

Are All Alike Unto God?: Prejudice against Blacks and Women in Popular Mormon Theology

By Eugene England

This essay presents strong arguments and a fervent call for Mormons to once and for all leave behind past teachings and scriptural interpretations that make God out to be a “respector of persons,” especially regarding race and gender, and to truly embrace the notion that “all are alike unto God” and, therefore, everyone should be seen that way by us as well. Early versions of this essay were presented at the 1989 Sunstone symposiums in Salt Lake City and Seattle.

Originally published: *Sunstone* 15, no. 2 (April 1990): 21–31.

WHAT WILL PEOPLE forty or fifty years from now think of us? What will seem as blatantly wrong to them as the racism and sexism of fifty years ago—or today—now seem to us? Will it be our careless destruction of forests and pollution of air and water that left an ugly, diminished earth to our descendants? Will it be our blind, heartless enmity with the Russians and Chinese that wasted trillions of dollars on arms while most of the earth’s people went hungry and without adequate housing or education? Or will our descendants, building the New Jerusalem, wonder why we spent so much time at Sunstone symposia sitting around complaining about such things as prejudice in popular Mormon theology when Christ was at the door and the gospel needing to be taken to the world.

But again, they may wonder why we didn’t help bring the Millennium sooner by working more directly and courageously to achieve a crucial condition of the New Jerusalem—that we all indeed be one, that black and white, male and female, be all alike unto ourselves as well as unto God. This essay is intended to help clear our minds and hearts for that task. I realize that it may oversimplify or sound dogmatic at times. Please help me achieve my real intent by silently prefacing each of my statements with “It *seems* that . . .”

First let me give you a little quiz. Just jot down true or false by each of the following eight statements:

1. We will be punished for our own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression.
2. All are alike unto God, both male and female.
3. All are alike unto God, both black and white.
4. In order for the faith of any rational being to center in God for life and salvation that person must believe that God is no respecter of persons.
5. Because Eve listened to Satan and transgressed first in the Garden, women

- must suffer in childbirth and be obedient to their husbands.
6. Plural wives, but not plural husbands, are part of the celestial marriage order.
 7. We are born into a particular race as a blessing or a punishment for our actions or decisions in the pre-existence.
 8. Religious practices and beliefs which make a spiritual distinction between races or sexes are inspired of God on the basis of what to him are spiritual differences between races or between sexes.

In an American literature course I taught at Brigham Young University, I found my students amused at what they saw as the ridiculous contradictions in Puritan beliefs and practices—for instance, the stated Puritan conviction that they were saved or damned solely by the inscrutable will of God, yet their frantic efforts to prove through good works they were saved and their meticulous attempts to discern signs of God’s grace or damnation in the way people behaved or what happened to them. I developed a version of the quiz above to engender, through self-scrutiny, a little empathy for the Puritans. It turns out that Mormons, at least my students, seem to be about as inconsistent as the Puritans. How about you? The first four statements I gave are quotations or paraphrases of Mormon scripture or statements by the prophets. Orthodox Mormons, I believe, should have put “true” by all of them. The second four are popular Mormon beliefs which directly contradict in order the first four; that is, five contradicts one, six contradicts two, etc. If the first four are true, the second four should, I believe, all be false. So those of us who have even one or two of the second four statements marked true are about as inconsistent as Puritan Divine Cotton Mather, a good and pious man who helped burn over twenty women in the 1690s for witchcraft and believed women more inclined to be witches than men because of the physiology of menstruation.¹

Where do such inconsistencies come from and what can be done about them? Let me give some history and then focus on present solutions. The remarkable thing about the Restoration, coming as it did to an American culture that in the early nineteenth century was openly racist and sexist, is that the Restored gospel avoided, even directly contradicted, traditional beliefs and practices that downgraded blacks and women. While careful not to deny the legal property rights of slaveowners, the Church accepted blacks into full membership, gave them the priesthood, and anticipated their full participation in the gathering and in temple blessings. In 1840 Parley P. Pratt wrote a hymn encouraging the Twelve to carry the gospel to “India’s and Africa’s sultry plains,”² and that same year the First Presidency wrote that “we may soon expect to see flocking to [Nauvoo] . . . Persons of all languages, and of every tongue, and of every color; who shall with us worship the Lord of Hosts in his holy temple, and offer up their orisons in his sanctuary.”³

In his “Views on the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States,” written during his campaign for the U.S. presidency in 1844, Joseph Smith discussed slavery at length and gave no comfort to the then-current ideas about inferiority of blacks or their descent from Cain and Ham or to the then-current claims of divine endorsement for slavery. Instead he called upon the nation to work to “ameliorate the condition of all: black or white, bond or free: for the best of books says. ‘God

hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth.”⁴

But by 1852 Brigham Young, speaking to Utah’s territorial legislature, declared that “any man having one drop of the seed of [Cain] . . . in him cannot hold the priesthood and if no other Prophet ever spake it before I will say it now.”⁵ Although there are journal accounts of Brigham Young taking this position earlier, this is apparently the first public, essentially official, denial of the priesthood to blacks. This seems to be a dramatic change from Joseph to Brigham; it appears to contradict the general truth that Joseph Smith’s teachings were essentially accepted as normative after his death and also to call in question Brigham Young’s claim that he never taught anything but what he heard from Joseph.⁶ On the strength of that claim by Brigham Young and the evidence that many of Joseph Smith’s teachings concerning the temple were made only in private councils during the last two years of his life, Ronald Esplin has argued that the denial of priesthood and temple blessings to blacks “was introduced in Nauvoo and consistently applied in practice at least by 1843, although it would require additional documentation to raise the possibility from the realm of the probable to the certain.”⁷ Whenever it occurred, there was clearly a change from the teachings and practices of the Church up to the early 1840s, and the present evidence seems to me to point to the beginning of Brigham Young’s administration.

It is difficult to judge the reasons for the change—perhaps simply a different personality and perspective in the new prophet. Brigham Young, perhaps (as I argued in 1973) the Lord’s recognition, conveyed either to Joseph or to Brigham. that, even with slaves freed, racism would continue to be so strong in America, even in God’s true Church, that blacks simply would not be allowed—by others—to function fully and be blessed if they held the priesthood.⁸ Whatever the case, it is now embarrassing to read of a man I love and respect saying such things as the following:

The Lord put a mark upon [Cain], which is the flat nose and the black skin. Trace mankind down to after the flood, and then another curse is pronounced upon the same race—that they should be the “servant of servants”; and they will, until that curse is removed; and the Abolitionists cannot help it, nor in the least alter that decree.⁹

Or this:

Shall I tell you the law of God in regard to the African race? If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God is death on the spot.¹⁰

I can only take comfort that President Young never taught that the priesthood was denied because of any action or lack of valiance in the pre-existence, and he held out some hope that the curse would eventually be removed in this life— though many Mormons later forgot both *those* elements of his teachings.

By the late nineteenth century, though all slaves in Utah (contrary to Brigham Young’s expectations) had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, Utah was much like the rest of the country in its beliefs about Negro inferiority and the rightness of prejudice and segregation. This was true even of the more educated and supposedly enlightened leaders like that hero of Mormon intellectuals, B. H. Roberts (who in his ideas about race was perfectly in tune with Harvard professors such as

Louis Agassiz). Roberts included, with approval, in the 1907 *Seventy's Course in Theology* a quotation from a then-current defense of racism, *The Color Line, A Brief in Behalf of the Unborn*, "That the negro is markedly inferior to the Caucasian is proved both craniologically and by six thousand years of planet-wide experience; and . . . the commingling of inferior with superior must lower the higher."¹¹

In 1931, a new rationale for the Church's one official racist practice, denial of the priesthood and of temple blessings to blacks of African descent, was developed by Joseph Fielding Smith in his very influential *The Way to Perfection*.¹² Explicitly recognizing that developments in science and popular thought had undermined the traditional rationale based on descent from Cain, Elder Smith put forward what he called the "pre-existence hypothesis": Assuming that blacks themselves were somehow responsible for the denial, he used what might be called the Mormon escape clause for difficult social questions, that is, pushing the cause back to our pre-mortal development and decisions. By 1949 this hypothesis became the major rationale in the first official statement of Church policy on blacks, though it was there stated undogmatically as a *possible* explanation.¹³

One thing that did not change in twentieth century Mormonism was the persistent rejection of racial mixing, whether in intermarriage or simple social intercourse, a rejection which began in Joseph's time and continued. The predominantly Mormon Utah legislature in 1939 extended its anti-miscegenation statute to prohibit whites from marrying Mongolians, members of the "malay race," or anyone with even an eighth part black ancestry,¹⁴ and in the 1940s it persistently killed public housing and fair employment bills aimed at reducing segregation. In 1947 the First Presidency wrote to Mormon sociologist Lowry Nelson, who had questioned the Church's racial policies, that racial intermarriage was "a concept which has heretofore been most repugnant to most normal-minded people."¹⁵

WELL HERE WE are, forty years later, probably with some relatively normal-minded people reading this essay who are married to people of other races. Blacks were given the priesthood twelve years ago; no leaders now speak against interracial marriages (except occasionally on the purely practical grounds that the couple and their children will "experience difficulties" in society); the Church has no longer any official racist practices or doctrines. But there is something going on still, much more surprising to me than those statements by Brigham Young or B. H. Roberts or the First Presidency. Let me give some examples.

In January 1989, just before Martin Luther King's birthday, I received an unusual phone call. The voice was pleasant enough but the request a bit unsettling: "I've just read your essay on blacks and the priesthood. Can I come and talk with you?"

I said, "Sure," but as I was waiting I wondered who might still find that sixteen-year-old work troubling.¹⁶ It was a student, who introduced himself as a fairly recent convert from a big Eastern city, thanked me for the help the essay had given him, and told me how much he had been surprised and hurt to find, here at BYU, that most people he talked to, including professors, still believed that blacks like him had been denied the priesthood because they were "less valiant" in the pre-existence.

The next week, in BYU's unofficial magazine, *The Student Review*, Stuart Pace, reflecting on his interracial marriage, talked about the "tacit racism" he has found in Provo. He mentioned "professors and amateur theologians who hypothesized about what spiritual shortcoming prevented blacks from getting the priesthood all those years, never once asking themselves what the universal atonement's shortcoming was that prevented it from applying to all men."¹⁷

About that same time one of my students told me of going to dinner with friends of roommates and being regaled with a story, by a returned missionary, about how a convert's skin gradually turned white after she joined the Church, because of her spiritual change. The roommates stared at their plates in embarrassment but said nothing; the regaler was completely oblivious to the insult he was giving my student, who despite her conversion remains as black as ever: and she was hurt to the point of impotent anger and silence and later to uncertainty and tears as she considered that the people of the Church she believes is true seem to believe there is a connection between skin color and righteousness.

These three people, and probably thousands—even millions—of others, perhaps especially the white Mormons who believe such ideas, are being hurt, damaged, even damned up, I believe, in their spiritual progression, by a popular but false theology. It is a theology that developed—from Orson Pratt to B. H. Roberts to Joseph Fielding Smith—as a tentative, unofficial rationalization for the official policy of denying blacks the priesthood. But such theology gradually became so universally believed, despite its inconsistency with central Mormon beliefs and scriptures, that it easily took on dogmatic, official status when it was included in 1958, in Elder Bruce R. McConkie's unofficial but forcefully worded and extremely popular book, *Mormon Doctrine*. It was then developed in detail by two books written specifically as rationales for the priesthood denial when that denial was coming under increasing attack, John J. Stewart's *Mormonism and the Negro* and John Lewis Lund's *The Church and the Negro*.¹⁸ In each of these books a temporary Church practice is used to develop a racist theology: 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. Such an argument, that lets the tail of historical practice wag the dog of fundamental doctrine, leaves great concepts of the restored Gospel in a shambles—especially our concept of a universally loving God of all people and of a universal Atonement.

A typical example of the unabashed racism that resulted is the following from Lund's book: "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."¹⁹ I know from personal conversations with some of those affected that such ideas administer devastating hurt to dark-skinned people, who make up the majority of God's children on the earth and will before long make up a majority of members of the Church.

One reader of this essay has suggested that perhaps Mormons don't really take these notions seriously any more. I hope she is right, but I've taken various informal polls, and on that evidence and the many stories I keep hearing from blacks and other racial minorities themselves about such ideas being taught or left unchallenged

in classes at BYU—right in their presence. I am convinced that a large number, perhaps a majority, of Mormons still believe them. I will proceed on that assumption.

What’s wrong with the notion that blacks are “not equal” (in Elder McConkie’s words in his original edition) and that that inequality is caused by God? What is false about thinking that God sends people into a certain race and puts “spiritual restrictions” on them because they were “less valiant”—so false that, I believe, it interferes with the salvation of all those who believe it, whether black or white? Simply, as Stuart Pace pointed out, that such theology denies the “universal atonement” of Christ by telling blacks they did something wrong in the pre-existence but that they can neither know what they did nor repent of it. It thus introduces, against the many scriptures that claim the Atonement is universal and *all* are born innocent into life, the notion that there are differences, color-coded by race in the plan of salvation.

And it denies all common sense: There are people with every possible degree of black inheritance; how “white” do you have to be to inherit Abraham’s blessings instead of Cain’s curse or the pre-existence stigma: 10 percent, 50 percent, 99 44/100 percent?

And it denies all our experience: It implies that all the best black people in the world—Martin Luther King, Elijah Abel, Alan Cherry, Catherine Stokes, my student—did something in the pre-existence that makes them intrinsically, spiritually, inferior to the worst white people in the world, such as Hitler, Stalin, Hofmann, Bundy.

And this damning idea that all blacks are spiritually inferior because of some unknown act or choice in the pre-existence directly denies one of the most beautiful and important and absolutely clear Book of Mormon scriptures, 2 Nephi 26:33: “[The Lord] doeth that which is *good* among the children of men; and 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 are alike unto God*, both [*black and white*]” (my emphasis). This scripture does not suggest, of course, that there are no physical or cultural differences between races but simply that there are no differences “unto God,” that is, gradings that are essential, spiritual, that imply different value or potential or processes of salvation and exaltation between races.

ELDER MCCONKIE, JUST a few weeks after the revelation giving blacks the priesthood in 1978, claimed that in the past the Church, including himself, had not fully understood the scripture that claims “all are alike unto God.” “Many of us,” he said, “never imagined or supposed that these passages had the extensive and broad meaning that they do have,” apparently because we assumed there were essential differences, distinctions “unto God,” between the races. Elder McConkie, well aware that he had made such distinctions and taught that blacks would not receive the priesthood on earth, continued, “Forget everything that I said . . . that is contrary to the present revelation. [I] spoke with a limited understanding.”²⁰ That was brave and good advice, But we have not followed it.

It is time, right now, to have Elder McConkie’s courage and to accept the inspi-

ration of our prophets and to renounce the false theology, the limited understanding, that we developed in an effort to explain our practice of denying blacks the priesthood. That theology, if we cling to it, subsidizes racism as much as the practice God has inspired us to renounce. It is time for all of us, especially any who teach religion, in seminaries and institutes, Church classes, or at BYU, to turn to the scriptures and receive the inspiration by which God renounces the theology as well. It is time to turn completely away from the peripheral and destructive notions which undermine our central concept of the universal Fatherhood of God, the universal brotherhood of man, and the Atonement of Christ.

It is time to reaffirm what seems to me the only scriptural and logical doctrine of the relation of the pre-existence to this life, that our actions and decisions there helped form the internal *quality* of what we became there and continue to be here, not our color or other external “advantages” of birth. Of course, there is a connection between the pre-existence and what we are here, and it is the obvious one: We are the same people, continuing with the same general kind of character and qualities we had there, but that doesn’t mean that God grades us accordingly by color or condition of birth. In fact, since we are constantly changing and growing, sinning and repenting, we can’t really judge *anything* about anyone’s pre-existent life. The only thing we need to know and have any right to act upon is that we are all children of God, “alike unto God,” and of infinite potential. As Joseph Smith stated in the King Follett Discourse: “All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement.”²¹ This means that we do not have moral identity, fixed and determined by past actions and signalled by skin color or condition of birth, but rather a moral *history* and infinite moral *potential*; we should not be looking for signs by which to judge each other’s moral *identity* but rejoicing in and doing all we can to help develop every person’s infinite moral potential.

Some have argued that since we are judged and given graded status *after* this life then it follows that we were *before*. But the Book of Mormon makes it clear that our post-mortal judgment is essentially administered by ourselves, based on complete self-knowledge, and consists mainly of such self-awareness and continuing to have “the same spirit that possessed our bodies” when we died (Mosiah 3:25 and Alma 34:34)—rather than the traditional Christian set of external rewards and punishments.

The *only* kind of pre-mortal judgment for which we have any scriptural evidence (besides, of course, the third who chose to deny themselves the chance to even come here) is the sending by God of certain “noble and great ones” into times and conditions where they can best *serve*—and if we can assume that prophets like Joseph Smith and Samuel the Lamanite are among those, they are certainly not rewarded with luxurious earthly conditions or white skin.

If there are any connections, for the rest of us, between our pre-existent character and the external conditions of our birth here—race, family, wealth, position, etc. — we do not have any clue as to what those connections are. We can only be certain, on scriptural warrant, that those connections are not a punishment nor a denial of the Atonement. In fact the most logical connection, given the assumption and scriptural evidence that our Heavenly Parents are better than the best earthly ones, is

quite different from the usual one in popular Mormon thought. If good earthly parents had a chance to send one child to a badly-run summer camp and one to an excellent one—and one child was sinful and troubled and the other righteous and a good influence—where would they send the troubled child? To the place the child could get the most help, I think the gospel would suggest and most of us would believe. But that means, assuming God is such a good parent, that we who are born into privileged white Mormon families were likely those *least* valiant in the pre-existence and in need of help! I'm very serious about this; such a relationship to the pre-existence, if we insist on any at all, squares much better with what we know of God's nature than the other notion, which makes God partial, racist, and vindictive.

LET ME SUGGEST two lines of thinking that can help us and those we influence to renounce any negative connection between pre-existence and race. In 1963, when the Civil Rights movement and also agitation about the Church's policy concerning blacks were at a height, I had expressed myself in my ward as unable to accept either the curse-of-Cain or the pre-existence hypotheses as consistent with the scriptures. I was told that I could not be a Mormon in good standing without accepting these "doctrines."

I knew that Joseph Fielding Smith had been the main modern Church writer about such matters and was very close to being the official Church scribe as well as President of the Quorum of the Twelve and likely our next Prophet. I got an appointment with him and asked him directly if I must believe in the "pre-existence hypothesis" to have good Church standing. He replied, "Yes, because that is the teaching of the scriptures." I asked him to show me the teaching in the scriptures, since I had not been able to see it there.

President Smith patiently went through the sources with me, particularly the Pearl of Great Price, and then he said something quite remarkable: "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 believe it to be in good standing, because it is not definitely stated in the scriptures. And I have received no revelation on the matter."

He then said to me that if Negroes were being denied the priesthood because of their pre-existence then we could not expect any of them to receive the priesthood in this life. It would be unfair, inconsistent with God's perfect justice, to those who had been denied it up to that point if some started getting it. The logic is good, but of course it has an important implication: If indeed Negroes ever *are* given the priesthood then we can only preserve our sense of God's justice by admitting that the reason it was withheld in the first place was *not* the pre-existence. President Smith did not state that logical implication, but I believe he would have accepted it had he lived to see the priesthood given to blacks in 1978.

The trouble is that others have not accepted that logic, though they have accepted the new revelation and apparently adjusted well to blacks having the priesthood. Even Elder McConkie, who leaned very heavily on President Smith's teachings about race, did not accept that implication of his logic about the justice of God. When he reprinted the 1966 second edition of *Mormon Doctrine* in 1979, it seems

the only change he made was under the entry for “Negroes,” for which he wrote a report of the new revelation in place of the old entry. He thus removed his earlier comments under “Negroes” about racial inequality and priesthood denial because of “lack of spiritual valiance” in the pre-existence. But he left complete his old entry under “Races of Men,” in which he continues to suggest that other races than the white arise from “racial degeneration” and “apostasy” from “our common parents” and states clearly that “The race and nation in which men are born in this world is a direct result of their pre-existent life.”²³ His book thus continues to provide a powerfully authoritative claim for a connection which cannot help, it seems to me, but implicitly encourage racism—and the examples I’ve given above clearly demonstrate that such racism continues in Mormonism. But Elder McConkie’s claim, it seems to me, is directly counter to the reasoning of Joseph Fielding Smith and the clear implications of the revelation of 1978.

My second line of thinking begins with the quotation used in statement four on my quiz. It is from the “Lectures on Faith,” which were partially written and fully approved by Joseph Smith and included in the Doctrine and Covenants as scripture until 1921:

It is also necessary that men should have an idea that [God] is no respecter of persons [“but in every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted of him”], 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 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.²⁴

This is a marvelous argument, though we seem to have missed it in popular Mormon thought: All human beings *must* be alike unto God and we *must* understand that that is *true* for the plan of salvation to work—for faith unto repentance, the experience of Christ’s Atonement, and exaltation even to be possible. The passage describes precisely how it seems to me it must feel to be black or a woman in a racist and sexist culture, supposedly being punished for something done by an ancestor or inherent in their own nature, but with no way to repent of that “something” and no certainty about its effects on their future. Joseph Smith provides us here with the most powerful practical reason why we must immediately stop teaching theology that supports color or sex prejudice: We are denying others—and probably ourselves—full access to Christ and his plan of redemption.

THOUGH IT PROVIDES a powerful argument against all prejudice, the quotation above from the “Lectures on Faith” is full of apparently sexist language (“every *man* in every nation has an equal privilege”). Are the races alike unto God

but not the sexes? Actually I believe the language in that passage is perfectly general rather than sexist, referring to all “mankind”—as we used to say but no longer should. At any rate, the Restoration was as radically nonsexist as it was nonracist—at least to begin with. Though Mormon women were from the beginning excluded from the governing priesthood, as in every other Judeo-Christian church, and thus from much of Church leadership, even this began to change when Joseph Smith responded to women’s needs and questions with the founding of the Relief Society in 1842. There is good evidence that he meant to make that organization a literal extension of the primary functions of priesthood, which are service and healing, and that the special endowment and sealing given to the so-called Temple Couples in Nauvoo actually introduced women equally into a body, with at least some governing functions, of “kings and queens, priests and priestesses,” beyond the purely patriarchal Melchizedek priesthood.²⁵ Whatever the case, when Eliza R. Snow got the Relief Society going again in Utah, she presided with the title “High Priestess” over the “priestesses” who did endowment work and gave priesthood blessings in the temple.

During most of the nineteenth century the Church was in what non-Mormon historian Jan Shipps has called a mode of radical restoration. Mormon women were fully involved and their involvement crucial to the success of a literal building of the Kingdom of God that required heroic efforts not only in traditional women’s roles of establishing homes and caring for their families and the sick and needy as the Saints were uprooted time after time. The Restoration effort also required women, because of polygamy and the continuing proselyting effort, both of which reduced the presence of men, to become heads of households and thus to develop occupational and professional skills. They did this, as Shipps has pointed out, “in far greater numbers than [women did] elsewhere in the Western world.”²⁶

Mormon women, individually and collectively, developed unusual independence, participated in public life, including publishing and politics, voted and involved themselves in the national suffrage movements. They enjoyed remarkable equality within the Church itself through the Relief Society and through their opportunities in speaking in tongues, healing the sick, and giving washings and anointings and blessings to women.

The success of the Mormon Kingdom generated opposition from Victorian society and the U.S. government that nearly destroyed it by 1890, and the Church moved into a period of conservative accommodation and preservation, including the end of polygamy (which, despite its sexist nature had liberated many women) and of theocratic politics and economics. Mormon women generally took the place defined for them as wives and supporters of the male Church and business and political leaders, and their lives centered almost completely in home and family. Their prominence in politics and publishing and their independent auxiliary declined. Evidence suggests that even their roles in relation to the priesthood and the temple were gradually diminished between 1880 and 1950.²⁷

This stage of retrenchment may have been inevitable, given the nature of American culture, but we are now, in the 1980s, entering a third stage, one more like the first, where radical restoration is needed again more than conservative

accommodation. New nations are opening up to the Church almost monthly, in a way unthinkable just ten years ago: India, Ghana, Poland, Hungary, China, East Germany. The Book of Mormon is being placed everywhere, with almost exponential increases, sweeping the earth, as President Benson has prophesied, like a flood. The need for leaders and teachers, for talent and energy and ideas, is growing just as fast, very much as in the early Church, when women had to contribute, beyond the conventions of American culture of the time, for the Kingdom even to survive. Again, I believe we are seeing, and will see, women emerging in new roles in the Church not because of someone's theory about equality but simply because their abilities and energies are desperately needed. It should simply no longer be possible to relegate women, over half the Church, to anything less than full participation in building the Kingdom.

However, it will be possible to make the mistake of ignoring women's abilities and energies and the Lord's need for their full service in the Kingdom if we do not, as we move into this new stage, leave behind some cultural baggage. There are prejudices and ideas inherited from our sexist Western traditions, some popular doctrinal ideas that are unworthy of our worldwide mission—and directly damaging to it. As Elder Boyd K. Packer said in 1987 concerning our entry into third-world nations, “We can't move *there* with all the baggage we produce and carry *here*! We can't move with a 1947 Utah Church!”²⁸ Part of that baggage, I believe, is 1947 vintage racism and sexism, and we have the means, in the gospel itself, to renounce both.

A CENTRAL LIBERATING truth restored by God to Joseph Smith was that the Fall was not a bad thing, a thwarting of God's plan, but was instead *part* of the plan, a courageous act by our great first parents, Adam and Eve, that initiated the process of mortal probation and atonement. Christ completed his Atonement, leaving us *all* free forever to choose and to progress through repentance toward Godhood. At the same time, because we have been unduly influenced by American values, including traditional sexism, a destructive ancient notion was gradually insinuated into popular Mormon theology: that Eve succumbed to Satan's temptation, in turn tempted Adam, and brought about our downfall—and thus she and all women have to be punished and controlled. This notion has long been used to justify the horrible suppression of women in Western culture, including the terrible persecution of so-called witches, when perhaps hundreds of thousands of women in Europe were executed, in the name of Eve, often simply because they practiced the healing arts or thought for themselves or did not fit the stereotype of “goodwife.”

I cannot emphasize too strongly how destructive this idea of Eve's weakness and guilt has been or how fundamental it is to Western sexism. It led theologians to debate seriously whether women had souls, and it produced a constant barrage of teachings and pronouncements like the following from Pierre Charron, a sixteenth century French cleric:

The distinction of superiority and inferiority consisteth in this, that the husband hath power over the wife, and the wife is subject to the husband. . . . In all things the wife, though she be far more noble,

and more rich, yet is subject to the husband. This superiority and inferiority is naturall, founded upon the strength of one, the weakness and insufficiency of the other. The Divines ground it upon other reasons drawn from the Bible [i.e., the woman was born after man, and sinned before him.]. The woman then, the last in good and in generation [that is, being made after Adam] and, by occasion, the first in evill and the occasion therof, is justly subject unto man, the first in good, and last in evill.²⁹

This idea—that Eve, because of her womanly nature, was the first to fall and the cause of Adam’s fall, and that thus all women are inferior and must be punished and subjugated—persisted into Joseph Smith’s time, and one of the most remarkable achievements of the Restoration was to denounce it. In fact, the Lord warned Joseph many times that the plain truths of the gospel had been lost to God’s children because of what he called “the tradition of their fathers” (D&C 74:4; 93:39). Joseph was given to understand specifically that “our wives and children” have been made to “bow down with grief, sorrow, and care” because of “that spirit which hath so strongly riveted the creeds of the fathers, who have inherited lies, upon the hearts of the children, and filled the world with confusion” (D&C 123:7). Nothing has so literally fulfilled that description than the false Christian creeds concerning the Fall, which have directly obscured the central truths that all children are innocent and that both male and female are alike unto God and have caused women and their father-abused and neglected children sorrow and care and all of us great confusion.

Given the deep entrenchment of that false idea about Eve in American religion of the early nineteenth century, one of the most amazing revelations of the Restoration was received right after the Church was organized in 1830. Section 29 of the Doctrine and Covenants explicitly denies the idea of Eve’s prior transgression by saying *Adam* was the one who initiated the Fall: “The devil tempted Adam, and he partook of the forbidden fruit and transgressed the commandment . . . Wherefore, I . . . caused that he should be cast out from the Garden” (D&C 29:40–41). But of course this is not mere reverse sexism, blaming Adam instead of Eve. God is using the term “Adam,” a plural proper noun, to mean here *both* Adam and Eve, Mr. and Mrs. Adam, as President Spencer W. Kimball called them. They made that crucial decision as you would expect our great, divinely chosen, first parents would do—through consultation and agreement and some kind of choice and action together. Much of the pain I have seen on the faces of Mormon women in the past few years could be removed, I believe, if we taught this true doctrine, which honors women and men equally and gives them equal responsibility.

Unfortunately, despite this clear modern scriptural refutation, the false tradition of Eve’s guilt has been buttressed for Mormons by a too-literal reading of the Genesis story, repeated in Moses, and then a too-literal reception of the temple enactment of that story. When we have made such a literal interpretation, we have failed to heed the clear warning that was given at the beginning of the temple enactment that it is only figurative as far as Adam and Eve were concerned. We thus chose a false theological tradition, based on a sexist view of women, in preference to the Lord’s clear teaching that the Fall was a great moral achievement, planned by

God and carried out by two courageous heroes, Adam and Eve, acting together in married harmony.

The Book of Moses gives a figurative telling of the mythic story of the Fall that is essentially repeated from the Genesis account which has been used in Western culture to excuse prejudice against women. But the modern scripture also later makes absolutely clear that what Eve correctly refers to as “our transgression” was a correct decision and something to be thankful for, not a reason for punishment and suppression (Moses 5:11). Further, God tells Adam and Eve after they are baptized that they are forgiven of their transgression in the Garden and it “cannot be answered upon the heads of the children” (Moses 6:53–54).

Why the old mythic form was retained in Moses and transferred into the temple I do not know, but, whatever the reason, the context and the warning in the temple should have prevented us from reading a literal and negative, sexist message into it that clearly the Lord does not intend and has explicitly rejected. The recent significant changes the First Presidency made in the temple ceremony, especially in the Eve segment, seem to me a clear indication that the story is *not* literal history but a mythic representation that can be changed by revelation to serve changing needs.

In the Book of Mormon, the Lord tells us clearly that not only are black and white alike unto God, but so are both male and female (2 Nephi 26:33). If, as Elder McConkie clearly stated in that talk given shortly after the revelation giving blacks the priesthood, we didn’t understand for a long time what it means that black and white” are “alike unto God,” perhaps we *still* don’t understand fully what it means that “male and female” are alike unto God. Surely it must mean in part that in spite of obvious physical differences, there are no spiritual differences—no differences “unto God.” I look forward, in this third era of Church history, opening up in the 1980s, to our discovering more fully what that means and changing our practices and beliefs accordingly. We can start by recognizing that it clearly means that our popular theology is wrong in claiming there are differences that affect the processes of salvation—such as that skin color is connected to “spiritual valiance” or that women are “more righteous” and thus needed for celestial polygamy or that men and women have intrinsically different spiritual needs and gifts.

LET ME SUMMARIZE: I believe that God, as part of the Restoration, gave revelations and inspired direction to Joseph Smith that directly countered in remarkable ways the prevailing racism and sexism of Western culture. In doctrine, and even in practice for awhile, the Church was relatively free from those evils. But beginning in the 1840s and for a variety of reasons, some of which we still do not understand, the Church adopted a clearly racist practice—the denial of priesthood to blacks—and gradually developed semi-official racist doctrines as rationale for that practice. The Church, by revelation, has now ended that racist practice, but we have not yet repudiated all of the racist popular theology that we developed to explain the practice, particularly the notion that race is a result of behavior in the pre-existence, though this theology denies the implications of the revelation.

By 1852 the Church openly adopted a clearly sexist practice—polygamy—and then developed a semi-official sexist theology to support it. The Church, by revela-

tion, ended that practice in 1890, but it has not repudiated the sexist popular theology that went with it, the notion that the ideal form of celestial marriage is not an equal yoking of one woman and one man in an eternal union of polar opposites that makes possible a continuation of the seeds forever, but rather one patriarchal man and plural wives. I have presented in an essay elsewhere five reasons why I believe that though nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy was revealed to Joseph Smith from God, it was for mortal purposes and not to be practiced in heaven. My chief reason is that there is no clear scriptural support for such a crucial but sexist idea about the highest ordinance of the gospel, celestial marriage.³⁰

In this essay I am attacking the other popular but sexist Mormon belief, adopted from the surrounding culture despite being directly contradicted by modern scripture, that Eve and thus all women are under some kind of penalty for the Fall, a belief which undergirds continuing devaluation, and therefore probably even some abuse, of Mormon women. I am also attacking the popular but racist Mormon belief, contradicted by reason and modern scripture, that race is connected to the pre-existence and that white skin is a sign of particular righteousness there and favor from God here, which undergirds a generally subtle but very real continuing racism of attitude and practice in far too many of us. We persist in these beliefs despite lack of scriptural support, even against clear scriptural evidence and official statements to the contrary. Why do we and what can be done about it?

It could be argued, of course, that our popular beliefs result from racist and sexist practices rather than the other way around, so that correcting false doctrine will not help us. But I suspect that beliefs and practices change together, and we can work on both at the same time. Certainly, persisting in false doctrine will not help reduce prejudice. The question of changing our practices gets at the main difference between racism and sexism: The Church no longer has official practices that imply a spiritual difference between races but it does have practices which imply such a difference between sexes. Those practices are changing slowly: women now praying in sacrament meeting; more women going on missions; wives of leaders appearing in more prominent roles as part of an implied team; a few women speaking in general conference. I suspect that there will be many more changes, but I believe that they will come much faster if we stop teaching false doctrines that imply that women are spiritually inferior. I do not know whether such changes will include women being “given” the Melchizedek Priesthood. Women already hold some form of priesthood through the endowment and sealing ceremonies, and perhaps, as we approach a Zion society and a true sense of being “alike unto God,” that will emerge more and more as the fullness of the priesthood envisioned in the Restoration. Whatever the case, as we wait and pray for continuing revelation to change our practices according to the Lord’s will and time, we can work directly to change our beliefs to accord more fully with his already revealed will.

MORMON SOCIOLOGIST ARMAND Mauss has studied the process by which strange theological ideas connected to surrounding cultural beliefs become popular among Mormons: First certain beliefs, such as that blacks and women are inferior and are being properly punished and subjugated, are imported

from the prevailing culture. Then what seem like supportive ideas from Mormon doctrine or practices of the Church are combined with the cultural beliefs and the combination given authoritative support by statements of some Church leaders or religion teachers. These statements are usually tentative or merely personal at first, but as they are repeated they become more dogmatic and semi-official until they become independent of the persons who first tentatively expressed them and are accepted as official doctrine by many or even most of the Church—though they are not accepted by all Church leaders and may, in fact, be directly repudiated by at least some.³¹

Elder Howard W. Hunter, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, has said:

The gospel of Jesus Christ transcends nationality and color, crosses cultural lines, and blends distinctiveness into a common brotherhood. . . . *All* men are invited to come unto him and *all* are alike unto him. Race makes no difference; color makes no difference; nationality makes no difference. . . . As members of the Lord's church, we need to lift our vision beyond personal prejudices. We need to discover the supreme truth that indeed our Father is no respecter of persons.³²

I would only add, and I believe President Hunter would agree, that all *women*, as well as “men,” are invited to come to God and all are alike unto him, both male and female—that we must repudiate entirely any prejudice against Mormon women based on the false tradition of Eve's primary guilt.

What can we do? What if religion teachers or priesthood and Relief Society leaders—or even General Authorities—teach these false ideas? Lowell Bennion has articulated a useful guideline when the scriptures, or Church leaders, apparently contradict each other. He suggests we look for the great central principles that are repeated again and again, especially by Christ, and judge all other claims or notions by them.³³ He writes, “I do not accept any interpretation of scriptural passages that portrays God as being partial, unforgiving, hateful, or revengeful. It is more important to uphold the character and will of God than it is to support every line of scripture.” In that spirit, it seems to me we must not accept any interpretation or scripture, or any statement by a Church leader or teaching in a Church meeting or Church school class that denies or diminishes the clear, central doctrine that all are alike unto God, black and white, male and female. It is more reasonable, as well as ethical, to give up racist and sexist theology than to cling to every statement by every Church leader as authoritative.

We are all sinners. I am guilty, I am certain, of other things as evil as color or sex prejudice—and so, probably, are you. There is no room in what I have said for self-congratulation, but neither is there for reticence. Racism and sexism are clear and destructive evils, inconsistent with our preparation for Christ's coming and, most seriously, effective denials of the impartial love of our Heavenly Parents and of the power of the Atonement of their son. People who feel that they—or anyone else—because of their skin color or sex do not have the same standing or privileges before God cannot exercise faith in him unto salvation. It is time to stop such beliefs. I suggest that we each find a way, first to expunge them from ourselves, but also to refuse to allow them to continue to be taught unchallenged.

I certainly don't mean that we need to challenge or denounce people in the traditional male model of confrontation. There are better ways to persuade, as explained in Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–46, and if we remember that our purpose is to persuade, not to cover our own sins or merely to demonstrate we are right—and if we prepare by knowing well the modern scriptures and reasons on which good and loving arguments can be based—we can find a way. May our Heavenly Parents, to whom we are all alike, help us to do so.

NOTES

1. See Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 94ff.
2. “Ye Chosen Twelve,” by Parley P. Pratt, in *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Europe*, selected by Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, and John Taylor, 1840. The best source for this kind of information, to which I am indebted for many of the following quotations, is Lester C. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8: 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68.
3. “Report of the Presidency” at general conference, 3–5 October 1840, in *Times and Seasons* 1:188; or Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Brigham H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1902–12), 4:213.
4. *Times and Seasons* 5:528–533, reprinted in *Dialogue* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 28–36, with editorial notes by Martin B. Hickman.
5. In an address as governor to the territorial legislature, 16 January 1852, as recorded in Wilford Woodruff’s journal of that date, published in *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal 1833–1898*, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–84).
6. *Deseret News*, 6 June 1877.
7. Ronald K. Esplin, “Brigham Young and Priesthood Denial to the Blacks: An Alternate View.” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 399.
8. Eugene England, in a response to Lester Bush’s Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” entitled “The Mormon Cross,” *Dialogue* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 82–83.
9. Brigham Young, 9 October 1859 sermon, *Journal of Discourses* [27 vols.] (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers, 1855–86), 7:290–91; hereafter cited as *JD*.
10. *JD* 10:110 (8 March 1863).
11. William Benjamin Smith, *The Color Line: A Brief on Behalf of the Unborn*, section reprinted in *Seventy’s Course in Theology, First Year* (Salt Lake City, Deseret Press, 1907), 160.
12. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1931); see chapters 7, 15, and 16, especially pp. 43–44 and 105–06.
13. First Presidency statement, 17 August 1949, copy at Church Historical Department. Reprinted in the “Historical Supplement” to John J. Stewart, *Mormonism and the Negro* (Orem, Utah: Bookmark Division of Community Press, 1960).
14. Bush, fn. 196.
15. First Presidency letter to Lowry Nelson, 17 July 1947, copy at Brigham Young University Library.
16. Eugene England, “The Mormon Cross,” 78–86.
17. Stuart Pace, “Reflections after Three Years of Mixed Marriage,” *The Student Review* 3:17 (25 January 1989): 1, 12.
18. Stewart’s book was given undeserved credibility by an “Historical Supplement,” “The Church and the Negroid People,” written by prestigious Mormon historian William E. Berrett and added to the second edition (1960) and all subsequent printings (1964, 1967,

- 1978). The book was reprinted in 1978 by Horizon Publishers, with the new revelation giving blacks the priesthood simply added—even though the revelation implicitly denied much of the reasoning of the book! John Lewis Lund’s book, *The Church and the Negro*, perhaps the more racist of the two, was privately printed in 1968.
19. Lund, 102.
 20. Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” speech given 18 August 1978, published in *Charge to Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 152.
 21. “The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated text,” ed. Stan Larson, *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 204.
 22. See Bush, 34–37, for a history and critique of the use of the Pearl of Great Price as a rationale for denying blacks the priesthood.
 23. Bruce R McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd edition (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966, rpt. 1979), 616.
 24. “Lectures on Faith,” lecture 3, paragraph 23, in any edition of the Doctrine and Covenants before 1921; also published in N. B. Lundwall, compiler, *A Compilation containing the Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City, n. p., n. d.).
 25. See Margaret Toscano, “The Missing Rib: Queens and Priestesses in the Establishment of Zion,” *Sunstone* 10, no. 7 (July 1985): 19–22; Linda Newell, Gifts of the Spirit: Women’s Share,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women In Historical and Cultural Perspective*, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 111–150; Carol Cornwall Madsen, “Mormon Women and the Temple: Toward a New Understanding,” *Sisters in Spirit*, 80–110; Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “Women in Winter Quarters,” *Sunstone* 8, no. 4 (July-Aug 1983): 11–19; Carol Lynn Pearson, *Daughters of Light* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977); and the special section, “Mormon Women and the Struggle for Definition,” with essays by Lavina Fielding Anderson, Francine Bennion, and Carol Cornwall Madsen, in *Sunstone* 6, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1981): 7–20.
 26. Jan Shipps, “Introduction” to *Sisters in Spirit*, vii–xii; I draw on Shipps’ analysis for much of this paragraph.
 27. See Newell, in *Sisters in Spirit*, 121–38.
 28. Boyd K Packer, Address to the Church Coordinating Committee Meeting, 8 September 1987, copy in Historical Department Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; cited in Lee Copeland, “From Calcutta to Kaysville: Is Righteousness Color-coded?” *Dialogue* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1988), 97.
 29. Pierre Charron, *Of Wisdome*, trans. Samson Lennard (London, 1658); originally published in Paris in 1602.
 30. “On Fidelity, Polygamy, and Celestial Marriage,” *Dialogue* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 138–54.
 31. Armand Mauss, “The Fading of the Pharaoh’s Curse,” *Dialogue* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1981): 33. His essay reporting a study of Mormon racism compared to that of others is “Mormonism and the Negro: Faith, Folklore, and Civil Rights,” *Dialogue* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 19–39.
 32. Howard W Hunter. “All Are Alike Unto God,” *Ensign* 9, no. 6 (June 1979), 72, 74.
 33. Lowell L Bennion, *Understanding the Scriptures* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 35–39.

How to cite this essay: Eugene England, "Are All Alike Unto God?: Prejudice against Blacks and Women in Popular Mormon Theology," *Sunstone* 15, no. 2 (April 1990): 21–31.

The Eugene England Foundation expects website users to follow carefully Fair Use of Copyrighted Materials guidelines. Please contact www.eugeneengland.org website administrators for questions or support, to submit or view thoughtful and responsible comments, and to donate to the nonprofit Eugene England Foundation.