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# Question Time — Why is the Study of Church History Important?

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Whether the study is about ancient, American or church history, the underlying principles are the same. Those principles can be summed up in an often-used phrase: “Hindsight is twenty-twenty.”

Our eyesight is measured by a standard. When we can read letters of a twenty-font size on a wall some twenty feet away, it is said our vision is twenty-twenty, which means our vision is good.

When events unfold in our lives, we are caught up in the moment, and are affected by factors that may distort our perspectives. Our memories are sometimes not “twenty-twenty.”

In 1963, I recall our school janitor coming into our classroom and saying President Kennedy had been shot, but he was going to be okay. Many were crying at the news. We were dismissed to the gym after Mrs. Runnels (our principal) told us that President Kennedy was dead. Some of my classmates ran and played kickball. Others of us sat in spontaneous groups in stunned silence, only speaking occasionally.

It was a cold, dreary November day with sleet falling outside as we milled around in the gym. My brother David and others there that day remember it the same way, except without the sleet. Even the official weather records from the Joplin Globe said there was no sleet, so I didn't remember it right.

It's funny how our minds remember details differently. Maybe you've played the party game where one person whispers a short story with several details to the person next to him or her. The story is then whispered to the next person and the next until it goes around the room. The last person then tells the story out loud and, to everyone's amusement, it usually is quite different than the original. Many details are dropped, changed or added. History can be like that.

As life's events unfold, we are caught up in the moment. Our daily tasks, worries, and health must be considered when we relate what happened, for these factors can distort our memories. This is why it is important to get multiple accounts of an event in history. The more people who recall what happened, the more likely the event will be recorded accurately.

As time passes after an event, all important factors can be objectively reviewed. The event's consequences can also be factored in, since enough time has elapsed to make an accurate assessment. All this is important as we seek “twenty-twenty hindsight.”

An old saying goes like this: “If we do not learn from our mistakes from the past, we are doomed to repeat them.” In society today, there is a great deal of sensitivity to confrontation and “hate speak,” with laws on the books about this. We take seriously the rhetoric from neo-Nazi hate groups that spew anti-Semitic and other racial talk. Why? Because such rhetoric in Germany in the 1920's and 1930's ultimately led a once strong and proud German nation to murder six million Jews in a war that ultimately caused many more millions of deaths.

From our recall of that history, our “twenty-twenty hindsight” tells us that nations must always talk to each other. Communication can and has prevented new wars. Learning from the lesson of history, the United Nations was formed and in spite of its poor record of late, is still a basically good idea.

Our own personal history tells us that it is good to keep lines of communication open with those around us. It can and will prevent misunderstandings and conflicts. If, however, we fail to examine our past, we can neither remember to repeat steps that were taken to bring about good, nor to avoid things we did that caused bad to happen.

Now for the question of why studying church history is important... Our church history is rich with stories and accounts from many people. Sacred scriptures are our primary historical records. The Gospel is repeated through multiple accounts from many individuals. We can objectively examine these records and get a fairly accurate account of what happened. By studying their history, we can use to our advantage the benefit of “twenty-twenty hindsight.”

We know their failings and triumphs in the context in which they occurred. The rest is simple...we identify the ingredients that made for their triumphs and apply them to our day. We avoid the pitfalls that led to their failures. Studying history saves us precious time we would otherwise spend muddling by trial and error. By studying history we can move on to the higher plain to which our Lord is calling us.

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