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The Record of Alma: A Prophetic Pattern of the Principles Governing Testimony

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Fred E. Woods

The book of Alma in the Book of Mormon is made up of the records of three different writers: Alma and his sons, Helaman, and Shiblon. The record of Alma in the book of Alma is unique in that it comprises 22.6 percent of the entire Nephite record and yet covers only 18 years, or merely 1.76 percent of the entire 1021 years of Nephite history from 600 BC to AD 421. The record of Alma covers the first 44 chapters of the book of Alma, the 18 years from 91 to 73 BC. The record of Helaman makes up chapters 45–62, covering the 16 years from 73 to 57 BC. Mormon’s abridgement of Shiblon’s record constitutes the last chapter (Alma 63). It also serves as a transition to the book of Helaman describing the transfer of the Nephite records.

Another unusual feature of the record of Alma, in addition to its length, is its large number of superscriptions. These superscriptions were part of the manuscript and were printed in the 1830 first edition of the Book of Mormon and should not be ignored. They appear over chapters 1, 5, 7, 9, 17, 21, 36, 38, and 39 of the book of Alma in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon. Professor Sidney B. Sperry has explained, “The fact that they are found over the chapters enumerated and over no others would seem to indicate that Mormon took them from

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Alma's original text" (203). The fact that with the exception of the introductory superscription to the record of Helaman at Alma chapter 45, there are no other superscriptions in that part of the record of Helaman, would also lend support to the idea that these superscriptions came from Alma's own hand.

One notable difference between the 1830 and the 1981 editions of the book of Alma is that the 1981 edition added the phrase "comprising chapters . . ." to some of the original superscriptions to designate current chapter divisions. As the superscriptions appear at natural divisions in the record of Alma, they will indicate the remaining divisions of this study of the doctrine of testimony in Alma's writings. In his record, Alma sets forth the most detailed pattern in all the standard works of the principles that govern testimony. It is interesting to note that over a third of the Book of Mormon references to testimony are found in the record of Alma.

The Necessity of Bearing True Testimony (Alma 1–4)

The introductory superscription for the record of Alma reads as follows:

The account of Alma, who was the son of Alma the First, and Chief Judge over the people of Nephi, and also the High Priest over the Church. An account of the reign of the Judges, and the wars and contentions among the people. And also an account of a war between the Nephites and the Lamanites, according to the record of Alma the First, and Chief Judge.

The principle of testimony is found early in the record of Alma, in the first year of the reign of the judges (91 BC). Nehor had introduced priestcraft and was bearing down against the church with *false* testimony (Alma 1:3). This created the need for bearing pure, true testimony. Gideon was the testifier who combated Nehor's false teachings with the testimony of the word of God. However, his opposition angered Nehor, who, in trying to enforce his false teachings with the sword, slew Gideon. He was consequently brought before Alma, the chief

judge, and found guilty. He “suffered an ignominious death” (vv 7–16).

By the eighth year of the reign of the judges (84 BC), the Nephites had forgot God and the church had become very proud and wicked. As the chief judge, Alma was confronted with the sin of priestcraft which had been enforced with the sword, and as the high priest of the Church he had to battle the sin of pride that had resulted in great wickedness within the church (Alma 4:6–12). Discerning the need to devote all his energies to spiritual concerns, Alma gave up the chief judgeship so that he might go among his people, “seeing no way that he might reclaim them save it were in *bearing down in pure testimony against them*” (vv 17–19; emphasis added). Knowing that the power of pure testimony “had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just,” Alma also recognized that it would have a “more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else” (31:5).

President Ezra Taft Benson counseled: “As individuals and society depart more and more from the laws of God, we will need to regulate the affairs of the Church, teaching persuasively the laws of God” (*Teachings* 313). Souls are reclaimed most effectively through teaching the laws of God and bearing pure testimony. Alma could have learned from the teachings of Nephi that “when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth [the divine teachings] unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1).

How to Bear Pure Testimony (Alma 5–6)

We live in a day when there is a definite need for the bearing of pure testimony and we can learn how from Alma. President Thomas S. Monson stated, “That energetic missionary from the Book of Mormon, even Alma, provides for us a blueprint for missionary conduct” (42). Alma chapter 5 describes the greatest step-by-step pattern for the bearing of pure testimony in all of scripture.

Before analyzing the pattern therein, let's look at the setting of this part of Alma's record. The superscription to this portion of the text states the following: "*The words which Alma, the High Priest, according to the holy order of God, delivered to the people in their cities and villages throughout the land.*" The land referred to is the land of Zarahemla, and probably includes the cities of Zarahemla and Gideon and their respective villages.

In Alma 5:3 and 61, Mormon says he copied Alma's powerful discourse word for word. In it Alma testified of Christ's invitation and promise, "Repent, and I will receive you" (v 33). He taught the gospel of Jesus Christ "plainly" with all the "energy of [his] soul" (v 43). After teaching the essential doctrine of repentance, he then testified that he had been called of Jesus Christ as a bearer of the holy priesthood to testify to the truths which had been spoken of by the "fathers," meaning the previous prophets (v 44). Thus, Alma established his authority and taught what the prophets before him had taught (See D&C 42:11; also 52:9, 36). He then sealed these teachings with his testimony, affirming, "Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true" (Alma 5:45).

Concerning the bearing of personal testimony of the doctrines we teach, President Benson has said, "Now, after we teach the great plan of the eternal God, we must personally bear our testimonies of its truthfulness" (*Ensign* 85). Elder Bruce R. McConkie added a second witness to this teaching: "We are obligated also to bear testimony of the truth of the doctrines we teach, not simply that the work is true, but that we have taught true doctrine, which of course we cannot do unless we have taught by the power of the Spirit" (116).

In addition to bearing testimony of the doctrines we teach, Alma also teaches the great lesson that we must testify *how we know* that what we have taught is true. After affirming that he knows the doctrines he has taught are true, Alma asks rhetorically, "And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety? Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the

Holy Spirit of God. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit” (Alma 5:45–46).

Alma then prophesies, “I know that Jesus Christ shall come . . . to take away the sins of the world” (Alma 5:48). After bearing pure testimony of Jesus Christ, Alma invites his “beloved brethren” to come unto Christ (vv 49–50). He clearly reveals that he knows Jesus Christ will come to atone for our sin and then tells how he knows. We must not only bear or carry our testimony; but more importantly, we must *bare* our testimony—expose and make clearly visible how we know it.

Alma’s testimony of Jesus Christ stirred the hearts of many in Zarahemla, and the church was set in order (Alma 6:1–4). After regulating the affairs of the church, he left the Saints in Zarahemla and headed for the valley of Gideon. There he hoped to find the members in a better spiritual shape than those he had found those in Zarahemla (6:7–8; 7:3). While in Gideon, Alma followed the same pattern of testifying that he did in Zarahemla. He testified by the Spirit with the former prophets that Jesus Christ would come to redeem his people from their sins (6:8).

*Testify, Identify the Spirit, Invite Others
to Repent (Alma 7–8)*

The superscription for Alma chapters 7–8 states the following: “*The words of Alma which he delivered to the people in Gideon, according to his own record.*”

After Alma arrived in the city of Gideon, he was delighted that the people were keeping the commandments. In teaching and testifying to the people of Zarahemla and Gideon, Alma centered his witness on the Lord Jesus Christ, a vital component to any testimony borne under the influence of the Spirit; “For behold, I say unto you there be many things to come; and behold, there is one thing which is of more importance than they all—for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people” (Alma 7:7). He knew, as

he would later testify, “there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ” (38:9). After testifying of the birth and mission of the promised Messiah, Alma invited the people to “Come and fear not, and lay aside every sin, which easily doth beset you, which doth bind you down to destruction, yea, come and go forth, and show unto your God that ye are willing to repent . . . and witness it unto him this day by going into the waters of baptism” (7:15). He then promised that all who do this and continue to keep the commandments would have eternal life (v 16).

Following his powerful testimony, Alma rhetorically asks: “And now my beloved brethren, do you believe these things? Behold, I say unto you, yea, I know that ye believe them; and the way that I know that ye believe them is by the manifestation of the Spirit which is in me” (Alma 7:17). Thus Alma knew, as we must also come to recognize, that “he that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth; . . . he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:21–22). Pausing when he felt the Spirit come upon his audience, this great model teacher identified the feeling they were experiencing as the Spirit of the Lord. In regards to the manner in which Alma identified the Spirit when he testified, Elder W. Grant Bangerter stated the following:

We need confidence in the Holy Ghost; believe in it and expect its presence . . . and be able to help others to feel the influence that it brings. One of our great missionaries said: “I bear them my testimony. Then I bear them their testimony. And then I have them bear their testimony back to me. That’s the process. Alma did the same thing when he had explained to the people of the city of Gideon about the coming of Christ and the redemption that would be provided for those who would accept Him and be baptized. (47)

After teaching in Gideon, Alma rested at his home in Zarahemla for the remainder of the year, 83 BC. At the commencement of 82 BC, he taught and found much success in the city of Melek (Alma 8:1–5). He then traveled three days to the city of Ammonihah, where he was given a much different

reception than he had received at either Gideon or Melek. Although he taught the word of God in Ammonihah, with the same testimony, Satan had such a great hold upon the hearts of the people that they would not listen to his words (vv 6–10). Alma prayed fervently that God would “pour out his Spirit upon the people who were in the city” (v 10). Nonetheless, they continued to harden their hearts and challenge Alma because he no longer had political power over them for he had delivered up the office of chief judge to Nephihah (vv 11–12). They “reviled him, and spit upon him, and caused that he should be cast out of their city” (v 13). Although Alma had encountered opposition before, he had always found a way to overcome it. Many of the people of Zarahemla who were described as “workers of iniquity” (5:32) had repented. However, the people of Ammonihah continued to harden their hearts despite Alma’s prayers, testimony, and invitation to come unto Christ.

The Law of Witnesses unto Life or Death (Alma 9–16)

The superscription for this section reads:

The words of Alma, and also the words of Amulek, which was declared unto the people which was in the land of Ammonihah. And also they are cast into prison, and delivered by the miraculous power of God which was in them, according to the record of Alma.

In these chapters we learn the principles regarding the law of witnesses. Even though he was discouraged and on his way home, Alma was commanded by an angel to return to Ammonihah (Alma 8:16). He was to provide this corrupt city not only with his own witness a second time, but also with a second testifier, Amulek, a native of Ammonihah who had been instructed by an angel to receive Alma (v 20).

Alma stayed at Amulek’s house many days preparing him to go forth to preach (Alma 8:27). During this time, Amulek was also instructed by an angel who verified the truth of Alma’s teaching to him (10:10). The Lord instructed Alma to invite Amulek to join him as a second witness his words. They went forth together in the power of the Spirit to warn the inhabitants

of Ammonihah that if they did not repent they would be destroyed (8:29–30). Thus, the Lord’s law of warning was in full force. For he will never destroy a people, “save it were foretold them by the *prophets* of the Lord” (2 Nephi 25:9, emphasis added).

The Mosaic Law stated, “One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established” (Deut 19:15; see also 17:6). The law of witnesses is amply attested in the Book of Mormon and the other standard works (Van Orden 307–08).

When Alma preached to the people of Ammonihah, they asked, “Who art thou? Suppose ye that we shall believe the testimony of one man, although he should preach unto us that the earth should pass away?” (Alma 9:2). Also, “Who is God, that sendeth no more authority than one man among this people, to declare unto them the truth of such great and marvelous things?” (v 6). They further said, “We will not believe thy words if thou shouldst prophesy that this great city should be destroyed in one day” (v 4). But the second time, both Alma and Amulek testified of the same truths, bearing their double witnesses, yet their warnings went unheeded (10:10, 13).

The people of Ammonihah sealed their imminent destruction when they shed the innocent blood of those who had believed in the preaching of Alma and Amulek or had been otherwise taught to believe in the word of God (Alma 14:1, 8). As Alma and Amulek were forced to witness the atrocity of the few remaining repentant and righteous Saints being burned by fire, Amulek told Alma they should stretch forth their hands to stop the killing of the innocent women and children (vv 8–10). But Alma told him that the Spirit had restrained him “that the judgments which [God] shall exercise upon [the wicked people of Ammonihah] in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day” (v 11).

Until this time, it was the prayers of these righteous few that had allowed the city to be spared, but the wicked people of Ammonihah were warned that when they had killed or cast out the righteous from among them they would be destroyed (Alma 10:23). Those believers who were not burned fled to the Land of Sidom where they met Alma and Amulek and related to them their deliverance (15:1–2). Alma and Amulek had also been delivered by the power of God (14:14–29). Before the year ended, the entire city of Ammonihah and its inhabitants were destroyed in just one day as prophesied (16:9–10). And thus we see that testimony or the law of witnesses is a two-edged sword: unto life for those who receive it, unto death for those who reject it.

Wisdom in Witnessing (Alma 17–20)

The superscription in this portion of the text states:

An account of the sons of Mosiah, which rejected their rights to the kingdom, for the word of God, and went up to the land of Nephi, to preach to the Lamanites.—Their sufferings and deliverance, according to the record of Alma.

The account begins with the sons of Mosiah and their companions separating to go to different portions of the land of Nephi, now occupied by the Lamanites. Ammon, chief among them (Alma 17:18), wisely took his leave for the territory of Ishmael where king Lamoni had stewardship over all the land. Ammon was captured and bound as he entered the land and was eventually brought before the king (vv 20–21). When the king asked him what he wanted, Ammon said he desired to live among his people and to be his servant (vv 22–25). Ammon worked not only as king Lamoni’s servant but also labored as the Lord’s servant to the king and his people.

In Alma chapters 17–19 we have a great example of Ammon’s wisdom in witnessing as demonstrated by the following procedures:

1. Ammon went before king Lamoni knowing that if he converted the king he would likely convert many of his kingdom.
2. He told the king he desired to live among his people and to serve him. He then provided great temporal service to the king which prepared his heart and the hearts of his people to receive his testimony (Alma 17:26–18:12).
3. Ammon recognized and capitalized on an opportunity to manifest God’s power by word and deed at the waters of Sebus when the flocks were scattered. This act of strength and courage won the hearts of the king’s servants as well as that of the king (Alma 17:29).
4. Ammon did a masterful job of testifying and inviting King Lamoni to heed his teachings (Alma 18:13–35).
5. Ammon taught on the king’s level. He identified that the Great Spirit Lamoni had spoken of was God (Alma 18:26–28).
6. Ammon taught Lamoni in plainness, testifying of the essential truths one needs to know in order to obtain salvation. He provided him with the overview of God’s plan, focusing his attention on the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement (Alma 18:36–39).

Ammon’s example provides us with a second model to follow in increasing our effectiveness in teaching and testifying of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Transformation through Testimony (Alma 21–35)

This superscription covers the largest amount of information in the record of Alma, covering some 15 chapters: “*An account of the preaching of Aaron and Muloki, and their brethren, to the Lamanites.*” The sons of Mosiah were missionaries among the Lamanites for fourteen years, testifying by the power of the Spirit (Alma 17:4). Their combined testimonies converted thousands of Lamanites and brought joy and great faith to their souls (23:5; 26:4; 37:19). Paul taught that “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17). Joseph Smith explained, “Faith comes by hearing the word of God, through the testimony of the servants of God; that testimony is always attended by the Spirit of prophecy and revelation” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 148; hereafter *TPJS*).

These converts changed their name from Lamanites to Anti-Nephi-Lehies to distinguish themselves from the other Lamanites (Alma 23:17). The Anti-Nephi-Lehies not only developed faith in God, but they also experienced a miraculous transformation of their souls through the piercing power of the spirit of pure testimony. This transformation is evidenced by the covenant they made to bury their weapons of war as a “testimony to God, and also to men, that they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man’s blood; and this they did, vouching and covenanting with God, that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives” (24:18).

Where thousands of Lamanites were converted to the Church, the text states that only one of the Amalekites (Alma 23:14), and none of the Amulonites, who were former members who had apostatized after “the order of the Nehors,” were converted (24:29). And Mormon noted, “And thus we can plainly discern, that after a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things” (v 30).

People never remain stagnant in their relationship to God once they have received a witness of the Spirit. When they accept the witness of the Spirit and turn toward God, they experience joy, light and life; but if they reject the testimony of the Spirit, they experience pain, darkness, and spiritual death. The sons of Mosiah and the prophet Alma experienced far greater joy than pain, and because of their testimonies many were converted and permanently changed. This caused Ammon and his brethren to cry out with jubilation, and Ammon asked rhetorically:

Behold, how many thousands of our brethren has [God] loosed from the pains of hell; and they are brought to sing redeeming love, and this because of the power of his word which is in us, therefore have we not great reason to rejoice? . . . Therefore, let us glory, yea, we

will glory in the Lord; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; . . . Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel. (Alma 26:13, 16)

Alma also felt this same way as he saw many of his people return to the Lord: “And behold, when I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy; then do I remember what the Lord has done for me” (Alma 29:10).

The pain is also real when people choose to turn from God and transform themselves into children of hell. The meeting of Alma and Korihor, the Anti-Christ, is a vivid example of a reaction to the two-edged sword of testimony. When Korihor, an apostate leader and teacher, who rejected the atonement of Christ and the spirit of prophecy, was brought before Alma, the high priest of the Church, he accused Alma and his brethren in the church of teaching falsehoods in order to get gain, the very sins of which he himself was guilty (Alma 30:1–31). Knowing that Korihor knew they did not get any personal gain except the joy of laboring with others, Alma bore testimony to challenge Korihor and to protect the lives of his people (vv 34–41). When Korihor asked for a sign, Alma said he already had signs enough through the testimonies of his brethren, the prophets, the scriptures, the earth and planets, all things since everything denoted that there was indeed a God (Alma 30:43–44). When Korihor continued to demand a sign, he was struck dumb. Only then did he confess that he had been deceived by the devil who had encouraged him to teach lies (vv 49–53). As Alma made *bare* his testimony not only were the people greatly strengthened, but Alma’s own testimony grew.

When Alma went among the apostate Zoramites, he gave a formula for obtaining and maintaining a testimony. He compared a testimony to a seed of faith in the word of God, which needed first to be planted in their hearts. By nourishing this word-seed with faith, diligence and patience, they would feel it grow into a tree of testimony that would bear wonderful fruit (Alma 32). Elder Dean L. Larsen testified that “Millions of

people have tried the experiment proposed by Alma. . . . They and others in increasing numbers throughout the world today bear testimony to the good fruit that the experiment has born” (68). Through the witnessing of Alma and his brethren, many Zoramites found their testimonies again (Alma 35:6, 14).

President Harold B. Lee explained the importance of the daily nourishment of a testimony: “Testimony isn’t something you have today, and you are going to have always. A testimony is fragile. It is as hard to hold as a moonbeam. It is something you have to recapture every day of your life” (4).

Alma and Amulek did not rely only on their own testimonies, but they cited the testimonies of the former prophets such as Zenos, Zenock, and Moses who testified of Jesus Christ (Alma 33–34). This prophetic pattern of living witnesses calling upon the words of the former prophets and then bearing their own testimonies should also be followed today by the Lord’s servants when teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, and they too will reap rewards of transformation through the power of testimony.

A Willingness to Recount One’s Witness (Alma 36–44)

The superscriptions in this section are conceptually identical in that they note Alma’s commandments to his sons Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton. The background for this section begins at the end of the 17th year of the reign of the judges (74 BC). Alma called his sons together to strengthen them because of the iniquity of the people (Alma 35:12, 15–16).

He first counseled with his eldest son Helaman, recounting to him his conversion and how his spiritual agony turned to exquisite joy through faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ and the power of repentance (Alma 36:16–21). To his son Shiblon, Alma also recounted his personal witness, boldly adding, “there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ (38:9). Finally, to his youngest son Corianton, who had strayed while on his mission, Alma testified that Christ “surely shall come to take away the sins of the world”

(39:15). The recounting of one's primordial witness is essential to the testifiers themselves, as well as to those who hear and receive their testimonies. For the faith of the hearers increases as they see, feel and know what God has done in the lives of the testifiers, who themselves are also strengthened as they remember the mercy and goodness of God as they recount their testimonies.

A vital point in the principle of sharing a testimony is the degree to which one is willing to bear witness of Jesus Christ at any time and in any place. Alma's father had stressed the need to "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places" (Mosiah 18:9), when he explained the baptismal covenant to those who desired to enter the church at the waters of Mormon. And Alma serves as a great example of being a willing witness in all seasons of his life. For example, he related to his son Helaman that from the time he was converted until the present time, "I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Alma 36:24).

After counseling his three sons and charging them to go forth and declare the word, "Alma, also, himself, could not rest, and he also went forth" (Alma 43:1). This divinely inspired desire to testify comes by the power of the Spirit, which brings a love for all people. The sons of Mosiah were also filled with this same desire to testify to everyone: "Now they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; . . . And thus did the Spirit of the Lord work upon them" (Mosiah 28:3-4). Both Alma and the sons of Mosiah left their homes and families to spend their lives bearing testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith declared, "A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race" (*TPJS* 174).

The record of Alma concludes in 73 BC, the 18th year of the reign of the judges. Alma then turned the keeping of the records over to his son Helaman. He then prophesied that the Nephites would be destroyed four hundred years after Jesus Christ would make himself known in the flesh (Alma 45:9–10), thus ending his ministry in mortality with testimony. Leaving his blessing upon the church, Alma went to the land of Melek; however, the text indicates that he was never seen again. Throughout the church it was said “that he was taken up by the Spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses” (45:17–19). Joseph Fielding Smith commented on this note: “It is a very reasonable thought to believe that both Moses and Alma, like Elijah and John, were translated to accomplish some work which the Lord had in store for them at some future day” (5:38).

Conclusion

How appropriate that Alma should be “taken up by the Spirit,” for from the time he was converted, even until the day of his apparent translation, he spent all his days trying to lift others to Jesus Christ through the power of his testimony, a testimony borne of the Spirit. Alma’s continual bearing of pure testimony brought a purity to his own soul which wrought a forgiveness of his sins. As we follow Alma’s pattern of testifying, we will not only save the souls of many to whom we witness, but we will also gain a forgiveness of our own sins (D&C 62:3).

The record of Alma has taught us the prophetic pattern of the principles governing testimony. These principles include the necessity of bearing pure testimony, the procedure for bearing witness, the law of witnessing, and the consequences which occur in the lives of all concerned when we bear pure testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These principles of testimony can and should be applied in every facet of church teaching.

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