

Thirty Years After the ‘Long-Promised Day’: Reflections and Expectations

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The announcement of the Revelation on the Priesthood of 1978, which extended the priesthood to all worthy Latter-day Saint men regardless of race, was celebrated as the arrival of a “long-promised day” (Doctrine and Covenants, Official Declaration-2). As I reflect on the upcoming thirtieth anniversary of that revelation, I feel deep gratitude to the Lord for sending me to earth in an age in which I would be allowed to hold the priesthood and work in his vineyard. The blessings and privileges my family and I have enjoyed in the Church in these last three decades have far exceeded any dreams we might have had prior to June of 1978.

The scriptures reveal that one thousand of our years are like one day for the Lord, so I don’t suppose he would care that much about our calendar and changes of years, centuries, and so on. “... all these are one year with God, but not with man.” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:44) But for us these things are important because they provide us with checkpoints for reflection and expression of gratitude for blessings received.

Over the years I have been asked many times to speak publicly about my thoughts on being a Black member of the Church. The first time I spoke publicly about my feelings was 14 years ago in a forum at the BYU campus, just a couple of miles from here. Since then I have spoken from coast to coast—from Boston to San Francisco.

Interestingly, based on my experiences it seems to me that only in the United States there seems to be interest in this subject. As I have traveled abroad in Asian countries and even in my own country, Brazil, I have never been asked to speak on this subject. The one exception happened in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, when during a break in a professional conference three Muslim women approached me and boldly asked: “You are Black and Brazilian. How come you are a Mormon?”

While I have always been grateful to my hosts for the opportunities to speak about my experiences as a member of the Church, I always stress to my audiences that I am not an activist in race relations. Instead, I see myself as just an ordinary member of the Church who in the last 36 years has lived a number of extraordinary experiences.

I reflect on the consequences of the Revelation on the Priesthood of 1978 “wearing two hats,” so to speak—that of a social scientist and of a person of faith. But let me clarify that in my mind I have resolved years ago that my faith will always temper my intellectual curiosity and keep it in check. In that spirit, I believe that the 1978 Revelation brought about major contributions to the Church. In the interest of time, I will limit my remarks to two of those contributions: (1) An enhanced emphasis on doctrinal accuracy; (2) An additional modern standard of faith. And then I will offer my opinion on one of the popular expectations for the future of the Church.

Enhanced Emphasis on Doctrinal Accuracy

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are also “ordinary” members of the societies in which they live, and having a lay clergy the Church does not coach its members about their social, cultural, or political views. The Church teaches the gospel of Jesus Christ as contained in the scriptures and in the words of living prophets, and then allows its members to apply the doctrines of the gospel in their daily lives according to their own choices. Therefore, it is inevitable that at times personal opinions and a few misconceptions or misinterpretations might occur at the local level in our Sunday School classes and so on. For me this is what has happened when it comes to issues of race and ethnicity in the Church.

As a sociologist I would argue that, as systems of belief, religions are not necessarily racist. People carry in their minds cultural traits and shared beliefs of their larger societies. So, if you ever met a Latter-day Saint who was admittedly a racist, that person would have been so not because of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but because of his/her adherence to traditions from the larger society. This would have been so whether in the United States, or in Brazil, or in South Africa, or anywhere else in the world. In fact, racism is not a phenomenon restricted to black-and-white relations, but it also occurs between whites and other whites, such as in the Balkans, and between blacks and other blacks, such as in many troubled tribal relations throughout the African continent.

I see the influence of cultural traits and social norms on religious life as almost unavoidable. Even the Prophet Joseph Smith seemed to acknowledge that possibility in 1835 by stating that “... many, having a zeal not according to knowledge, and not understanding the pure principles of the doctrine of the Church, have, no doubt, in the heat of enthusiasm, taught and said many things which are derogatory to the genuine character and principles of the Church; and for these things we are heartily sorry, and would apologize, if apology would do any good.” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p.80)

From the mid-1800s until early June of 1978 no male member of the Church with Black African ancestry could be ordained to the church’s priesthood. We could never explain the reason for that “priesthood ban,” as it is commonly known. Because of its belief in modern-day revelation, it seems that the Church chose to deal with the priesthood ban by waiting for divine direction, which finally came in 1978. In the meantime members and leaders attempted on their own to find possible reasons for the existence of the ban. Those attempts led to the unofficial popularization and adoption of pre-existing ideas about the Black race well known in other religious traditions for centuries. However, those who chose to adopt those ideas did so in opposition to our scriptural stance on race relations found in the Book of Mormon where Nephi proclaims that “...[God] 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.” (*The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*; 2 Nephi 26:33)

Some argued that there was no preparation among Black Africans, but they said so based on their own opinions, without any evidence, and not in harmony with the revelations of this dispensation, which clearly state that the restored gospel was for all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people—without exception clauses. The revelations given to Joseph Smith and recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants establishing the orders of the priesthood in the modern era are broad

and all-inclusive in scope, meaning that they established no restrictions on which tribes or lineages could hold the priesthood in this last dispensation. Often the language in that book clearly states the scope of those revelations—including those that established the organization of the priesthood—by using terms such as “every man,” or “all men,” or “all the world” (D&C 1:2, 4, 6-7, 20-23, 34-36; 84:45-48)

Therefore, one of the consequences of the 1978 Revelation has been an enhanced emphasis on doctrinal accuracy. This is one of the challenges for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the early 21st century. The Church—or anyone for that matter—has no control over the flow of information in cyberspace. Anyone can become an “informal public affairs officer” by creating web pages and blogs, without any supervision from the Church.

We now understand more than ever the responsibility each member of the Church has to carefully study the scriptures and the words of the currently living prophets, so we can make accurate statements about our beliefs. And notice my emphasis on the “words of the currently living prophets.” It is easy to use wonderful computerized databases to find quotations from the past. But we must check those words against the teachings of the present. It doesn’t matter what Brigham Young, John Taylor, or any other 19th century prophet thought about this or that racial group or nationality. For us all that matters is what the currently living prophets and apostles teach about our status and worth as children of God.

An Additional Modern Standard of Faith

The vitality of Mormonism stems from its extraordinary doctrines, ordinances, and the blessings, privileges and promises contained in the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Underestimating any of those could compromise the life of the Church. Figuratively speaking, it is the sacred grove that attracts lifelong converts, not the pioneer handcart. While the handcart is the symbol of an exodus based on faith, that faith started as result of the heavenly visitation that took place in the sacred grove. The Church is not true because its early members crossed the plains. The Church is true because God spoke from heaven, called a modern-day prophet, and through this prophet restored his gospel and priesthood to the world.

The power of the message and doctrines of the restored gospel can be ascertained in the fact that before June of 1978 people with Black African ancestry who joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were willing to do so even if they could not enjoy its full benefits. Reminiscent of the faithful Canaanite woman mentioned in the New Testament (Matthew 15:22-28) they would rather enjoy “chunks,” if you will, of the true gospel in the Church of Jesus Christ than banquets of incomplete truths elsewhere in the world.

When my parents and I joined the Church in Brazil in 1972, we did so as an act of faith. Some people think that faith and reason do not agree one with another, but looking in retrospect in our case our strong faith led us to see that racial concerns were secondary and temporary. We sincerely believed that if we were faithful, God would have us in a good place in heaven regardless of whether my father and I could hold the priesthood in this life.

The trials of faith faced by Black members prior to 1978 speak volumes about their commitment to the restored gospel, and just as the 19th century LDS pioneers provided a standard of faithful living for future generations by their obedience and sacrifice in crossing the plains and building

communities in a then inhospitable environment, Black converts prior to 1978 added yet another modern standard of faith by joining the true faith even without the enjoyment of its full privileges.

After thirty years this additional standard poses a significant question for all Latter-day Saints: Would we remain faithful if some of the privileges and blessings of our religion were withheld from us for a while? Have we ever doubted the Lord and his promises just because a certain anxiously desired blessing was delayed or temporarily denied?

Some of us desire a temple marriage, but are temporarily unsuccessful in our search for an eternal companion. Others desire children, but are unable to conceive them in this life. Or we desire the fulfillment of a specific promise contained in a patriarchal blessing, but cannot see signs of the day in which that promise will be realized. Or we have been anxiously waiting for an answer to a heartfelt prayer, but receive only heavenly silence for what it feels like a long while. For all these and many others in similar circumstances the question remains: Can you remain faithful and obedient even without the realization of all your expected blessings?

For those in these conditions or similar ones, we remember the word of the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail: “[Peace] be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes.” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:7-8) With faith in the Lord we can triumph over the “foes of our souls,” such as frustration, sadness, embarrassment, impatience, hopelessness, and remain faithful until the Lord manifests his power in our behalf and grants us either the righteous desire of our hearts or another, even greater, blessing.

A Popular Expectation for the Future

Every time there is a vacancy in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles people ask the question—“Will the next Mormon Apostle be someone with Hispanic or Black African ancestry?” It has become customary for reporters to ask whether the next prophet will bring “radical” changes in the composition of the Quorum of the Twelve—by this meaning the calling of men from non-Caucasian races.

Whenever I am asked this question I remind my interlocutors that Apostles are called to represent the Lord before the people, and not the other way around. No single member of the Quorum of the Twelve controls that body’s agenda or perspectives. They form a council which by revelation received the charge that “...every decision made by ... these quorums must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member in each quorum must be agreed to its decisions ...” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:27). The role of those men is to testify of Jesus Christ and teach his gospel to the nations of the world. They’re not set up to represent the demographic makeup of the Church.

For example, the calling of President Dieter Uchtdorf to the Quorum of the Twelve in 2004 did not make the Church’s policies or perspectives become more European (if there is such a thing). Changes in the Church happen because of wisdom and inspiration received in response to the needs of the collective membership of the Church worldwide. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

“This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed.” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p.256)

As a sociologist I see the question as a possible evidence that society in general—both Mormons and others—is ready and willing to accept a non-Caucasian as a religious leader in the Mormon faith. As a Latter-day Saint, I also consider that this is a matter of divine intervention, that God himself chooses whom he wants to serve him in this position of great responsibility. So, we can say that, yes, one day there will be Hispanics, Black Africans, and Asians serving as Apostles in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But at this time we cannot tell when this will happen. And I don’t expect any significant changes in church policy or administration as result solely of the nationality or race of a new apostle. Changes have always occurred and will continue to occur in the Church, but they will come not because of political or cultural pressures. They will come in order to allow our members to better live the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ in their homes and families, and in order to refine and make the Church more efficient in fulfilling its mission of proclaiming the gospel, perfecting individuals, and uniting families as eternal entities.

Conclusion

I love my religion and I have never found in our official doctrine (3 Nephi 11:31-39; Doctrine & Covenants 1:17-26) any evidence of racism. I lived through the last six years of the priesthood ban, and after its lifting I was the first member of my race to serve as a full-time missionary. Now, almost thirty years later I am a high priest and an ordained bishop, and my two sons are also priesthood holders—one also a bishop and the other an elder. My late father, Helvécio Martins, served as a general authority of the Church between 1990 and 1996. He was a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy, and Latter-day Saints throughout the world from that time still remember him speaking in two general conferences of the Church.

As an educator I meet with fellow administrators who prior to 1978 might have espoused speculative ideas supportive of the priesthood ban. Like those Muslim women in Malaysia, others might also ask me: “How come you are a Mormon? How can you associate with these persons?” For me it is a matter of forgiveness, faith in God, and hope of a peaceful future for my children and grandchildren. Nothing good would come to the present if I were to keep reliving events of the past.

That is why I have stated my opinion that this is a time for activity, not for activism in the Church. Daily faithful living of gospel principles is what is going to improve our lives and the quality of our associations with others, regardless of the conditions of the society around us.

This is not a “pie-in-the-sky” religion. Many of the extraordinary blessings, privileges and promises contained in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ can be enjoyed right here, right now. It is interesting that in the Book of Mormon we find references to the Nephites and Lamanites’ concern with the maintenance of “[the] rights and privileges of [their] church ... of their religion ... and of their worship ...” (Alma 2:4; 51:6; 3 Nephi 2:12; brackets added) In a world full of ambiguities, doubts, fears and dangers, it is a great blessing to be able to enjoy in our lives and homes “... the rights of the priesthood [which] are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven ...” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:36; brackets added). These rights enable every member of the Church to approach the

Lord with bold faith, and through reverent obedience receive “...peace in this world and eternal life in the world to come.” (Doctrine and Covenants 59:23)

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