

“No Respector of Persons”: A Mormon Ethics of Diversity

By Eugene England

A call to awareness and repentance for ways in which we Latter-day Saints still have a long way to go in becoming like God in terms of fully accepting “others”—whether their otherness from us is their race, gender, class, politics, or sexual orientation.

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THERE WAS A certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the . . . Italian band.” Luke tells us, in Acts chapter 10, that this Roman was “a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway” (v. 2). An angel of God appeared to him, saying, “Cornelius, . . . thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter.”

God knew this man’s heart, that he was prepared to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ, but because Cornelius was a gentile, Peter, though an apostle of Christ, had to be prepared to accept Cornelius. So God sent Peter a vision in the form of an allegory. Peter saw a great vessel let down from heaven containing “all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat” (vv. 12–13).

But Peter, still an orthodox Jew, recoiled at this great diversity of meats, which included some forbidden by Jewish law: “Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again . . . , What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (vv. 14–15). This vision was repeated three times, and while Peter wondered about its meaning a messenger arrived from Cornelius, inviting Peter to come to his home in Caesarea—and the vision became clear. Peter went and found many of Cornelius’s friends and family gathered to hear him, and he said, “Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean” (v. 28). Cornelius then told him of the angel who had appeared with the instruction that he listen to Peter, and “Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respector of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (vv. 34–35). He then preached the crucified Christ to these gentiles, and they were baptized, the first non-Jews in the universal church.

What Peter perceived, for the first time, is that “God is no respector of persons,” a strange expression, too easily misunderstood. It means, of course, not that God

doesn't respect persons, but that he does not have respect of some over others, that his *respect* is equal, not conditional or partial, and does not vary, as human respect does, according to irrelevant matters: race, gender, creed, intelligence, politics, wealth, sexual orientation. The apostle James, Peter's counselor, makes this clear when he implores early Christians not to forget what Peter has learned—and at the same time implies that some faithful Christians had already forgotten it:

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves? (James 2:1–4)

To have respect of persons is to be partial—in both senses, I believe: to show partiality to others (respecting a part of humanity, not all) and to be only part of one's true self, split apart, less than whole, to lack integrity.

James teaches how serious this is: “If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin.... For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (2:8–9). The scriptures use this expression, “respect” or “regard” of persons, to teach us what God is like and also what he expects of us when we understand who he is and try to be like him. In Deuteronomy we are assured that “the Lord your God . . . regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger.... Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10:17–19). In the Book of Mormon, we are given a picture of a Zion society: “In their prosperous circumstances, they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished; and they did not set their hearts upon riches; therefore they were liberal to all, both young and old, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need” (Alma 1:30). In other words, when converted fully to Christ, these Nephites responded to others liberally, generously, freely—and only in terms of what was relevant, their need, not what was irrelevant, their class or sex or church membership.

The language here echoes the other great New Testament affirmation of this principle, by the brash young apostle Paul, who even after Peter's vision had to convince some of the church leaders that the gospel should go even to the uncircumcised beyond Israel (see Acts 15). Paul writes to the Colossian Saints, who apparently also needed to be taught that the gospel was for everyone, though some were once excluded gentiles themselves: “[You] have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created [you]; Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all” (3:10–11).

Paul used the same language when writing to the Corinthians: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be

bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). And Nephi uses similar language in what, for Mormons, is the most straightforward, challenging, and perhaps still not fully understood expression of God’s nature and expectation concerning “respect of persons”—what is, in fact, the fundamental Mormon source for a theology of human diversity: “The Lord ... doeth that which is good among the children of men; ... and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Ne. 26:33).

This idea, consistent throughout scripture and eminently sensible, seems clear enough: God loves us all equally, treats us all equally and liberally, expects and hopes the same for all of us—and asks, expects, us to do the same for each other. But of course we have not done so. Human history, including religious history, is perhaps most notable for “respect of persons,” for fear and abuse and even terrible violence centered in our rejection of those who are in any way different—our willingness to hurt, exclude, and kill those who are *other*, those not of our color, gender, stratum, beliefs, even those with different culture or customs. Rather than rejoicing in diversity, as God seems to, on the evidence of the marvelous diversity of his creation, the absolute and stunning plenitude of human form and behavior that has flowered from the agency he has given and fostered in us—rather than praising God and reaching out to that ever-renewing richness, we have recoiled in fear and set up walls of protection.

God constancy calls his children to accept, even love, diversity. Luke records Paul’s sermon before the Court of Areopagus on Mars Hill, about the God they were worshipping without understanding at their altar “To an Unknown God” (I use the New English Bible version for great clarity):

He created every race of men of one stock, to inhabit the whole earth’s surface. He fixed the ordered seasons of their history and the limits of their territory. They were to seek God, and, it might be, touch and find him; though indeed he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move, in him we exist; as some of your own poets have said, “We are also his offspring.” As God’s offspring, then, we ought not to suppose that the deity is like an image in gold or silver or stone.... As for the times of ignorance, God has overlooked them; but now he commands mankind, all men everywhere, to repent (17:26–31).

We Mormons are among those God has been patient with in the time of our ignorance but who are now called to repent and join in God’s delight in the diversity of his creation. We are his offspring, part of the plenitude of his creation, and ought not to suppose he is like an idol, partial, loving only those who have made and worshipped him. He created and loves all races—and now commands us to repent. Why? Claiming to be specially chosen children of God, inheritors of his true kingdom, we have denied our parenthood and the universal atonement of our brother, Jesus Christ, by having respect of persons. We have not only been partial in our response to difference, asking some, by virtue only of their class or color or gender,

to “sit thou here in a good place” but others to “sit here under my footstool.” We have also set limits to spiritual opportunities and taught spiritual inferiority, based only on race or gender.

The most obvious example so far, of course, is our denial, from about 1852 to 1978, of priesthood rights and temple blessings to blacks of African descent. Despite the announcement giving blacks the priesthood and the new understanding that action supposedly brought to the church, I find that many Mormons at BYU and in Provo still believe that the *reason* blacks did not receive the priesthood before 1978 was that they were unfaithful in the pre-existence—in other words, that people come color-coded into the world, exhibiting in their very flesh that God has differing opportunities and expectations for them, that he is a “respector of persons.”

A worldwide revolution is taking place—not primarily a religious one, though many religious people are involved, but an essentially political and moral one, uniting in common cause people of many different beliefs and backgrounds. The revolution is away from the violent fear of diversity that has plagued all human history and toward a guarantee of equal rights for all and, even more, a rejoicing in the rich diversity of human life. We as Mormons have unparalleled opportunity to be part of, to benefit from, and to contribute to that revolution, given our theology, our remarkable record of openness in the early church, and the divinely directed and energized reach of our worldwide mission. But we mainly missed participation in the first part of that revolution, the quest for civil rights for American blacks in the 1950s and 1960s, and our fears and uncertainties are thus far keeping many of us from contributing much to the second major phase of that revolution, the quest for equal rights and opportunities for women worldwide.

Why does it matter? After all, the restored church has its own agenda—to take the gospel to the world and save all the dead. We don’t need to be involved in faddish and divisive revolutions for minority rights, do we? Certainly, any quest for rights tends to be self-centered and vindictive, and excesses have occurred and will. Minorities have struggled for redress of past grievances and in the process have sometimes taken vengeance, or have gained power only to use it unrighteously. Increased pride in ethnic or religious identity has sometimes brought, not mutual respect and tolerance that builds community but tribalization, reopening of centuries-old wounds and violent conflict that has destroyed community in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union, in Sri Lanka and Rwanda—and increasingly even in our own country. The revolution is not without its failures and setbacks—about which we should not be surprised.

Abraham Lincoln recognized, in his *Second Inaugural Address* in 1865, “If God wills that [this terrible Civil War] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid,” we could not question God’s justice. We Americans are still paying those costs in the seemingly unbreakable cycles of discrimination, poverty, alienation, and violence in our ghettos which increasingly affect us all. We are paying similar costs for our wholesale exploitation and destruction of Native Americans and the dehumanization through forced assimilation of their descendants. And we have not even begun to recognize the costs we

are paying and yet must pay for thousands of years of suppression of women.

Despite the costs and setbacks, we must work our way through, I believe, towards a world where there is no respect of persons—even if for a while we who have benefitted most from past exploitation, whites and especially males, are treated unfairly. Thoreau wrote in *Civil Disobedience*, “If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself,” and we must bear the costs of returning those planks we and our ancestors have unjustly taken from minorities and women. We must do so not because we are *responsible* for others’ sins or because some abstract justice must be served, but simply because some of the inequities still remain and many of the effects from past sins have been passed on in families and attitudes and laws and customs and continue to cause damage for which we are *response-able*, about which we *can* do something. Mormons must do something about such past and continuing damages precisely in order to achieve our worldwide mission. We cannot succeed fully in taking the healing and unifying gospel to a world that remains divided by race and sex, by any form of fear of the other—we can’t especially if we as Mormons remain divided. I do not believe Christ can come again until, like him, we have no respect of persons, until for us, as well as for our God, all are alike, black and white, male and female.

But my main reason for thinking so is not social, but personal. I believe our individual salvation, at the very deepest level, is tied to this principle. Perhaps the greatest paradigm shift of the Old Testament, one very much related to that which came to Peter in his vision of the diversity of meats God had cleansed, was the understanding, recorded most clearly by the literary prophets like Isaiah and Amos, of what has been called “ethical monotheism.” This is the new idea that the God of Israel, unlike pagan gods, cannot be known directly, through personal piety and sacrifice. We can only know God as part of a triangular relationship that includes all other humans, his other children whom he loves as much as he does us. He speaks clearly through the prophets: “I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings ... I will not accept them... . Take thou away the noise of thy songs.... But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (Amos 5:21–24). “When ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.... put away the evil of your doings ... Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:15–17). In other words, it is *only* through accepting human diversity in unconditional love, as God does, he who is no respector of persons—only through seeking justice and mercy for all his children and taking delight in them all—that we can know and love and please God our eternal Father.

Emmanuel Levinas, the great post-modern Jewish philosopher from Lithuania, who has become an important focus of study and influence for many faculty members at BYU, has developed an extremely persuasive ethical philosophy centered in exploring our encounter with what he calls the “other.” He claims that our experience with otherness, with the beings outside ourselves whose very presence makes ethical demands on us, beginning at least in the womb, is the pre-rational basis of all ethical meaning, in fact, the basis of our ability to experience individuality, to have language, and to think. I believe he is right that the most

fundamental of our life experiences, the confrontations with the others as persons, whether human or divine, make infinite claims on us: We must respond—or try not to respond—to the demand, posed by their very existence, that they be treated as ends in themselves, that we do them good according to their needs and our ability to respond, that we never dehumanize them, never define them (“totalize” them in Levinas’s word) or limit them to a category or a static judgment and thus limit our infinite responsibility to them. This line of thought is, of course, a useful way to recognize we cannot be partial, cannot have respect of persons, without denying our fundamental nature as children of God or trying to deny the most fundamental claim that others, including God, have upon us. If we have respect of persons we injure them, ourselves, and God.

How great is that injury? The following passage 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 respector 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 respector 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 respector 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 respector of persons, and that every man in every nation has an equal privilege.¹

This is a marvelous argument, though we seem to have missed it in popular Mormon thought: All human beings *must* be alike unto God, with no respect of persons, for *him* to be God, and we must understand that that is *true* for the plan of salvation even to be able to *work* for us—for faith unto repentance, the experience of Atonement, and exaltation to be possible. The passage describes precisely how it feels to be a rejected person or woman in a racist or sexist culture, supposedly being punished or limited in some way, purely on the evidence of the bodies they inhabit, for something done by an ancestor or in the pre-existence or inherent in their nature, 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 believing or teaching racist and sexist notions in popular Mormon thought and develop an affirmative theology of diversity: We are denying others—and ourselves—full access to Christ and his plan of redemption. In a culture that believes God is a respector of persons—or simply acts as if he were—neither the victims nor the victimizers can have sufficient faith in God unto salvation.

The root reason for this, I believe, is that the Atonement, as we understand from the Book of Mormon, is only efficacious when we can accept the unconditional love Christ gives us, even in our sins. The chief barrier to that acceptance, according to

Alma, is “the demands of justice”—the felt need to pay debts fully and condemn ourselves when we haven’t, even when that’s impossible. Those demands can only be appeased by Christ’s “plan of mercy,” which offers infinite and unconditional love, not as a *payment* for repentance but as a means to *empower* our repentance; it provides “means unto men that they might have faith unto repentance” (Alma 34:15). But, as King Benjamin makes clear, we tend to remain caught up in justice, in deciding what others “deserve,” and therefore withhold unconditional love and service to them, *not*, as God requires, “administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their *wants*” (Mosiah 4:26; my emphasis). And King Benjamin declares that anyone who has such respect of persons cannot retain “a remission of... sins from day to day” (v. 26)—that is, cannot enjoy the continuing blessings of the Atonement, and “except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God” (v. 18).

With so much at stake—our personal salvation as well as the salvation of the world in preparation for Christ’s coming—it seems to me useful to review the history of diversity as a value and challenge in the restored gospel and church. God revealed to Joseph Smith a remarkable theology of diversity, which seems to have been followed by a sometimes swift, sometimes gradual, decline from that theology in popular Mormon thought and custom, but there are some hopeful signs of recovery in recent years. The Restoration was a stunning rejection of the racism, sexism, and general fear of diversity that had plagued even the great world religions for thousands of years. God revealed to Joseph that most explicit, foundational claim in the Book of Mormon, that “all are alike unto God”; then, through continuing revelation and Joseph’s own developing character and insights, came many remarkable specific advances directly contrary to the views and customs of early nineteenth-century America: Joseph ordained blacks to the priesthood and contemplated their participation in the Nauvoo temple; he opposed slavery in his U.S. presidential campaign of 1844; at a time when wholesale genocide of American Indians was preached and practiced, he declared them to be of the chosen House of Israel and destined to rise to great power in preparation for the Second Coming; he included women as essential to the building of God’s kingdom, organized them and gave them keys of authority after the pattern of the priesthood, included them as equal participants with men in temple ordinances that bestowed upon them saving gifts and healing authority from God, and taught a doctrine of eternal marriage that exalted the equality of men and women to the very highest level, guaranteed in divinity itself. For Joseph Smith Godhood, the ultimate goal of eternal marriage, required a divine union of the two genders in the future, and thus by implication—and according to Eliza R. Smith, Joseph taught it directly—our present God is actually Heavenly Parents.

In the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants the prophet Joseph struck directly at the chief theological error that has led to the suppression of women in Judeo-Christian cultures, the idea that Eve was the first to fall and that all women are subsequently cursed with child-bearing and subservience to their husbands. In 2 Nephi, chapter 2, Nephi makes clear that the fall was necessary and positive, and in Doctrine and Covenants 29:40 God declares it was “Adam,” clearly in context

meaning what President Spencer W. Kimball called “Mr. and Mrs. Adam,” the model first couple *together*, who made that difficult and courageously intelligent choice that cost them dearly but blessed us all.

Later in the Doctrine and Covenants God condemns the false traditions and “creeds of the fathers” in Western thought. Christian creeds all include that false idea about Eve, and we are told in section 123 that it is our “wives and children, who have been made to bow down with grief, sorrow, and care” as a result of such creeds. In the King Follett Discourse, given just before his death, Joseph Smith declares the fundamental truth that explains why God is no respector of persons and we must not be—the infinite God-like potential of *every* mortal: “[God] once was a man like one of us and ... dwelled on an earth ... like us. All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement.”²

With such a clear and dramatically challenging theology of diversity, if we had held true to it, the restored church should by now have radically changed the world—or been destroyed in the attempt. But God has always adjusted his demands to some extent to his people’s ability and circumstances, given us lower laws to live, such as the Old Testament laws of performance and our present law of tithing, schoolmasters to bring us gradually to Christ. By 1852, for inspired cultural and survival reasons, I believe, but not because of metaphysical realities or eternal doctrinal principles, we were denying blacks the priesthood and practicing polygamy openly. By the late nineteenth century, the person still honored as our most liberal high church leader and outstanding intellectual, B. H. Roberts, felt comfortable opposing women’s suffrage and supporting the theories of the time about Negro inferiority.³ In accommodating to American government power in the 1890s in order to survive, we also increasingly accommodated to American culture, including its military violence, its racism, and its sexism. By the early twentieth century polygamy had ended, but by the 1940s women’s roles in healing and blessing ordinances were gradually diminishing, and paradoxically the very autonomy and forceful roles in publishing, politics, and professional life that polygamy had provided some Mormon women were declining and continued to do so almost to the present.

In 1931 Elder Joseph Fielding Smith published, in *The Way to Perfection*, his speculation that the proscription on blacks was reasonably explained by some fault in their pre-existence.⁴ That idea gradually achieved doctrinal force in popular Mormon thought and, combined with unexamined notions from the Book of Mormon and false Christian traditions about God cursing whole races, was generalized to all colored races, including Native Americans and Jews. Skin color was nearly universally seen as an indication of spiritual inheritance—the darker the worse.

By the 1950s, when I was a college student, Utah culture was thoroughly racist and sexist and characterized by popular Mormon notions that uncritically assumed a divine mandate for the culturally assigned roles and limitations for women and colored races. In other words, much Mormon thinking and teaching was founded on the implicit assumption that God is a respector of persons and all are *not* alike unto him. The almost totally Mormon Utah legislature passed stringent laws against inter-racial marriage and persistently killed fair housing and employment bills. Good

Mormons cheerfully canvassed our neighborhood in eastside Salt Lake City with a petition to keep out a Jewish family. And most Mormons began to accept as the natural order the unusual gender role differentiation (perhaps only widespread before in upper-class Victorian society) that the prosperity after World War II made available to middle-class America—the father as boss but at a job in an office all day and the mother totally absorbed in nurturing her children in isolation in a suburban home.

It is easy to see why, despite our radically liberal theology and early history, we have responded very conservatively to the revolution toward racial equality that began in the late 1950s and the revolution toward gender equality that began a decade later. Very few Mormons got involved in the early stages, and the church for a time opposed equal rights laws that might lead to integration and made only lukewarm statements affirming civil rights in 1963 and again in 1969 in its last official statement about blacks not being allowed the priesthood. That policy, of course, tended to make even liberal Mormons defensive and reluctant participants in civil rights efforts, partly, as I learned at Stanford, because our credentials were automatically tarnished and our motives suspect.

All that seemed to change with the announcement in 1978. There was instantaneous churchwide rejoicing (we all remember what we were doing when we heard), quick expansion into areas missionaries had not been allowed to go before, and, with very few exceptions, loving acceptance of the new black converts and of their participation in the temple and in leadership. But we have never officially renounced the false theology that blacks—and by extension other races—are color-coded as to pre-existent righteousness, and some blacks feel their full acceptance as persons and as leaders is still limited.

One black BYU student told me, in 1990, of sitting in a Pearl of Great Price class where someone asked why blacks had once been denied the priesthood and the instructor and class speculated for fifteen minutes on the various sins they might have committed there, with no apparent awareness that he was present—truly “the invisible man.” Those two embarrassing books published in the 1960s, John J. Stewart’s *Mormonism and the Negro* and John Lewis Lund’s *The Church and the Negro*,⁵ have not been repudiated, though both try to explain why blacks are denied the priesthood and in so doing use a temporary church practice to support a thoroughly racist theology and concept of a partial God, a respector of persons. Such teachings directly contradict the central scriptural teaching that all are alike unto God, that he is no respector of persons, and those teachings must be kindly but firmly rebutted in whatever form they appear, with knowledge and authoritative resources. Elder John K. Carmack, in his recent book *Tolerance*,⁶ provides the most explicit renunciation yet by a church leader of the false ideas about the inferiority of non-white races—because of supposed “degeneration” from the “pure” white race of Adam or “choices in the pre-existence”—that developed in the church prior to 1978 and are still published, taught, and believed by some Latter-day Saints: “We do not believe that any nation, race, or culture is a lesser breed or inferior in God’s eyes. Those who believe or teach such doctrine have no authority from either the Lord or his authorized servants.”⁷

Elder Bruce R. McConkie, in a remarkable address given shortly after the 1978 revelation, quoted the passage from 2 Nephi 26:33 about all being alike unto God and said, “Many of us never imagined or supposed that these passages had the extensive and broad meaning that they do have,”⁸ apparently because we had assumed, until that revelation, that there were essential differences, distinctions “unto God,” between the races. Of course, we may still not understand the “extensive and broad meaning” of that scripture as it applies to gender—how all are alike unto God “male and female.”

The most challenging—and meaningful—human diversity is, of course, gender diversity. It directly affects us all, touches our deepest joys and insecurities, determines the very survival of human life, and for Mormons is intimately connected to the meaning of exaltation and the very possibility of Godhood. For most of us, in our highest concept of earthly felicity, in our sweetest imagining of heavenly glory, and in our excited anticipations of what makes Godhood possible and desirable and defines the nature of Godly power and creativity, “Neither is the man without the woman or the woman without the man” (1 Cor. 11:11). The gradual retrenchment from the remarkably liberated gender theology and practices of the early church continued into the 1970s, with the disempowering, under Correlation, of the Relief Society, the ending of its own publications and independent budget, even control over its lesson manuals. The Equal Rights Amendment was defeated, in good part through Mormon opposition. Through determined right-wing influence, Mormon women were marshalled against even the clearly beneficial proposals during the International Women’s Year convention in Utah in 1977, beginning a process of dividing Mormon women and aligning a majority with fundamentalist religions which dogmatically oppose all efforts to improve women’s rights and opportunities that can be labeled feminist. For a while Mormon women were even denied the right to pray in sacrament meeting and then for a while restricted to opening prayers.

Perhaps most indicative of the depth of our present anxieties is the process of fearful escalation at local levels that has followed the admonition by President Gordon B. Hinckley in 1991 not to pray publicly to Mother in Heaven.⁹ I understand that some local leaders are now telling their people they can’t even *talk* about Mother in Heaven, and some students at BYU seem to have accepted that view as orthodox. What is most disturbing about such an unauthorized “improvement” on counsel and the fear it reveals is that the concept of Mother in Heaven is one of the great gifts of the Restoration, a keystone concept in the crucial theology of diversity I have described because it establishes genuine diversity as intrinsic to the very nature of Godhead. It gives the highest possible guarantee for the perfect equality of men and women, showing that there cannot be respect of persons in God because *two* persons dwell there, in perpetual otherness to each other. If we cannot solve our intrinsic aversion to the other, which places those infinite and inescapable demands on us, it isn’t simply that we thus cannot be more *like* God, we cannot be Gods—which requires a perfect union of male and female.

What are we to do then about what seem increasing divisions in the church centered around the efforts of some Mormons to join in the multicultural and feminist revolution? One frequent response is to quote Christ’s command, “I say

unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27), as a way of condemning those whose otherness and interest in diversity seems to bring division. I don't believe, however, that Christ means "Be all alike in the Church or I won't accept you," but rather "Be like me by accepting each other in the Church, even if you're not all alike." He is asking us to be one in our *acceptance* of diversity, not as a *denial* of diversity.

As evidence for this crucial interpretation, I offer the following: Just before making that command, Christ pleads, "Let every man esteem his brother as himself." He then retells a story of a man who has twelve sons and who claims to be no respector of persons, a just man, but nevertheless "saith unto the one son: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there" (D&C 38:25–26)—a clear parallel to the example I cited earlier that the apostle James uses to teach what "respect of persons" looks like (James 2:1–4). Finally, Christ concludes, "This I have given unto you as a parable, and it is even as I am. I say unto you be one." Clearly, to be like Christ rather than the man in the parable, we need to learn to love unconditionally and treat equally all the members of our church and human families, no matter how different they are.

I believe this is our greatest single challenge as Mormons—and as Americans and human beings—right now. We Mormons are experiencing the growing pains inevitable as we become a genuine world religion, soon to be preaching in every nation and with a membership approaching ten million. As a nation we are trying to cope with our increasing racial diversity and the struggle for women's rights. As a human family we are trying to cope with increasingly deadly prejudices, of which neo-Nazism in Germany, the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia, lethal religious intolerance in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, and racial violence in American cities are only the most prominent examples.

There is no room for smugness in this matter. *All* of us are sinners in this regard and need help so that we can be one, even be gratefully accepting of each other, despite our differences, in the Mormon and in the human family. In just the past year I have seen Mormons of all political and intellectual and spiritual varieties guilty of judging and rejecting others on partial and irrelevant grounds. Feminists have been called Nazis—and conservatives have been called Nazis. Conservatives have been stereotyped as stupid, not fit participants in the university community; liberals have been stereotyped as evil, not fit participants in the church community. The very terms "intellectual" and "feminist/" which are traditionally neutral words describing certain people's commitment to rational discourse or gender equality—and thus ought to be terms of honor or at least respect for all Mormons—have been perverted into something like swear words.

At the same time, general authorities have been stereotyped as senile, unresponsive, dishonest, sexist, even diabolically conspiratorial. Letters to the *Deseret News* and *BYU Daily Universe* are a constantly embarrassing revelation of the aggressive prejudice of some Mormons, their frank willingness to be respecters of persons and hunker down in fear of diversity. The challenge to Utah high school graduation prayers a few years ago provoked a huge outpouring of letters condemning the American Civil Liberties Union and asserting the right of the Mormon majority in

Utah to control public religious life; one letter frankly stated, unaware of the irony, “We were once a persecuted minority who were denied religious freedom and driven out of the United States. Now we’re in control, and if minorities don’t like what we do they can leave.” How easily we chosen people forget, when we get political control, that plea of God to us in Deuteronomy, “Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10:19).

A letter last year in the *Deseret News* asking for understanding of those who have same-sex preference and challenging people to find any biblical evidence that God condemns the preference brought a huge number of homophobic letters that confirmed my sense that most Mormons do not make any separation between same-sex *preference* and homosexual *acts*, condemning both as sinful—even though the church position *does* make a clear distinction. A speech given by a visiting educator, Dawn Person, in 1993 at BYU during Black Awareness week, titled “Diversity: The Critical Need to Nurture Pluralism in Higher Education,” was reprinted in May in the *Brigham Young Magazine* for BYU alumni; the author discussed difficulties posed by the increasing diversity in our colleges and the great opportunities this could bring us all if we would learn to solve the resulting problems: “I challenge you to dream a world of higher education that is caring, just, open and honest, disciplined, civil, and supportive of diversity, multicultural issues, and pluralism.” The next issue carried a host of negative letters attacking the article for “advocating a message so opposite to the standards of BYU and its alumni” and attacking the editors for publishing it. A recent letter in the *BYU Daily Universe* defended discrimination as merely part of God-given agency and as having scriptural precedent: “With god’s help, Abraham discriminated by race, religion, sex, and national origin to choose a wife for his son. [The Book of Mormon] describes God creating race to segregate people.”

Such use of authority to justify attitudes and practices that directly contradict our affirmative theology of diversity must be clearly repudiated and thoughtfully rebutted. For instance, we can use recent Book of Mormon scholarship to help us understand the origin of darker-colored Lamanites in intermarriage with pre-Lehite peoples of probably Asiatic origin rather than as a genetic curse by God. We can also look sensibly at the evidence in the scriptures themselves that the racism and sexism in scriptural societies was culturally constructed not divinely directed: The Doctrine and Covenants warns us that God speaks to humans “in their weakness, after the manner of their language” (1:24), and the Book of Mormon preface warns us that any faults in the book “are the mistakes of men; wherefore condemn not the things of God.” An obvious mistake, resulting from the cultural attitudes of the people who wrote the record, is the claim that God punishes sinful people and their descendants by cursing them with darker skins; the Book of Mormon itself directly contradicts that idea by stating not only that all are alike unto God, black and white, but that “every man that is cursed [doth] bring upon himself his own condemnation” (Alma 3:19). Yet I have seen Mormons so resistant to the idea that even prophets can be at times affected by their cultural conditioning that, rather than consider that the writers of sexist or racist passages in the scriptures are reflecting a limited perspective, they would rather attribute racism and sexism in the scriptures to God

himself—making *him* a respector of persons!

We need to look more carefully at what prophets are saying to us in our own time about the need for change in our cultural limitations. Elder Boyd K. Packer, concerning our entry into third-world nations, has exclaimed, "We can't move *there* with all the baggage we produce and carry *here*. We can't move with a 1947 Utah Church!"¹⁰ President Howard W. Hunter 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 respector of persons.¹¹

Contemporary philosophy and literary criticism has thoroughly demonstrated, I believe, the truth of the Lord's statement in the Doctrine and Covenants, section 1, about how all language, even scriptural, is *affected by*, though certainly not *determined by*, the cultural constructs of the speaker. This idea does not undermine prophetic authority but rather establishes clearly the need for continuous revelation and continuous individual spiritual confirmation and renewal in our understanding of prophetic discourse. As part of this we must constantly listen and respond as the prophets change. The "supreme truth" President Hunter evokes, that God "is no respector of persons," must constantly take precedence over earlier statements by seminary teachers, authors of popular books, even by general authorities and the scriptures, that may seem to contradict it.

We need to accept wholeheartedly the enormous, prophesied success of the church worldwide, and change ourselves so we can rejoice in it rather than impede it. Fine models for us are becoming available in both the increasing diversity of the church itself and also in the diverse spokespersons who are telling us their stories and challenging us to move forward with them. Catherine Stokes, whom most Mormons in the Chicago area know well, expressed to a gathering of Mormon women at Nauvoo shortly after the 1978 announcement an insight gained by her own sometimes painful diversity that could help us all: "[When I went to the temple for the first time], I took my blackness with me, and that was part of what I consecrated . . . My blackness is one of the things that the Lord can use if he wants to."¹²

On 26 January 1993, Elder Yoshihiko Kikuchi, our first native Japanese general authority, spoke at BYU's International Week and challenged us:

We now see great turmoil and anger, pain, hunger, suffering, hate, jealousy, and dishonesty in our society, [which] cause us to lose human dignity and values.... We must continue to break down barricades. We must bring down the barriers of cultural misunderstanding and misconception. We must break down the spiritual Berlin walls in us. [To do so] we must understand [that] (1) God made all these nations and is now gathering them under His Wings. (2) The best prescription is to implement the Savior's teachings. (3) The love of

God is already in the souls of the human family.¹³

The best teacher of these truths I know is Chieko Okazaki, the first non-Caucasian member of a church general board and now the first in a general presidency. As you may have noticed in any of her recent Women’s Conference and general conference addresses, she makes diversity a central theme: In her first book, *Lighten Up!*, she begins by announcing,

Diversity is a strength. I attend a lot of meetings where I’m the only woman. And I attend many, many meetings where I’m the only Oriental woman.... Have you ever had the feeling that you’re the odd one, the different one? Maybe even too odd or different for this church? The truth is that you’re not odd—you’re special. When white light falls on a wall, it makes a white wall. But when it passes through a prism, that same light makes a rainbow on the wall. ... [Like God during creation, I say] “Let there be light!” All kinds of light! Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet light. We need our differences.

Sister Okazaki claims her favorite saying is

In principles, great clarity. In practices, great charity.... When it comes to practices, I want kaleidoscopic vision I want the whole world of options to be at our fingertips so that we can consult our needs and wants when we decide how to apply those principles. I want us to make up our own minds, experiment with one form and abandon it without feeling guilty if we find it doesn’t work, listen to what works for other people, find something else.¹⁴

She summarizes, in personal and practical terms, the heart of any theology of diversity:

In Hawaii, I was surrounded from babyhood by differences—in language, in physical appearance, in dress, in economic level, in religion, in traditional men’s and women’s roles, in education, in race, in life-styles, and in customs. I observed differences, but I did not learn to label them as “good” or “bad.”... Being different, I internalized, is all right. Heavenly Father wants differences. He does not make two identical blossoms or two snowflakes that are the same.¹⁵

I thought of these words in March 1993, at the Sunstone Symposium in Washington, D.C., as I listened to a panel of recent converts talk about the difficult new challenges as well as benefits of difference that are coming to the universal church. A young woman told how offensive to the Japanese is our standard Mormon phrase, “I *know* the gospel is true”—too assertive, too prideful; she pled that translation must increasingly recognize such extremely different cultural inheritances. A young Israeli talked of continuing to wear his Jewish skullcap, his yarmulke, for a year after he converted and of attending his family’s prayer ritual for the dead—done for *him* as dead to them while standing fifty feet away, because he was still a Jew in culture and family. One friend tells me how difficult it is for the Finns to understand or live by our concept of “authority,” and another tells me the French have such different ideas about visiting others, about the pace of life and family vacations, etc., that our Utah Mormon ways of doing home teaching and burdening

bishoprics simply must be reconsidered.

I recently heard that one new Mormon branch in India, before sacrament service on Sunday, gathers to chant for half an hour the name of the church in Hindi—as a mantra. As Sister Okazaki points out in her new book, *Cat’s Cradle*,

If you’re a convert in the LDS church, you’re aware of two separate religious cultures, but the gospel culture is the one that will ultimately infuse, replace, and transform every human culture on the earth. Are we trying to move into that gospel culture already, or are we putting our energy into preserving one of these old cultural forms like hierarchy and gender and youth and wealth that will be swept away when the Savior comes again?¹⁶

We are seeing new challenges and new delights—and gradual change, often encouraged by our leaders. In 1979 Elder Carmack, in an article in the *Ensign* entitled “Unity in Diversity,” pled with the Saints not to encourage in any way jokes that demean and belittle others “because of religious, cultural, racial, national, or gender differences. All are alike unto God.” He warned about stereotyping and judging: “Labeling a fellow Church member an intellectual, a less-active member, a feminist, a South African, an Armenian, a Utah Mormon, or a Mexican, for example, seemingly provides an excuse to mistreat or ignore that person.”¹⁷

In October 1993 general conference, Elder Russell M. Ballard announced that in a recent meeting with the presidencies of the women’s auxiliaries he’d been told that “very few women in the church express any interest in wanting to hold the priesthood. But they do want to be heard and valued and want to make meaningful contributions.” He then went on to give specific suggestions about how the councils of the church could improve their work through focussing on people, through free and open discussion, and through wide and responsible participation.

We live in difficult times. Many of us who value diversity, who believe the cause of truth is served by dialogue and the quality of our social and political and ethical life by healthy encounters with the other, have ourselves been excluded—labeled intellectuals, feminists, dissidents, heretics. We must not let these exclusions lead us to lose faith that God is no respector of persons, that he has restored the gospel in part to provide a base and a people to “gather in one” all the lovely diversity—of race and culture and gender and perspective—that he has created and encouraged. We must be part of the gathering—to help it succeed and to save our own souls through the atonement of Christ.

We must not let our resentments about being excluded—or seeing those we love and admire excluded—move us to exclude anyone or to put up walls that will further shut us out. Chieko Okazaki is a great model. She has been excluded often and painfully and bears her witness to us: “Having been excluded ourselves, we’ve learned to take extraordinary measures to include others.... What can you do? If you’re waiting to be included, think about some steps you can take to put yourself at the center of a circle, a circle of inclusion.”¹⁸ We must keep ourselves included, by staying active, serving gently and creatively, seeking out those we offend to apologize and repent if need be, seeking out those who offend us to seek understanding and reconciliation rather than harboring resentments that easily turn into

revenge.

We must act to create circles of inclusion, in our wards, across ward boundaries, throughout the church. Keep this community of independent Mormon thought alive and Christ-centered; lend our voice for peacemaking and humility, for gentleness and meekness and love unfeigned. Write directly to church leaders with our concerns—never criticizing them to others. And also write directly with our love and support and specific thanks: write Bishop Robert Hales and thank him for his acceptance for the church of the thousand white roses sent at general conference in October 1993 as a gesture of reconciliation; write Elder Ballard with thanks for his talk at that same conference on including women’s voices in our church councils; write Sister Okazaki and thank her for her courageous faith in Christ and in God’s love of diversity.

The widespread and thorough discussion, during last year’s “quincentenary,” of the nature and consequences of Columbus’s voyages to America, raised important questions that we must face as Mormons who are now confronting very similar challenges to those Columbus brought the Catholic church: What is the spiritual status of people, especially of other races, who have long “dwelt in darkness,” and what is our responsibility to them and ourselves as we intrude upon them with the version of the gospel of Christ developed in our culture? The Catholic answer was, of course, mixed and in many ways a failure, but Catholic theologians have analyzed that process in ways we can learn from, as they have, as we all now try to do better.

Mormons, of course, agree with Columbus’s own conviction that he was inspired and blessed by God in his voyages; because of him and the colonization that followed the gospel was brought back to Book of Mormon peoples and a way was prepared for the development of the United States, a country sufficiently formed by and respectful of diversity and freedom that the gospel could be restored there and go forth to bless all the world.

But as the revisionist historians of recent years have graphically reminded us, Columbus himself participated in the exploitation and racist violence of the Spanish Conquest he made possible—which was followed by the Portuguese and French and English conquests and participated in by some of our own ancestors. Some Catholics, including Columbus’s editor and biographer and champion Bartolome de Las Casas, as well as many heroic and sometimes martyred priests down to the present, strenuously opposed the violence and racism of the Conquest and tried to develop and promote their understanding that the impact of European civilization on others was justified *only* in bringing a non-intrusive and non-judgmental extension of the gospel of Christ to them. And Catholic theologians like Karl Rahner have tried to describe the gains in possible understanding for all of us—the new paradigms made possible—from the mistakes and new perspectives of this crucial historical experience of proselyting Christian cultures colliding with others.

For instance, Rahner has articulated a way of understanding, given God’s universal love and power, how Christ’s grace must have been operating in non-Christian peoples all along: Christianity cannot “simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian. It would

be wrong to regard the pagan as someone who has not yet been touched in any way by God’s grace and truth.”¹⁹ Rahner also asks us to consider what did and what should happen to Christianity itself as it enters into a genuinely loving encounter with others in another culture. He points out that Catholicism was always a world church “in potency” but in the encounter with the New World brought on by Columbus it came for the first time to act, on a huge scale, like an export firm: it exported an essentially “European religion as a commodity it did not really want to change but sent throughout the world together with the rest of the culture and civilization it considered superior.”²⁰ And as a result it has had to face the mistakes and evil that resulted and try to admit that, in a genuine world church, such cultural imperialism must give way to interaction and reciprocal influences in all the non-essentials.

The restored gospel has given us a crucial additional concept to help us improve on the Catholic experience, as we face our own transition into a world church. Alone among Christians, we understand that God did not first reveal Christ’s identity and saving gospel at the meridian of time but has done so again and again from the very beginning, in dispensation after dispensation in all parts of the world. Indeed in the Book of Mormon the Lord declares, “Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth” (2 Ne. 29:7).

I can only understand that passage as giving even more concrete meaning to Karl Rahner’s sense that Christ’s grace has come to all, that every people has the word of God, much of it in written form, from the Hindu *Baghavad Gita* to the Ogalalla Sioux *Black Elk Speaks*. Part of our mission is to learn from them and delight in the diversity of revelation God has given.

I do delight in that diversity—even while struggling with its challenges and often failing. I confess I experience the greatest challenge to my faith when I consider the enormous variety of races and cultures and people and, caught up in the popular Mormon notion that only those who have known Christ through our particular Western Christian and now American Mormon tradition have been “saved” or even experienced life properly, realize that perhaps less than one in ten of those who have lived have even heard of Christ and only one in a thousand have heard the restored gospel. Then I must consider, bleakly, that God is terribly inefficient and powerless, wasteful of those billions of suffering lives—and that we must expend even more concentrated, even desperate, effort to save a few more before Armageddon.

In saner moments I remember God’s universal love, and I open my imagination to the billions of diverse lives which have experienced that love in many diverse ways and enjoy being part of a missionary effort that will share what God has given them with what God has given us, with the genuine and joyful anticipation that we can *all* be changed and healed by each other and brought back to him.

Finally, as I face the most difficult and delightful form of diversity, that between men and women, I rejoice in what I believe is the greatest challenge facing our church at present—how to translate the assurance that all are alike unto God, male and female, into a theology of gender and church practices that fully reflect that

equality and thus release the enormous spiritual energy and moral impetus that true gender equality and family relationships unfettered by the sinful traditions of the fathers would bring. The most challenging diversity is of course that provided by the partner in marriage, what Michael Novak describes as "seeing myself through the unblinking eyes of an intimate, intelligent other, an honest spouse."²¹ And that I believe is what each of us must work through into genuine equality and delight before we can become as the Gods in the highest degree of celestial joy and creativity. We have not yet developed sufficiently the theology and practices concerning gender that will make that possible, and "all the blessings of the gospel" are therefore not yet equally shared. How that will come about I do not know, and it has apparently become a potentially actionable offense to speculate about it. I value my membership in what I believe is Christ's authorized church, led by his apostles, more than I do my speculations, so I will only voice my abiding faith that genuine equality will come in some form and before too long. God is no respector of persons.

NOTES

1. *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 3, in any edition of the Doctrine and Covenants published before 1921; also in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, eds. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1990).
2. "The King Follett Sermon: A Newly Amalgamated Version," ed. Stan Larson, *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 204.
3. See his inclusion, on page 160 of his *Seventy's Course in Theology, First Year* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1907), of a paragraph from William Benjamin Smith's *The Color Line: A Brief in Behalf of the Unborn*.
4. *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1931), see chaps. 7, 15, and 16, esp. pp. 43–44 and 105–106.
5. Stewart's book was published by Community Press of Orem, Utah, in 1960, 1964, and 1967, and reprinted by Horizon Publishers of Salt Lake City in 1970. Lund's book was privately printed in 1968.
6. John K. Carmack, *Tolerance: Principles, Practices, Obstacles, Limits* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993).
7. *Ibid.*, 64.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, "All Are Alike unto God," speech delivered 18 Aug. 1978, published in *Charge to Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 152.
9. *Ensign* 21 (Nov. 1991): 100.
10. Boyd K. Packer, "Address to the Church Coordinating Committee Meeting," 8 Sept. 1987, copy in library, historical department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, cited in Lee Copeland, "From Calcutta to Kaysville: Is Righteousness Color-coded?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21 (Fall 1988): 97.
11. Howard W. Hunter, "All Are Alike Unto God," *Ensign* 9 June 1979): 72, 74.
12. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "Making the 'Good' Good for Something: A Direction for Mormon Literature," *Mormon letters Annual, 1984* (Salt Lake City: Association for Mormon Letters, 1985), 163.
13. Yoshihiko Kikuchi, "Breaking Barriers," 1–2, speech delivered at Brigham Young University, 26 Jan. 1993, copy in my possession.
14. *Lighten Up!* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 17.

15. Ibid., 122–23.
16. *Cat’s Cradle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 65.
17. Quoted in *ibid.*, 85.
18. Ibid., 68.
19. Karl Rahner, *Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions*, 131.
20. Ibid., 717.
21. Michael Novak, “The Family Out of Favor,” *Harper’s*, April 1976, 42.

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