

The Mormon Cross

By Eugene England

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THE STORY OF God asking Abraham to offer his son, his only son, as a burnt offering offends me. I can find no way to be at peace with it. Yes, I know that it is a sign, a type, of God’s sacrifice of his own son, his only begotten son, who would (in fact, through the lineage of Abraham and Isaac) come as a blessing to all the world. Yes, I’ve read Kierkegaard, and I know that faith in the living God makes ultimate demands—beyond experience, beyond emotion, beyond reason—and I have read the modern scriptures and know that a true witness comes only after a trial of faith. But for God, who had called Abraham out of idolatry, out of the way of sacrifice of human beings in order to appease and please the gods, for God to turn now and ask not only that Abraham give up the thing most dear to him, the miraculous blessing that God had given him in his old age, but to give up one of the chief sources of his vital relationship to God, the higher ethical and spiritual vision to which God had called him, to violate God’s own teachings—that is beyond my comprehension or the power of my spirit to say yes to. It is a trial, a cross, a mystery. It is a cross Christians and Jews have borne, in one way or another, for centuries.

We Mormons have our own special cross—one which must weigh heavily on our hearts if we are truly trying to live our religion as Paul recommends: proving all things, holding fast that which is good. When God asks us, as we believe He does, not to give blacks of African descent the priesthood at this time, He asks us to sacrifice not only our political and social ideals and the understanding and good will of our colleagues and friends, but seems to ask us to sacrifice the very essence of His own teachings—the divine potential of all His children, the higher ethical vision of possible exaltation for all people, concepts that are among the most attractive and vital features of our faith.

I have given myself with all my soul to that faith. I have felt a witness within the deepest core of my being that God lives, that His son Jesus Christ is truly our Saviour and has restored His Gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith and maintained His true Church on earth down to His present prophet, Harold B. Lee. As I go about my duties as a branch president, trying to be a true pastor to a small

flock, to counsel precious souls in trouble and answer the questions of new converts and of my children as they seek to develop their faith, I find that, apart from my own sins and failings, this is, in its way, the heaviest cross I have to bear. The historical work of Lester Bush, amazingly thorough and dispassionate, gives by far the most complete picture we have of how L.D.S. Church policy with respect to blacks has developed to the present point; yet it merely confirms a conviction I have had for some time: that the policy of denying blacks the priesthood is rationally untenable from a number of perspectives—historical, theological, ethical, social, psychological, in fact from all perspectives but one—ecclesiastical authority. But for me that perspective outweighs all the others because I am convinced that ecclesiastically the Church is doing what the Lord has directed, even though morally and spiritually its members may not be. I am certain that the Church is directed through revelation, that at least the most recent prophets have prayed sincerely about this matter and that if the Lord thought it best to make a change at this time He could get through to His prophets and have a change made. However, as I will try to explain later, I also believe that the Lord wishes a change *could* be made and that we *all* bear responsibility for the fact that it hasn't been made yet. But first let me try to lay some groundwork.

Discussion about this issue has been damaged considerably, I believe, by heated and misleading arguments about whether what the Church is doing is a “policy” or a “doctrine.” The reason for the heat has been the assumption of many that those words are synonymous, respectively, with “manmade” and “revealed,” which fails to recognize that a policy can be revealed or not and so can a doctrine. It seems to me that a more useful distinction is the following: a policy is an administrative decision affecting the action of Church members and usually made to meet the particular needs of the time. It may be revealed, inspired, or just plain common sense and may be changed as needs or times change. A doctrine on the other hand is a teaching, a description or immediate consequence of a description of reality, usually ultimate reality. For instance, it is Church *policy*, revealed or at least inspired, that Church members are to have a family night together each Monday evening, with no interferences; this has not always been Church policy and it may change as conditions in society change. On the other hand, it is a *revealed doctrine* that family life is central to the plan of salvation, that only there can an individual reach his full potential, and that therefore family relationships can and should be eternal. Of course, as is the case in these examples, a policy can be related to or derived from a doctrine, but the policy can be changed, even dramatically, while the doctrine can change only in the sense that our understanding of its underlying metaphysical reality can grow, through the process of continual revelation and individual study and practice.

A policy can be *not* revealed, though official, a practical decision for which no special inspiration is claimed, such as, I suspect, the recent decision to have temple recommends renewed on people's birthdays rather than at a set time, to avoid crowding up the schedules of interviewing officials. Doctrines also can be *not revealed* and not official, though accepted by many, for instance the idea that present-day blacks are cursed because of Cain's or Ham's wrong-doing; there is no basis in any

scripture or claimed revelation for this teaching, even though it has been taught by many in the Church, and it contradicts basic and clearly revealed doctrines about the nature of God and His relationship to man and the process of salvation. (For instance, the second Article of Faith: “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins,” and Alma 3:19: “... I would that ye should see that they brought upon themselves the curse; and even so doth every man bring upon himself his own condemnation.”) Of course recognition of the basic truth of the scriptures just quoted and the historical process that Bush documents, have led good Mormons, trained to expect a rational theology and seeking a way blacks could have brought a curse upon themselves, to develop another doctrine, for which no claim of revelation has been made that I am aware of and which is also not official and, I think, untrue — that blacks must have brought about their limitation with respect to the priesthood by conduct or choice in the pre-existence. This teaching contradicts the basic revealed gospel doctrines concerning repentance and its role in the plan of salvation. Blacks have no chance to repent or change in order to remove the restrictions, a provision our merciful God makes everywhere else; in fact, blacks have no opportunity to even know what their mistake or wrong choice was.¹ It even contradicts itself because, while based on a spurious connection between actions in the pre-existence and opportunities in this life, it implies there is no genuine relationship between spiritual and moral attainments there and here, because it essentially states that the most noble black man who has ever lived (choose your own example: Elijah Abel, Martin Luther King, Ralph Bunche) is in some crucial sense not up to the level of—is, in a word, inferior to—the most depraved white man (Hitler, Stalin, Charles Manson?). It strikes right at the heart of that unique and emotionally and intellectually captivating conception of the restored Gospel: God desires all His children to be saved and exalted and has worked out a plan by which they can be; there are no limits on God’s redeeming love—no predestination for the elect and damned, no irrevocable assignment to heaven or hell upon death—no limits, that is, except our own individual choices and influence on each other. As for God, He struggles with all His power to provide equal opportunity for all who come to the earth. He treats them all with the same unconditional love: “he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45); “. . . he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness . . . and all men are alike unto God” (II Nephi 26:33). He has even provided a way (again, a unique feature of Mormon theology) by which those who are deprived, by human choices and failures, of an opportunity to know and accept the Gospel in this life can have such an opportunity after death; in fact a prevailing image we have from Christ is of God standing at the door knocking, continually inviting us to respond.

These *unrevealed doctrines*—that the priesthood is withheld from blacks because of their descent from Cain or pre-existent choices—come from a very natural, perhaps laudable, desire to explain, give reasons for a *revealed policy*. And Bush has shown convincingly what we should have all known, that they are in fact just that: rationalizations, explanations after the fact, rather than doctrines revealed from which the policy was derived. The terrible danger, and result, has been the classic

problem of the tail wagging the dog. Doctrines, beliefs about the nature of God and man and their relationship, have been derived from policies rather than the reverse.²

Bush's historical review seems to me to provide the materials for completely demolishing any lingering doubts about whether there is some doctrine, some metaphysical state of the souls of certain human beings, behind the Church's practice. If such were the case, if there were indeed a specific number of spirits designed to come into the earth with certain crucial restrictions on them, one could reasonably expect that the Lord in His almighty power would provide a way that those restrictions would be applied to those particular souls and no others. With such a good reason God could certainly set up a foolproof means of discrimination; one might, for instance, expect Him to mark such restricted spirits infallibly and indelibly, even make them a separate species so that cross-fertilization could not mix things up. At the very least He could inspire His servants, particularly patriarchs, with instant detection. History gives us no assurance of that kind of concern on God's part. Not only (as Bush points out) have many more whites than blacks been denied access to the priesthood because of simple failure on man's part to carry out God's plan of taking the gospel to all, but a certain number of blacks have not had the restrictions applied. At least one, Elijah Abel, was knowingly given the priesthood and enjoyed most of its blessings and powers throughout his life. Certain others known to be blacks may have held the priesthood as well, and there continue to be cases of those who, because they unfortunately are faithful enough to the Gospel to do their genealogy, discover a black African ancestor and are asked to discontinue using the priesthood (it is not "taken" from them). In addition, in South America (and under a new policy inaugurated under President McKay in South Africa) it is extremely likely that men of black African descent hold and use the priesthood because it is not necessary that they demonstrate acceptable ancestry before being given the priesthood where there is no obvious "mark of Cain" upon them. In fact, despite Brigham Young's unequivocal linkage of the two, physical features now have nothing to do with priesthood denial—black, negroid-appearing Fijians receiving it and white Europeans with black African ancestry not.

Many other minor changes in policy and historical discrepancies documented by Bush show conclusively that God is not acting or requiring His Church to act in a consistent way, which would be necessary if there were a specific number of spirits metaphysically set apart from the rest of us. Especially problematic is Joseph Smith's own teaching on this matter, since there is no available contemporary evidence that he denied blacks the priesthood, and Bush has unearthed, it seems to me, very significant references indicating that, at least in the late 1830's and early 1840's, the First Presidency had no intention to discriminate against blacks in preaching the Gospel or bringing them to participate fully in the temple.

But these unrevealed doctrines are not only wrong, they are terribly dangerous. Such doctrines are more racist and demeaning—to blacks in general and to members of the Church, both black and white—than the actual practice of denying the priesthood. They not only warp central life-giving principles of our theology but provide a false theological subsidy for the racism already natural to us as human beings and Americans, and they promote a lack of courage in meeting a crucial need of our

time—to which the Gospel itself calls us—to overcome racial fear and prejudice on this shrinking spaceship earth. The recent official statements of the Church offer no such subsidy, nor any such doctrinal rationales. These statements seem to me to call Church members to accept, as part of their faith in a divinely directed Church, the revealed policy that those of black African descent are not now to receive the priesthood. I accept that, essentially at face value. I do not ordain blacks to the priesthood nor self-righteously (or in any other way) fulminate against the Church or its leaders, nor lobby for a revelation to change things. I trust our leaders are doing their job, seeking and awaiting a revelation, and I believe with all my heart that if such a revelation is received they will in no way hesitate to enforce it, no matter how or where unpopular.

But my Mormonness wants a rationale, and though I reject the unrevealed doctrines that I have mentioned as any basis for such a rationale, there is to be found, in our history and that of America and in the theological resources of the Restored Gospel, a possible reason for the policy that can perhaps help us bear our cross—particularly since it has the advantage of putting blame and the need for change on all of us, not, as is the case with other doctrinal rationales, on the victims alone.

I believe that historical conditions in our country, essentially unique in the world, including resultant attitudes of Church members, brought about a situation where it was in the best interests of all involved for the Lord to institute a lower law for us to live (denying for a time the priesthood to blacks of African descent—those who had been subjected to slavery and its aftermath in our country) until we are ready to live the higher law (accepting blacks fully into the priesthood with all of the natural consequences, including black leadership over whites in the Church and the extremely close relationships and trust that the lay leadership structure of the Church requires). Given its particular nature, the Restored Church could not, during the period of slavery and its bitter heritage when American blacks and whites could not relate as equals, ease the transition by segregating congregations or keeping blacks out of leadership and priesthood functions through educational requirements, etc. Thus it seems to me fairly easy to understand that, at least until quite recently, giving blacks the priesthood would have been greatly destructive to the Church because of white reaction and thus not a blessing to blacks.

The idea of living a lower law should be a familiar concept to us. The children of Israel had the fulness of the priesthood and the higher ethical law taken from them and were restricted to the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic Law of performances. Even now in the latter days with the “fulness” of the Gospel available to us we are presently living a lower law, tithing, because of our inability to live fully the higher Law of Consecration. The Lord can and does at times reveal policies which it is His will that we practice but which He is not very happy about, in the sense that he wishes we were ready to live a higher law and stands ready to give it to us when we get ready. I believe that is the case with the Church’s policy on blacks and the priesthood. The policy is revealed—at least in the negative sense that the Lord has not changed it, though He clearly has had the opportunity. I don’t believe, as some have suggested, that the word can’t get through to the Prophet, nor that the Church and its leaders have become frozen in a defensive position, resisting this

one last surrender to outside secular values.³ No, I think rather that we are collectively living out the consequences of historical evil and failure—that of ourselves and of others before us.

There may be nothing at all to my theory. It sounds like a cop-out in the face of a certain kind of idealism, a shameful giving in to human weakness, an argument from expediency. But God is certainly not to be understood as *inexpedient*. He refers to revealing “what is expedient for you to understand”; He gives “milk before meat” bringing us along according to our growing capacities, “line upon line, precept upon precept.” If, as it seems, His loving care is extended to all of us and He is willing to work with us where we are in order to be able to get us where He wants us, even instituting lower laws to help us get through some rough periods, then my idea makes some sense. We must all share the blame for a tragic situation, as Americans with our bitter historical burden of slavery and continuing racism, including black Americans who may be in fact in a way “not ready” because they have been forced by that same burden into situations and attitudes in which the priesthood would not be a help. (A thoughtful friend, an historian, suggested to me, plausibly I think, that we have come to such a pass that for our white-dominated church to offer blacks the priesthood would be patronizing; that perhaps they must receive their own prophet and a direct dispensation.)

And some of us in the Church may not yet be capable of participating in the consequences of blacks receiving the priesthood in such a way that it would be a blessing. I don’t think the Lord is happy with any such, any more than He is with the increasing number of wealthy Mormons who self-righteously pay their tithing and other “obligations” and then squander the rest of their increase on luxury, forgetting the poor who could use their help to help themselves, in South America or right across town, forgetting therefore the Lord’s call for us to voluntarily work towards equality in earthly things, to live the higher Law of Consecration. But the Lord will not give a higher law until it is a blessing, until the Church members or whites or blacks or America or all are finally “ready,” until it will be in the best interests of the Lord’s plan of salvation for all people.

And therein, perhaps, is the great advantage of such an explanation as mine. I can rationally hope for change without in any sense implying a challenge to the authority of the Prophet, whom I sustain with all my heart, or undermining my faith in the Church as divinely directed and its doctrines as essentially true, which faith is more precious to me than life. The unrevealed doctrines which have been used to rationalize the policy have had as perhaps their most anguishing deficiency that they carry the implication that any change before the end of the world would be unjust. (Why should blacks up to a certain point suffer restrictions and not those after if they all “deserve” such restrictions?)

President Smith pointed this out forcibly to me on one occasion; and at the risk of being dismissed as another purveyor of questionable anecdotes about statements of modern prophets I ought to report that experience, not to prove anything, but to keep open some important possibilities. In the summer of 1963, agitation about the Church’s policy was at a kind of peak, both nationally and within Church circles. I had expressed myself in Church situations as not being able to square the curse of

Cain or preexistence “doctrines” with the Scriptures, central principles of the restored gospel, or my own best thinking and feeling. I was told bluntly that I could not be a Mormon in good standing without accepting those doctrines. I cared deeply about my standing in the Church and relationships with my brothers and sisters and wasn’t about to lead a crusade and so was ready to seek an authoritative answer.

It came to my attention that Joseph Fielding Smith (then President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles) had published an article in the *Church News* about this matter and in the process had essentially contradicted one of his assumptions in his earlier discussion of the matter in *The Way to Perfection*, then calling blacks an “inferior” race and now specifically saying they were not. Two of my friends who were concerned about the same matter, and, as I did, looked at President Smith as the nearly official scribe of the Church, made an appointment for us to see him. President Smith was not very anxious to see us since he was being baited from many sources at that time, but after some assurances of our intentions he gave us some time and was particularly gracious when one of my friends, moved I think by the prayer we offered together before going, began the interview by confessing in tears that his original motives for coming had been somewhat contentious. I told President Smith about my experiences with the issue of blacks and the priesthood and asked him whether I must believe in the pre-existence doctrine to have good standing in the Church. His answer was, “Yes, because that is the teaching of the Scriptures.” I asked President Smith if he would show me the teaching in the Scriptures (with some trepidation, because I was convinced that if anyone in the world could show me he could). He read over with me the modern scriptural sources and then, after some reflection, said something to me that fully revealed the formidable integrity which characterized his whole life: “No, you do not have to believe that Negroes are denied the priesthood because of the pre-existence. I have always assumed that because it was what I was taught, and it made sense, but you don’t have to be in good standing because it is not definitely stated in the scriptures. And I have received no revelation on the matter.” Then it was, as we continued our discussion, that he said, with what seems to be irrefutable logic, that if, as he believed, the reason for the denial was the pre-existence then there could be no expectation that blacks would receive the priesthood in this life, because that would not be fair to those who had been denied it up to that point.

Where then are we today? The cross we’ve hewn for ourselves is painful, embarrassing, humiliating, and ought to, perhaps does, engender humility. On no other issue does our history present us with such a sorry spectacle. It can’t be anything but painful to read Joseph Smith, whose vision and mind were so expansive and radically humanitarian on so many other issues (and were also on the race issue towards the end of his life) sounding the same racist strains as the rest of American society. It’s painful to read Brigham Young (who was right about many things of much more importance than any of his critics and nearly everyone else) supporting slavery of blacks and Indians, predicting that the Civil War would not end slavery, repeating the racist myths of his time and even improving on them—in fact, as Bush documents, undercutting any basis in his teachings for *doctrine* on the subject by including, each time he spoke, things the Church clearly does not now believe. It is

shameful to read about faithful black members of the Church being asked officially not to come out to meetings or to sit in special places to avoid conflicts with white members. There is nothing about the whole matter in which we can take any comfort, certainly not in the sociological studies of Armand Mauss and others about which some members have been quite enthused because they show that Mormons are no more prejudiced than other Americans. In all conscience, given our ideals we should be ashamed that we are not significantly *less* prejudiced. Perhaps the greatest shame is that we in the Church—including our leaders—have been cut off from the major thrust of social conscience in our times, from a social revolution against racism in which we could have exercised beneficial leadership, perhaps even helping to avoid the polarizing bitterness that has wounded our nation. I think Thomas F. O’Dea is right when he says a response to the challenge of that particular social revolution is a telling diagnostic test of the viability of any person’s or institution’s relation to the challenges of modern life. So far we have not met that challenge well—and by “we” I mean the lay membership of the Church.

What can we do? We can get ready for living the higher law, first by working to root out racism in ourselves through getting to know blacks and something of black aspirations and culture. And we can help get Americans ready, black and white, by working honestly and vigorously to overcome the burden of our racist past. We can become anxiously engaged in the good cause that our Church leaders have already called us to—to see, as they said in their 1969 statement on “the position of the Church with regard to the Negro both in society and in the Church,” that “each citizen . . . have equal opportunities and protection under the law with reference to civil rights.” We can then go beyond that, as they announce *they* are doing in that same statement, to “join with those throughout the world who pray that all the blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ may in due time of the Lord become available to men of faith everywhere.” If I understand that correctly, it’s a call to prepare—by prayer and the action that the Gospel makes clear must accompany sincere prayer—for the higher law under which we would be able, as God desires, to extend His blessings to everyone without discrimination. We can try to do what it seems the First Presidency is doing and has by example called us to do, praying in our private prayers and in our meetings that the time may soon come when blacks may receive the priesthood and then acting with energy to be prepared for and thus make possible that time. This may not at first make our cross easier. In fact, in my experience, our efforts as Mormons to join with others in civil rights actions and to build bridges and respond positively to black aspirations will bring special kinds of misunderstanding and pain and will make the cross harder to bear. But those efforts may just help the day come when the Lord can extend the fulness of the gospel blessings to all of His children—which will be a great blessing as well to all of us in His Church.

NOTES

1. The psychological and spiritual damage done by the implication of an inherited curse or the allegation of an unspecified act or choice in the pre-existence which the black cannot know about or repent of is precisely delineated by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the *Lectures on Faith* (along with the clear teaching that God’s character is such that He does not operate that way):

[I]t is also necessary that men should have an idea that [God] is no respecter of persons, for with the idea of all the other excellencies in his character, and this one wanting, men could not exercise faith in him; because if he were a respecter of persons, they could not tell what their privileges were, nor how far they were authorized to exercise faith in him, or whether they were authorized to do it at all, but all must be confusion; but no sooner are the minds of men made acquainted with the truth on this point, that he is no respecter of persons, than they see that they have authority by faith to lay hold on eternal life, the richest boon of heaven, because God is no respecter of persons, and that every man in every nation has an equal privilege. (Lecture Third, paragraph 23)

2. Two books circulating among Mormons and even non-Mormons which exemplify this devastatingly are those by John Stewart, *Mormonism and the Negro* (Deseret), and John Lund, *The Church and the Negro* (privately printed). In each of these the concept of a partial God, sending His favorite children into more and more favored conditions where they buy their salvation easily by taking advantage of their already superior advantages, is derived from the Church practice of not giving blacks the priesthood, as a result leaving great concepts of the restored Gospel in a shambles. A typical example of the unabashed racism that results, with one can imagine what salutary effects on dark-skinned people such as East Indians, Polynesians, and South Americans, who with Africans make up the majority of God's children on the earth—and will likely before long make up the majority of members of the Church, is the following (Lund, p. 102): “When people rebel against God's commandments, either during their pre-earth life Or while in mortality, they are given a dark skin so that those who are of the chosen seed will not intermarry with them.”

3. This interpretation has been suggested by Thomas F. O'Dea in his essay “Sources of Strain in Mormon History Reconsidered” as found in *Mormonism and American Culture*, edited by Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

The matter of distinction on the basis of skin color in the Book of Mormon and thus the matter of racism toward American Indians, is an entirely separate matter from the Church's policy with respect to blacks of African descent, although non-Mormons have confused the two and Mormons (i.e. Lund and Stewart) have sometimes mistakenly connected the two as mutually supportive evidences for a racist God. That subject deserves a separate essay, but let me merely say at this point that when the Amlicites (Alma 3) *marked themselves* with “a mark of red upon their foreheads,” we are told that “thus the Word of God is fulfilled . . . which he said to Nephi: Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed, and I will set a mark on them that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed . . . except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me.” This raises the very strong possibility that the original “curse” being quoted was also propagated by the separated Lamanites themselves—through marking their own skin, choosing a degenerate life style, and perhaps intermarrying with darker New World peoples around them—and not by a genetically inherited curse from God. At least the commentator in Alma 3 states unequivocally that every man that is cursed brings upon himself his own condemnation, and Book of Mormon history is consistent with that, because there are no religious restrictions on individual Lamanites such as there are on blacks—extraordinary efforts are made to establish contact with the Lamanites and as soon as one chooses to accept the Gospel he can participate in it fully and is no longer in any sense cursed—a point we fail to make sufficiently clear to modern “Lamanites,” such as Polynesians and American Indians, who sometimes suffer seriously under the impression, conveyed by false doctrines such as those put forth by Lund and Stewart, that their skin color is evidence of a cursed and therefore inferior and incapable lineage. Before the end of the Book of Mormon the terms Lamanite and Nephite have no precise reference to ancestry or skin color but are used to distinguish between those who accept God and Christ and those who do not.

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