Nauvoo, Illinois, from New York. He welcomed them to the city and then gave them a word of counsel that illuminates how Joseph understood his own prophetic authority. He declared, “[I am] but a man and [you] must not expect [me] to be perfect; if [you expect] perfection from [me], [I should] expect it from [you], but if [you will] bear with [my] infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, [we will] likewise bear with [your] infirmities.”¹

1. “Discourse, 29 October 1842,” in *Documents, Volume 11: September 1842–February 1843*, ed. Spencer W. McBride, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brett D. Dowdle, and Tyson Reeder, Joseph

In this instance, Joseph Smith addressed common frustrations among Saints who had arrived in Nauvoo. New converts came to the city with very lofty expectations, assuming that a prophet residing in the city would mean that the community was free of the growing pains faced by other American communities at that same time. It was not. Many also assumed that Joseph would lead perfectly. He did not. What particularly draws me to this discourse is that in it, Joseph Smith understood his calling as a prophet of God and felt the need to recalibrate the Saints' expectations of prophetic authority.²

For me, this means that I do not expect perfection from those called to lead the Church. I do not expect to agree with every decision that leaders make. Perfection is not a prerequisite for my sustaining vote. I do not need to agree with every policy to sustain Church leaders. What I need to do is what Joseph Smith said: to bear with the brethren in their infirmities as they bear with me in mine. Following a prophet requires humility. It is a communal effort of imperfect people working together to hear the voice of God and to implement his will.

This is a more complex understanding of prophetic authority than I had prior to working on the Joseph Smith Papers. Still, it has resulted in developing a stronger testimony, one that is better equipped to endure the lamentable, but perhaps inevitable, tumult and debate that occurs in and around the Church.

Revelation as a Process

My academic study of Church history has not only enlarged my understanding of prophetic authority but also expanded my understanding of revelation. I now better understand revelation as a process.

This concept is readily apparent in the Joseph Smith Papers. For example, in the two earliest accounts of the First Vision (1832 and 1835), Joseph, stuck within the confines of imperfect mortal language, struggled to adequately describe what he saw in the grove of trees. In these instances, he worked to find the best words for describing the bright pillar that descended upon him. Was it fire, or was it light? He alternated between the two.³ In fact, in 1832, the same year that he composed his

Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 190, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-29-october-1842/1>.

2. See "Discourse, 29 October 1842," Historical Introduction, 189–90 and nn. 1034–36.

3. "History, circa Summer 1832," in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford,

earliest extant written account of the First Vision, Joseph lamented to his friend William W. Phelps about the “little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and Ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language.”⁴ Writing was hard for Joseph Smith. Writing about the things of God was even harder because words often failed to capture what Joseph experienced in his interactions with the divine.

The same process plays out in the manuscript revelations—that is, the handwritten versions of the revelations that are now canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants. There is evidence of Joseph Smith, his scribes, and his clerks working together and with the Holy Spirit to find the right words—the words that matched what the Spirit was prompting Joseph Smith and others to know and do.⁵

As it was for Joseph Smith, so it is for us. Have you ever felt the Spirit—and you knew in the moment that you were feeling the Spirit—but did not immediately understand what God was prompting you to know or do? Such instances often require us to work and pray to more fully understand God’s communication to us. The lesson for me is this: Revelation is a prolonged process more often than it is a miraculous moment. Revelation requires work.

This is a more complicated understanding of revelation than many Latter-day Saints commonly articulate. But this approach to seeking and receiving revelation is certainly more apparent to me after I worked on the Joseph Smith Papers. Again, a more complex testimony can be a stronger testimony. In this case, it is for me. Understanding revelation as a process and revelation as work gives me more patience with myself. It is a reminder that we all likely receive more revelation than we realize; we just need to be better at knowing what to look for.

and William G. Hartley, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 281, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>; “Conversations with Robert Matthews, 9–11 November 1835,” in *Documents, Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838*, ed. Brent M. Rogers, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Christian K. Heimbürger, Max H. Parkin, Alexander L. Baugh, and Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 43, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/conversations-with-robert-matthews-9-11-november-1835/3>.

4. “Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832,” in Godfrey and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 2*, 320, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-27-november-1832/2>.

5. For examples, see Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2011).

Seek and Understand

The third and final example for how my work on the Joseph Smith Papers has affected my Christian discipleship relates to the way that seeking new spiritual experiences informs our comprehension of past spiritual experiences. Just as the different accounts of the First Vision illuminate the nature of revelation, they also demonstrate that Joseph Smith's understanding of one of his most profound spiritual moments increased with time and experience.

Consider the progression in these different accounts. The earliest surviving account of the First Vision comes from a draft of an unfinished history Joseph wrote in 1832, in which he told the story of his vision to explain how he became converted to Jesus Christ.⁶ The next account that we have is from 1835, when Joseph Smith told a visiting religious leader about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. However, he did not start that story with an account of Moroni's angelic visitation on September 21, 1823; he started with the First Vision.⁷ By 1835, Joseph likely understood that while the vision was about his own Christian conversion, it was also a key moment in the history of the Book of Mormon. Then, in 1838, when Joseph Smith and his scribes were writing the history of the Church, Joseph did not start that history with the Church's official organization on April 6, 1830. Once again, he began by relating the First Vision.⁸

By then, Joseph may have seen that this spiritual moment during his adolescent years was at once about his Christian conversion, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the Restoration of the Church. There is no evidence to suggest that Joseph ever took the significance of the First Vision lightly. However, the way he framed different accounts of the event demonstrates that his understanding of the vision and its significance grew with time. As he sought and received further light and knowledge from God, the significance of his past spiritual experiences expanded.

I have never had a vision of comparable magnitude to Joseph's First Vision, but I have had spiritual experiences since my youth. While I

6. "History, circa Summer 1832," 279–85, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3#full-transcript>.

7. "Conversations with Robert Matthews," 39–47.

8. "History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841," in *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2012), 204–14.

recognized their importance then, my understanding of their significance has grown. I look back on my life—on the moments that God guided me and spoke peace to my soul—and I now understand how God was blessing me in the moment while simultaneously preparing me for opportunities still to come.

It is only with time and experience that we can fully understand and appreciate the way God works within our lives. Seeking continued discipleship to Christ brings new spiritual experiences and magnifies the power of past spiritual experiences. It was like that for Joseph. It can be like that for us. I believe that it is like that for all who seek to follow Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

There are many more lessons that I have learned from the Joseph Smith Papers about Christian discipleship in our dispensation. Here, I have only offered a sampling. I hope that they demonstrate several reasons why the project is a valuable resource to Latter-day Saints seeking a deeper understanding of the Prophet Joseph and his Christian ministry. I feel that I am a better Christian because of the Joseph Smith Papers.

Still, as grateful as I am for the project, it is important to recognize that a deep knowledge of Church history is not required for salvation. As far as I can tell, there is no Church history test administered at the gates of heaven. This is important to remember because it prevents Latter-day Saints from stopping short of the mark—or, Jesus Christ (Jacob 4:14; John 14:6). Understanding Church history—and Joseph Smith’s ministry—is not the final destination of our spiritual journeys. Church history, like Joseph’s ministry, points us to a loving God and his loving Son, Jesus Christ. If we are studying Church history as part of our discipleship, let it be a way of remembering the marvelous works that God has accomplished in the past using imperfect but willing people. May it be a reminder that he can do the same with us in the present—if we exercise faith and humility as individuals and as a people.

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