

# Becoming a World Religion: Blacks, the Poor—All of Us

*By Eugene England*

This essay, originally given as a talk at the 1998 Sunstone West Symposium held in Los Angeles, California, illustrates the ways that Mormons continue to be both racist and classist, and argues that for people to learn to accept the unconditional love God has for us as manifest through the Atonement, we must truly become, like God, “no respecter of persons.”

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FROM THE VERY earliest days in the 1830s, of what they called “the Restoration,” the leaders of a tiny American sect known as Mormonism, though reviled and persecuted and driven, have constantly repeated the astounding claim that their church would not only succeed but would grow into a world religion—in fact, *the* world religion. In 1831, the Lord announced through Joseph Smith that “the keys of the kingdom of God are committed unto man on the earth, and from thence shall the gospel roll forth unto the ends of the earth, as the stone that is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth” (D&C 65:2). Since then, we Latter-day Saints have thought ourselves to be the chosen ones to fulfill that prophecy made first in Daniel’s interpretation of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar. He saw, you remember, a great composite figure representing the kingdoms of the world, from the head of gold to feet and toes of clay, that was smitten by a stone which then “became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth” (Dan. 2:35). We have seen ourselves as that stone growing into a mountain, and we have believed ourselves to be the true inheritors of Christ’s final commission to his disciples, before his ascension, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19).

We have succeeded remarkably. Even through times of the most bitter persecution and suppression—including all-out attacks, both judicial and military, from the U.S. government—the Church has grown steadily and, in the past forty-five years especially, has prospered in numbers and power and increasing recognition. We are now over ten million, doubling about every fifteen years, with easily one of the fastest growth rates for any Church larger than one million, with even non-Mormon sociologists predicting we will pass the two hundred million mark sometime in the middle of the next century. And we are, since the 1990 breakup of the Soviet empire, rapidly fulfilling our commission to reach all nations. In fact, if you count our “non-proselyting” and “humanitarian service” missionaries in places like Vietnam and China and our huge and expanding television and radio resources, we are quite

close to fulfilling that goal we have long dreamed about as a condition for Christ's return to the earth—to preach the gospel to every nation, tongue, and people.

I remember praying in the 1950s—and 1960s and 1970s and 1980s, as our Church leaders regularly exhorted us to—that God would touch the hearts of the leaders of nations to open their doors to the preaching of the gospel. I confess that, concerning Russia and China, I prayed without much faith, mainly in hope for something I thought would only occur far in the future. But God *did* touch hearts and open nations, and there are now branches in Prague and Krakow and Kiev and Novosibirsk and pioneering missionaries gradually venturing out to the east across that huge country of Russia and landing in places like Ulan Bator, Mongolia.

Seventeen years ago, when I helped send food and medicine to suffering people under martial law in Poland, which was then threatened by a Soviet invasion, or even thirteen years ago, when I visited Poland and what was then Leningrad, U.S.S.R., I did not dream that a time would soon come when, as I did last spring, I would be able to speak to a Polish Club here at BYU, which contained many young Polish LDS converts who had already been on missions to Poland and elsewhere. I did not dream that by now I would have welcomed back to campus my dear friends and BYU colleagues, Gary Browning and Thomas Rogers, returning from service as mission presidents in Russia, full of stories of faith and reports of thousands of converts, including expanding branches in the former Leningrad, now again called St. Petersburg. In the Cold War tensions as late as the mid-1980s (remember the Soviets shooting down a Korean airliner and Ronald Reagan's "evil empire"?), I could not have imagined that in 1991 a young pair of Mormon elders would be companions preaching the gospel of peace together in northern England, one the first missionaries called from Russia, a former soldier who had served in Afghanistan, the other a former U.S. cadet at West Point, where he had been trained to fight the Soviets.

In the midst of this growing success, this fulfillment of what may once have seemed like outrageous prophecies, it is time, I believe, to take stock of where we are and where we are going as the stone cut out of the mountain that will fill the earth. It is vital that we not only grow in size but that we also grow in truly becoming the people of God. I will focus on two major challenges we still face and two central theological ideas that have profound implications in our present situation. The challenges are racism and classism, which are continuing and potentially crippling violations of our claim that "all are alike unto God." The theological ideas are, first, the universal fatherhood of God and his unconditional love for all his children, manifested in his grace extended throughout time to all of them, and, second, the related concept of universal salvation, the equal opportunity for *all* God's children, through his grace, especially of course through the universal and infinite atonement of Christ, to gain immortality and eternal life with God. I will address the theological ideas first and then the related social challenges.

#### THE UNIVERSAL FATHERHOOD OF GOD

*God has already revealed himself to all nations and cultures.*

THE CENTRAL IDEA and contribution of Judaism, contained in what for Jews is still their most sacred expression, was the revelation to the prophets that “The Lord our God is One God” over all the earth (Deut. 6:4), with the same concern and expectations for all people. Christ expanded that idea in his claim to be the literal son of God, sent to earth to reveal to us all what God is like and to live and teach and suffer and die in order to bring salvation to all people. He also, in the Christian religion he founded, expanded the Jewish notion of faith *inherited* literally by physical descent from Abraham to faith that must be *chosen* and demonstrated by individual repentance and baptism, and he called his disciples to take that faith to all nations.

That charge from the Savior of the world contains an implicit theological problem for which, I believe, the restored gospel provides the best answer. The charge to take the call to repent and be baptized as the necessary way to salvation into all the world makes us wonder about the millions of God’s children who had not heard that message before Christ came and the billions of those who, despite the best efforts of his disciples, would live and die in the future without hearing it. What are we to make of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God, who by nature is concerned equally about all his children, but whose absolutely crucial message of salvation he can only communicate to a very small fraction of those children? Certainly less than 10 percent of the estimated seventy billion people who have lived on the earth have even *heard* the Christian gospel, perhaps 2 or 3 percent have accepted it, and something like one hundredth of 1 percent have been Latter-day Saints. Even with our rapid growth, the percentages will always be small, when you consider all the billions of lives that have already been lived without any knowledge of the atonement of Jesus Christ or the restoration of the fullness of the gospel through Joseph Smith.

To point out that all those others can have their temple work done for them and hear the gospel in the next life is hardly an adequate response when we continue to put huge and anxious effort into missionary work and imply that it is critical for people to hear and accept the gospel in this life. And that response also fails to address the question of God’s apparent inefficiency: what has a loving God been doing *previously* in people’s lives, if those lives can only be made meaningful through conversion to Christianity? In addition, we must face the fact that Christ’s charge to take his gospel to the world has inspired in some Christians a missionary zeal that has been destructive to the cultures and even lives of non-Christian peoples. The recent, widespread, and thorough discussion during the 1992 “quincentenary” of the nature and consequences of Columbus’s “discovery” of America raised important questions that we Mormons must face as we now confront throughout the world similar challenges to those that the voyage of Columbus brought to 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 own Western, American culture?

The Catholic answer was, of course, mixed and in many ways a failure. But Catholic thinkers like Karl Rahner have tried to describe the increase in understand-

ing for all of us—the new paradigms made possible—from the mistakes made and new perspectives gained from the crucial history of Christian proselyting cultures colliding with very different cultures. 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.”<sup>21</sup> Rahner also asks us to consider what did and what should happen to Christianity itself as it enters into 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 a capitalistic 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.”<sup>22</sup> As a result, it has had to face the mistakes and evil consequences that resulted and try to admit that, in a genuine world church, such cultural imperialism must give way to peaceful interaction and reciprocal influences—at least 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. We have been clearly taught 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 beginning, in dispensation after dispensation and in all parts of the world. Indeed, the Book of Mormon preface declares that “Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, *manifesting Himself unto all nations.*” And early in the book we learn at least one of the ways Christ so manifests himself. The Lord asks Nephi, “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? . . . I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it. . . and the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel . . . and they shall write it; *and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it.*” (2 Ne. 29:7, 12; emphasis added.)

I can only understand those passages as giving even more concrete meaning to Karl Rahner’s claim that Christ’s grace has *already come to all peoples* on the earth. It seems to say that every nation has been given, directly, in their own tongues, some manifestation of Christ through the word of God. It then goes on to promise that “the Jews shall have the words of the Nephites, and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews” (2 Ne. 29:13) and both will have the words of the lost tribes and vice versa—which seems to mean that God’s intent is that all his children will be able, if we try, to share the words given by God to all other peoples. This means to me that we are to look *in every nation* for those scriptures: In India is it the Hindu Baghavat Gita, in China the Tao Te Ching, among the Ogalalla Sioux *Black Elk*

*Speaks?* In Russia is it Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, in England Shakespeare and Milton? And what about Samoa and Switzerland? I don't know, but I feel called by that revelation to Nephi to search with an open mind and heart.

Part of our mission, it seems to me, is to identify and then *learn from* the scriptures that God says have been given “unto all nations.” We are called to learn how to delight in the diversity of revelations and other manifestations of his grace that God has given his children everywhere and to honor and learn from those people he has inspired to minister to and teach those children. On 15 February 1978, the First Presidency under Spencer W Kimball officially declared:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers . . . including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.

The Hebrew prophets prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, who should provide salvation for all mankind who believed in the gospel. Consistent with these truths, we believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come.<sup>3</sup>

I delight in that call to appreciate God's respect for diversity—even while I struggle with its challenges and often fail. I confess I experience the greatest challenge to my faith when I consider the enormous variety of races and cultures and people and, being caught up in the popular Mormon notion that only those who have known Christ through our particular Western Christian and now our American Mormon tradition have been “saved” or even experienced life properly, I realize how few 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 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 who have learned about and experienced that love in many diverse ways. I realize that the mortal experience of those billions is not wasted because they don't have the version of the gospel that I have. They are learning and experiencing vital things, things I will have to learn and experience in the next life. They are engaged in important spiritual growth, even as they are being prepared—just as I am—to eventually hear the fullness of the gospel in this or the next life. I continue to enjoy being part of a missionary effort that will share what God has given us with other nations. I also seek to find and understand what God has already given those in other nations, with the genuine and joyful anticipation that we can *all* be changed and healed by each other and be brought back to him, partly in this life and partly in the next.

The challenge to be open to “anonymous Christians”—whatever they call themselves, whether Buddhists, Muslims, or atheists—in all other cultures is made particularly pointed, I believe, by that statement about Christ “manifesting himself



unto all nations” (see 1 Ne. 13:41). This seems to be a direct witness that Karl Rahner is right in his suggestion that a loving God has *already*, in a great variety of ways, revealed himself through Christ *to all nations and cultures*. How he has done this we can only begin to imagine, but imagine it we must.

#### THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION

*The grace and opportunity from God to be saved is never withdrawn.*

**I**T WAS ON my mission to a very different culture than my own that I first felt the full impact of a *second*, related, theological idea, crucial to our being a world church—the idea that not only does God love all his children equally and send his revelations, both scriptures and manifestations of Jesus Christ, to all of them impartially, but he acts with constant, unending grace and power to *save* all of them, in this life and forever. Just before Christmas, in 1955, my wife, Charlotte, and I were living in Mapusaga, a small village in American Samoa. We had been married two years and had been missionaries to the Polynesians for a year and a half. Charlotte was six months pregnant. We were teaching a woman named Taligu E’e, who had Mormon relatives and who had agreed to meet us each Wednesday afternoon. We would walk to her *fale*—her circular, open, thatch-roofed home—and teach her in broken Samoan one of the lessons from the systematic missionary teaching guide. She would listen politely and impassively, her eyes looking down at the mats we sat on, and after we finished she would serve us the meal she had prepared.

One Wednesday, we taught her the plan of salvation. We told her how we had all chosen to come to earth, with Christ who had offered himself as our Savior, and how important it was to follow him if we knew him. Then we told her how, by doing temple work, we could help those who had died without knowing Christ, but who were being taught about him in the spirit world. Her head came up as I told this story. Timidly she asked about her own ancestors who lived before Christian missionaries came to Samoa. She had been taught by her Christian pastor that those ancestors must be damned because they had not known Christ and were not baptized.

I repeated what I realized right then was indeed the gospel, the “Good News.” I assured her that God loves everyone equally who comes to earth and had provided a way for all, including her ancestors, to come to him. She kept her eyes on my face, and they slowly filled with tears. I sensed that a deep sorrow, a long-standing wound, was being healed in her, and I kept repeating, “*O le Atua, alofa tele ia ‘i latou uma,*” which I hoped conveyed to her, “God really loves them all.” Taligu was baptized the day after we left Samoa, but we have heard that she became the matriarch of a great Church family in Samoa, and we are confident that she did the saving work for her ancestors in the New Zealand Temple, built just a few years after her baptism.

Ten years after teaching Taligu, in the winter of 1965, while I was a graduate student at Stanford, I audited a course in Christian ethics from Robert McAfee Brown, the great Presbyterian theologian. I was in awe of him—his meticulous scholarly writing and precise lecturing, his ecumenical friendships with the likes of

Paul Tillich, Abraham Heschel (whom he brought to class once), and Jacques Maritain (with whom he had served as an observer at Vatican II). Later, when he accepted me as a teaching assistant in his theology and literature class, I learned of his warmth and humor, but sitting in that first class I thought he existed in a realm of pure, emotionless Protestant thought that both impressed and repelled my Mormon sensibility.

So it was a great surprise when one day, while he was talking about God's infinite, unconditional love as a basis for all human ethics, he paused, and sitting on the first row, I could see that there were tears in his eyes. After a few moments, he said, I'm considered a heretic in my own church because I can't accept its teaching that, when we die, we are judged and go to heaven or hell. That's completely inconsistent with the God of perfect love I know. He would *never* stop loving us and trying to save us."

My heart yearned for him, and at that moment a joyful conviction renewed itself in me that God did indeed love us infinitely, and he would indeed never stop loving us and helping us repent—and he would accept our repentance and welcome us into his presence and eternal life *whenever* we chose to turn to him, even after any imagined "final" judgment. That conviction, born of the spirit, has never wavered.

Mormonism is not the same as "universalism"; it does not claim that an all-powerful God can and will save all his children. Rather the restored gospel provides both the incentive and power of God's infinite love and the knowledge that we must and can choose to use that power to do and be better, all according to eternal laws. It teaches clearly the active grace of God that extends into the post-mortal life and eventually provides *all who come to earth* with sufficient knowledge and power to be saved, if not in this life, in the next. And, with Robert McAfee Brown, I believe that the grace and opportunity from God to be saved is never withdrawn by him—though we can eventually, through our own constant refusal, *destroy our own ability* to accept it.

As a missionary I often rejoiced in being able to teach people that God does not separate us, according to our great range of sinfulness and righteousness, at death and then stand at the border between heaven and hell, stomping on the fingers of those reaching up who don't quite qualify. I somewhat smugly taught that there are actually three kingdoms of glory—and of course the sons of perdition. But surely the restored gospel does not merely substitute *four* divisions of judgment for *two*, with God standing at each border stomping on fingers. The Book of Mormon makes clear that the judgment will be simply our complete self-knowledge and our consequent acceptance of the best opportunities and environment for further progress that we are able and willing to accept from a perfectly loving God. It will be as unlimited as our individual potential and as diverse and individually tailored as God's infinite creation—"for as one star differs from another star in glory, even so differs one [person] from another in glory" (D&C 76:98). Yes, I know that section 76 *seems* to describe a condition of three separate glories, with no possible advancement of certain kinds of sinners "worlds without end" (v. 112), but if we remember that this is a vision of one specific time (like a snapshot), it simply means that while those people *remain* sinners they can't advance to the presence of God. Repentance, which

is always acceptable to a perfectly merciful God, would change the picture—just as is allowed by the official Church position on advancement between kingdoms (which is, “We don’t know”).<sup>4</sup>

I feel in the universe a constant and permanent message, expressed by Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse, that “all the minds and spirits God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement.”<sup>5</sup> Some (such as sons of perdition) may eventually stop progressing, limited permanently by what they have chosen to become, that is, beings no longer *willing* to progress, but neither we nor God knows who they are—and so we must, as God does, always treat everyone, including ourselves, as potential gods.

So I rejoice in God’s overflowing grace and permanently offered forgiveness. I rejoice in a universe of plenitude, full of his glory and love. As the earth turns, the dawn comes up constantly for new people, and bright sunsets revolve before us—God’s never-ending show of his grace. The clouds turn with the earth, and rainbows grow up through the rain—God’s never-ending promise of forgiveness. God’s everlasting, unceasing work and glory is to bring to pass our immortality and eternal life.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF RACISM

*The Church’s progress in overcoming racism is primarily due to Blacks inside and outside the Church.*

**N**OW, WITH THESE two glorious principles firmly in mind, let’s turn back to the *challenges* that still face us and see how those principles can help us. We are approaching the twentieth anniversary of the remarkable revelation ending the priesthood denial to black men, which was announced by President Spencer W Kimball on 8 June 1978, and which most of the Saints received with such jubilation that they can remember exactly what they were doing when they got the joyful news. This is a good time to remind ourselves that most Mormons are still in denial about that ban, unwilling to talk in Church settings about it, and that some Mormons still believe that Blacks were cursed by descent from Cain through Ham. Even more believe that Blacks, as well as other non-white people, come color-coded into the world, their lineage and even their class a direct indication of failures in a previous life.

The Book of Mormon, published in 1830 when the Church was organized, announced unequivocally that “black and white . . . all are alike unto God” (2 Ne. 26:33) and that “every” man that is cursed bring[s] upon *himself* his own condemnation” (Alma 3:19; emphasis added). At that time, very few American whites, if any, believed those claims, but Joseph Smith spoke and acted consistently with them until his assassination in 1844. Evidence indicates that he ordained Blacks to the priesthood, that he clearly anticipated sending missionaries to Africa and welcoming Blacks into the Kirtland and Nauvoo temples, that he took a strong stand against slavery from early 1842, especially in his 1844 campaign for the U.S. Presidency (where he proposed compensating all slave-owners over a period of six years), and that he consistently advocated “equal rights” for all Americans, specifically what



he called “national equalization” for freed slaves.

However, Mormon publications equivocated and became racist when the Church came under threat of violence for being “abolitionist” in Missouri in the early 1830s. Many Mormon converts from the South kept their slaves and indeed took them West with them (where Utah became the only western territory that allowed slavery). At least by 1852, Blacks were specifically denied the priesthood and temple blessings. The slaveholders’ theology that claimed Blacks were descended from Cain through Ham and were subject to “natural servitude” was expressed by Mormon leaders, even the liberal B. H. Roberts, and official publications, and indeed from then on Mormons were generally in line with predominant American attitudes and practices concerning race.

In the twentieth century, speculation by Mormons that Blacks were being punished for some sin committed before they came to earth gradually gained in popularity and was extended to other races. When I was growing up in the 1940s and ’50s in Utah, I was a racist in a thoroughly racist society. The predominantly Mormon Utah legislature passed anti-miscegenation laws and consistently killed fair housing laws. Blacks were neither allowed in the Church-owned Hotel Utah nor on Salt Lake’s east bench, where even Japanese-American Chieko Okazaki encountered prejudice and efforts to keep her out and where a good sister in our ward came to our home with a petition to exclude a Jewish family. Hard as it is to even say it now, down into the 1950s you could go to a restaurant named the Coon Chicken Inn and enter through a doorway that was the mouth of a huge, grinning Black man’s head. In the 1960s, as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements gained in strength, there was criticism, both from without and within the Church, of the priesthood ban and racist Mormon teachings, criticism that produced its own apologetic theological response by white Mormon writers. In 1960, John J. Stewart published *Mormonism and the Negro*, and in 1967, John Lewis Lund published *The Church and the Negro*. Both books approvingly reviewed the Cain and Ham theology. They also asserted unequivocally that “the Priesthood . . . is denied to the Negroes because of their behavior in the pre-mortal existence”<sup>6</sup> and not only that, but *all* races and conditions of birth are determined by “conduct in a life before this”<sup>7</sup>—using an analogy with our being “punished” in the life after this according to our conduct now. These books were so popular as to be reprinted, especially Stewart’s, which was reissued in 1964 and 1967 and even published again (by Horizon Publishers) in 1978, *after* the priesthood ban was lifted. Thus, in a tragic case of the tail wagging the dog, a Church *practice* was made the basis of a racist popular *theology*—even though many thought the practice to be historical and sociological in origin and therefore temporary, as it in fact proved ultimately to be: President Kimball told the press after the 1978 revelation that the revelation came at this time because conditions and people have changed. “It’s a different world than it was 20 or 25 years ago. The world is ready for it.”<sup>8</sup>

However, as is too often the case, we Mormons didn’t all follow the prophet; some continued to believe the racist theology, even though the practice that gave rise to it had ended—and even though it contradicted central Mormon doctrinal principles. For instance, the scriptures and common sense suggest clearly that each

of us is punished solely for our own sins, not through lineage, that no one is punished for a sin he or she does not know about and have opportunity to repent of, and that the analogy of being judged as we come into this life just as we will into the next is false because, in fact, as we move from here into the next life we are *not* punished or rewarded by God but simply continue to *be* what we *are* (celestial, telestial, or whatever) and can act and associate accordingly unless and until we change. (In other words, the best way to judge what any person was like in a previous life is, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, by the content of their character, not the color of their skin or the kind of mansion they live in.) However, that false, race-based theology became a basis for perverting more important principles like free agency, even for imagining *God* as a racist—partial, a respecter of persons, punishing his children for lagging in a “lap” of the eternal race with extra handicaps of skin color and poverty in the next.

Of course, there was opposition to that influential popular theology that denied agency and made God into a racist—a sort of Mormon theology of liberation if you will. In 1970, Stephen Taggart published *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins*, which thoroughly discredited the Cain-Ham theology and attempted to show that “God did not place a curse on the negro—. . . his children did.”<sup>9</sup> In 1973, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* published Lester E. Bush's more thorough and reliable study, “Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” with responses by Hugh Nibley and me.<sup>10</sup> Nibley recommended much more detailed study and discussion of the issues as a “prelude” to revelation, and I argued, using the evidence Bush had uncovered, that the ban was indeed a “practice” with no scriptural or doctrinal support (that is, no basis for believing in some kind of ontological difference between races). I suggested that the practice was “inspired” or at least “allowed” by God, but not because he was a racist—rather because we are, especially in America and as an inheritance of slavery, and in such a situation, with most whites simply unwilling to accept Blacks in full fellowship, especially in positions of authority, the priesthood would be tragically *divisive*, not a blessing. We were, I concluded, like the children of Israel in the desert, living, by God's sufferance but to his sorrow, a lower law. I pointed out that the policy did not apply to Asian and Pacific Island blacks, that it was already changing as we became less racist (with light-skinned Blacks of unproven ancestry in Africa and Brazil receiving the priesthood), and I predicted that it would be ended when we were ready to *accept* God's will in a way that would bless all his children, including us whites, whom I saw as being terribly harmed *ourselves*, both morally and spiritually, by the priesthood denial.

The most comprehensive effort in such a Mormon theology of liberation so far is *Neither White nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church*,<sup>11</sup> edited by Armand Mauss and Lester Bush, a fine collection of historical data and analysis concerning the experience of black Mormons. And there have been other resources: Black Mormon voices have themselves been speaking to us. The first were Alan Gerald Cherry's *It's You and Me Lord: My Experience as a Black Mormon*<sup>12</sup> and Mary Frances Sturlaugson's *A Soul So Rebellious*.<sup>13</sup> Both were converts before the priesthood revelation and talk frankly about their resistance to

joining what they saw as a white racist Church and the problems they encountered in the Church, but they also express the mature, even heroic, ability of Black Mormons from that period to separate the truth of the gospel they were convinced of by the Holy Spirit from the deficiencies in a racist Mormon culture. In 1988, I collected many Mormon narratives, including some by Blacks, for my book *Converted to Christ through the Book of Mormon*. These showed that, in addition to the explosive growth in black converts in Africa, similar to that in early Mormonism, these converts were having spiritual experiences and visions similar in power and in content to those of early Mormons. In the early 1990s, Dale LeBaron collected more of such narratives, all from Africa, in *All Are Alike Unto God*<sup>14</sup> and Jessie Embry reported on the extensive LDS Afro-American Oral History Project in *Black Saints in a White Church*.<sup>15</sup> There, through interviews and analysis, she explored in more complexity and range the Black American Mormon experience, including those who joined before the revelation and were embittered by persecution, those who stayed faithful through spiritual conviction, and those who joined after, have stayed faithful, but feel that, because of prejudice, they are not being used in Church leadership.

The same year that Embry's book appeared, Elder Helvecio Martins, of the Seventy, published his *Autobiography*,<sup>16</sup> giving us in moving detail the life of the Black Brazilian who joined the Church in 1972, became a prominent Church leader without priesthood and a friend of President Kimball and eventually a general authority—and is perhaps the one human being most directly responsible for the yearning prayers of President Kimball that led to the priesthood revelation.

Fictional literature about the Black Mormon experience has so far been disappointing in quantity but not in quality. (Outstanding examples are Virginia Sorensen's story "The Ghost"; Karl Keller's essay, "Every Soul Has Its South"; Orson Scott Card's novel, *Prentice Alvin*; and Margaret Blair Young's story, "Outsiders.")<sup>17</sup> In 1995, Scott Livingston's play, *Free at Last!*, which deals very honestly with the experience of a Black coming into the Church and meeting racist Mormons just before the priesthood revelation, was performed at BYU. The largely Black cast decided to have open discussions with the audience after each performance, and those turned into a remarkable form of guerrilla theater, where Mormons talked openly about racism, racist theology, and Black experience in the Church. The white audiences, I believe, craved a cathartic discussion that would liberate us from the suppression we practiced and the guilt we still feel.

It is clear in scripture that a central quality of God is that he is impartial—"no respecter of persons"—and that a chief evidence that one has truly come to Christ (even a *requirement* for fully experiencing the Atonement and being saved, as I will discuss more fully later) is that all economic, class, and racial distinctions are done away. In other words, oppression, including racism, is a major sin, from which we must be saved.

The majority of Mormons were clearly still racists in the 1960s. One of the most humorous if not heart-breaking indications of this was the widespread elation felt by Mormon intellectuals when Mormon scholar Armand Mauss, in 1966, published, in the *Pacific Sociological Review*, a fine comparative study of attitudes toward race

in a variety of Mormon and other Christian congregations.<sup>18</sup> He showed that, despite all the publicity alleging Mormons were more racist because of the priesthood ban, they were in fact actually no more racist than other American Christians! Mauss himself took no comfort in such findings. He had shown that the Church's enemies were wrong in asserting that its policy on the priesthood was causing Mormons to be racists in areas outside the Church, but in a follow-up article in *Dialogue*, he took the lead in demolishing the false theology used to justify the priesthood ban and in encouraging his fellow Mormons to give up their racist folklore.<sup>19</sup>

In the thirty years since then, much progress has been made and some reconciliation has been achieved, in good part because of what Blacks—Mormon and non-Mormon—have done for the Church. We Mormons owe an enormous and as yet unexpressed debt of gratitude to Black people for helping liberate us from false and destructive ideas about race, for helping to save our souls from the sins of racism and oppression, and for making possible the world-wide expansion and growth of the Church that we prize so much. To begin with, the work of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, though they seemed so different, achieved a unified effect in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that changed the world and provided impetus and vision for continual future change. Those movements, I believe, saved America from a violent revolution, gave political and cultural direction to African Americans, and permanently aroused the conscience of many Americans, including Mormons.

#### THE PERSISTENCE OF MORMON RACISM

*“We can't move there with the baggage we are carrying here.”*

**T**HAT SOCIAL AND cultural change in Mormons' views on race made possible the revelation of 1978, and that in turn made possible the explosive growth of Mormonism since, especially in nations of color. It made possible, just last March, the first visit of a Mormon prophet to Black people in Africa and the announcement of a temple to be built in Accra, Ghana. Mormonism recently passed the point where over half its members live outside the United States. In not many years, if present trends continue, over half the Church will be non-white and then, in a few more years, over half will be from oppressed classes throughout the world, from Los Angeles and Chicago ghettos to the slums of Sao Paulo and Calcutta. If scholars' predictions are fulfilled that the Church will reach two hundred million of such mainly colored, mainly oppressed, third-world peoples by the middle of the next century,<sup>20</sup> and if the Church is not just *big* but the true Zion community Joseph Smith envisioned, it will lead people not only to better private morality (freed from drugs and abuse and sexual sin) but also to greater social morality (freed from racism and sexism and economic oppression). If that happens, it will have been made possible in good part by Martin and Malcolm, as well as by Black Mormon heroes like Alan and Mary and Helvecio—and by the thousands of humble souls who were converted by the Spirit and remained true to that testimony despite being denied the priesthood and temple blessings, being told their skin was a sign of spiritual failure and a divine curse, and being treated accordingly.

However, work still needs to be done—perhaps in a “Mormon theology of liberation”—because, although our racist behavior has changed dramatically, the false ideas that were invented to rationalize our earlier racist practices are still with us. In his book, *Tolerance*, published fifteen years after the priesthood revelation, Seventy John K. Carmack still felt it necessary to say, “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.”<sup>21</sup> No wonder Apostle Boyd K. Packer, speaking in 1987 concerning the Church’s entry into third-world nations, exclaimed, “We can’t move *there* with all the baggage we produce and carry *here*! We can’t move with a 1947 Utah Church!”<sup>22</sup>

Sadly, some of that baggage is still with us. I check occasionally in classes at BYU and find that still, twenty years after the revelation, a majority of bright, well-educated Mormon students say they believe that Blacks are descendants of Cain and Ham and thereby cursed and that skin color is an indication of righteousness in the pre-mortal life. They tell me these ideas came from their parents or Seminary and Sunday School teachers, and they have never questioned them. They seem largely untroubled by the implicit contradiction to basic gospel teachings—and seem to have never thought through such obvious rebuttals as these: Then-Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith pointed out, in an interview in 1962, that if Blacks were being denied the priesthood because of the pre-mortal life, a just God would not suddenly start giving it to some. God *has* started giving priesthood to Blacks, so (as I believe President Smith’s great integrity and clear thinking would have led him to recognize) the reason had *not* been the premortal life. As for the idea that black skin comes through a cursed lineage from Ham, besides recognizing how that notion violates all our teachings about moral agency and individual responsibility, we need only remember that Asenath, the wife of Joseph who bore the sons Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 41:45, 50–52), was an Egyptian and that, according to Abraham 1:21–22, Ham married Egyptus and “from this descent sprang *all* the Egyptians.” Thus Joseph Smith (JST, Gen. 50:30) and in fact *all of us* who claim literal descent from Ephraim are also descendants of Ham. (I’ve checked this genealogy with Hugh Nibley, and he says there’s no question about it.)

For my gospel doctrine class, when I taught the great story of Joseph last March, I found a painting in the ward library that shows Joseph greeting his aged father, Jacob, as he comes down with his family to live in Egypt. Joseph is in full Egyptian regalia as Pharaoh’s appointed ruler, and behind him are his family and retainers in their Egyptian dress, while behind Jacob, in simple shepherds’ clothing, are his family, the first Children of Israel. Here we have two great nations—two separate races—coming together, to be literally joined in the children of Joseph down to us in the present in a great manifestation that God has indeed made “of one blood all nations . . . for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17: 26) and that “all are alike” unto him, whether descended from Ham as blacks or as whites.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF CLASSISM

*Any discrimination or failure to aid and free the oppressed interferes directly with the salvation of souls.*



**B**ESIDES RACISM, ANOTHER kind of baggage we must drop is classism and its associated cultural icon, our strange, especially Utah, Mormon drive for wealth and social status as if they were *religious* virtues—what Hugh Nibley calls “successism.” Recently a doctoral student at BYU, John Rector, completed a study of “Wealth, Poverty, and Religiously-Based Attributions” among Utah County Mormons—extensively interviewing Mormons to see if we “believe that material prosperity is a reward for righteousness, and that poverty is due to wickedness.” You guessed it! We do—at least in Utah County. Rector says that one of his motives for conducting such a study is to form a basis for evaluating the psychological and spiritual effects on those who believe such things and on those about whom such things are believed, especially because there is good evidence that people who connect wealth to righteousness “tend to be less sympathetic to the plight of the poor, and [to] be less likely to support social programs aimed to assist the poor.”<sup>23</sup>

Recent studies show that the United States, over the past twenty years, whether led by Democrats or Republicans, has been returning to the huge gap that existed between rich and poor of one hundred years ago. The middle class is decreasing and the very rich and very poor are increasing in percentage. And we Mormons are right there at the national averages, with our billionaires and millionaires and struggling two-job families and desperate single mothers and neglected elderly.

With these timely facts in mind as Mormonism aspires to be a genuine world religion, let’s look at the evidence in our scriptures that Christ came chiefly to liberate the oppressed. Whether we are oppressed or oppressors, we need to focus our religious life on that message. A Mormon “theology of liberation” must begin with Christ’s very first announcement, in Nazareth, of his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; . . . to preach deliverance to the captives, to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18). Mormon scriptures record that whenever a new dispensation of Christ’s gospel opens, the response is a desire by the people who have faith to do away with economic, racial, and class distinctions. In the New Testament, the newly converted faithful “sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (Acts 2:45) and learned that after genuine conversion, “there is neither Jew nor Greek . . . bond nor free . . . male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Modern scripture tells us that the ancient city of Enoch became righteous enough to be taken up into heaven “because they were of one heart and one mind . . . and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). And when Jesus Christ appeared in America after his crucifixion and taught his gospel, the newly converted “had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free” (4 Ne. 1:3).

Exactly the same impulse for liberation and equality moved the new converts to what Joseph Smith called restored Christianity in the 1830s. They learned right away that “black and white, bond and free, male and female . . . all are alike unto God” (2 Ne. 26:33) and that “it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin” (D&C 49:20). The newly converted faithful yearned and tried mightily to live these ideals in the midst of a violently

racist and exploitively capitalistic American society. They practiced the Law of Consecration in Missouri, holding all things in common. They covenanted to share all they had with the poor so they could make the trek West with them, and established fully communitarian United Orders throughout Utah territory. In response to such ideals, the U.S. government nearly destroyed the Church and forced it to submit to Federal power and, beginning in 1890, accommodate to American political and economic practices.

But that Zion ideal remains strong, not only ready to be put into literal large-scale practice in a *Church-directed economy* of equality when the Lord so directs, but constantly reaffirmed as a temple covenant to be practiced *individually* right now. I've known Mormons at all levels of income who have lived modestly, with consciously restrained consumption, and, as their temple covenant of consecration requires, used all the resulting surplus to help others. They understand the clear (and never rescinded) command of the Lord, "In your temporal things you shall be equal, and this not grudgingly, otherwise the abundance of the manifestations of the Spirit shall be withheld" (D&C 70:14; see 78:6). They believe the assurance of the Lord that "the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare," that *force* by him or earthly governments will not bring equality because his children are "agents unto themselves" so it must be done "in [his] own way" (D&C 104:16–17). But these Mormons also accept the way the Lord says he has "decreed to provide" for equal distribution and an end to oppression: "the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low. . . . Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion . . . unto the poor and needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment." (vv. 16–18.) This revelation has never been repealed, and though the institutional Law of Consecration, administered by the Church, is in abeyance, our covenants of consecration, made in the temple, are not—and I suspect that nearly every one of us is in violation to some degree. I am. Often in Church, I hear discussion of this matter, in which the clear, demanding scriptures are read and then someone says, nervously, "But God doesn't care how wealthy we are but how we live," and the discussion quickly ends, often with a palpable sense of relief. That statement about what God cares about is technically true, of course, but it can be and usually is a cop-out. God may not care about how wealthy we are, but he certainly cares how much we consume, how wealthily we live, whether we in fact use all our wealth, beyond our basic needs and those of our family, to serve him and build his kingdom of peace on the earth.

Jesus not only *began* his ministry with a focus on "the poor," he *ended* it with the same focus. In his last sermon to his disciples, he said he would come to judge the world, to divide the "sheep from the goats," and he told them clearly what the criterion of judgment would be. Do you remember what it was? Not whether we've been to the temple or paid our tithing, not even whether we're Mormons or have confessed Christ is our Lord. Surprisingly, and an offense and stumblingblock to many of us, he tells his disciples that his *only* criterion, by which he will separate the good from the evil, the saved from the damned, will be whether we have actually done to the "least" of his brethren what we *think* we would do for him: "I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat . . . I was a stranger, and ye took me in, . . . in prison,

and ye came unto me” (Matt. 25:35–36).

Joseph Smith builds on this crucial understanding, by teaching the *reasons* that classism and racism—i.e., any discrimination or failure to aid and free the oppressed—are not only sinful denials of Christ’s announced mission and damaging to society, but also interfere directly with the salvation of souls, both of the victims and the victimizers. In the third lecture on faith, Joseph Smith teaches that “it is necessary [for all to see] that God is no respecter of persons, for [otherwise] men could not exercise faith in him: because if he were a respecter of person, 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.”<sup>24</sup> This describes exactly how it must feel to be an oppressed person in a racist or sexist culture, supposedly being punished or limited in some way because of the bodies we inhabit, for something done by an ancestor or in the pre-mortal life or inherent in our nature, with no way to repent of that “something” and no certainty about its effects on our future. Joseph continues: “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 every man in every nation has as equal privilege.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, by persisting in oppressive teachings and practices, we are denying others—and ourselves—full access to Christ and his plan of redemption.

The Book of Mormon explains most fully why judgment and partiality to others rejects the process of salvation from sin through the atonement of Christ and denies *ourselves* access to it. The Atonement is an expression of unconditional love from God powerful enough to move us, if we *accept* that love, to repent and be saved. If we are caught up in what the Book of Mormon calls “the demands of justice” (Alma 42:15) in our relations with others—refusing unconditional love for them because they do not *deserve* it—we will refuse that love for ourselves, whom we know in our hearts are *also* not deserving. Even if we focus only on “justice” for the oppressed, we will lose sight of the mercy that makes atonement possible—for others and ourselves. The Book of Mormon teaches us that in order to “retain a remission of [our] sins from day to day” we must be focused on mercy and forgiveness—for others and ourselves (Mosiah 4:26). King Benjamin, 150 years earlier than Jesus, was inspired to use the same phrases as Christ for what we must do specifically: we must be constantly engaged in imparting “our substance to the poor . . . such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants” (Mosiah 4:26). Notice that doesn’t say “according to their *needs*” even that bit of judgment is denied us. Even if we are thinking about what people *need*, we may judge them; we must give them what they *want*. Why? Because though their needs for proper food, clothing, and spiritual relief are important, there is an even more important reason to feed and clothe and visit them. Until we do so, with unconditional, un-judging, even uncalculating love, we cannot invite into our own flawed hearts the unconditional love of Christ—which alone can save us.

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