

The Mark of the Curse: Lingering Racism in Mormon Doctrine?

By Keith E. Norman

THE TEACHER OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS for 15-year-olds was fairly new to our ward, so he did not anticipate the danger when he brought up the topic of the Priesthood recently. For lurking within that collection of tranquil and lethargic minds was a young proto-feminist, ready to pounce on his first unwitting profession of patriarchy. The budding liberal was, in fact, my daughter. I am not sure how she became such a radical thinker in the bosom of our conventional Mormon family. My wife was a stay-at-home mother until the kids were all in school, has served as a Relief Society president, and has never burned her bra. For my part, none of the women in my life has ever accused me of being the sensitive, nurturing type. I have consistently resisted becoming a house-husband, even for some brief periods of unemployment. (Okay, I did do the shopping at times, but the kids *hate* it when I buy the food). What's more, I drive a pickup truck.

So how did my daughter—I'll call her "Katy"—come to this heretical state of mind? It seems to me that she has always been tainted with feminist doubts. I can only conclude that it is either a congenital defect or something she picked up in the pre-existence. For as long as I can remember, she has been miffed whenever a Boy Scout camp-out or fathers and sons outing was announced. She could not fathom what was so special about boys that only they could pass the sacrament. She noticed that in almost any class—church or school—more attention would be given to, and more slack cut for, the boys than for the girls. And why were church leaders so insistent that she sacrifice her career aspirations to an early and preferably fertile marriage? She has no intention of giving up her name to some guy just because they might be getting married. And why shouldn't she pray to Heavenly Mother as well as Heavenly Father? For a

while, she did. Maybe she still does, although not openly. Ironically, she is the only one of my children who has ever stood up to bear her testimony in Fast Meeting. I had thought she had weathered the worst of the crisis and was learning to endure, at least, the gender inequality so often flaunted in church.

But on that Sunday, her consciousness rose to a new field of injustice. By the end of the class, she was in tears, feeling she had been ambushed and beaten up. It was not the subordination of women that upset Katy in this discussion. This she knew about and could deal with after her fashion. No, when the unsuspecting teacher was telling them about how all worthy male members could now receive the Priesthood, his focus was on race, not gender. Solemnly he related how, against all expectation, the Lord in 1978 had revealed to the prophet Spencer W. Kimball that black males should no longer be denied ordination on account of their race. Now, I don't believe that this is the first time my daughter had ever heard of this change, but it may be the first time it really struck her. Why was the Priesthood *ever* withheld from anyone because of race, she wondered out loud. How could the true church practice such blatant, racial prejudice?

The teacher, however, was prepared. He explained how the Priesthood had often been restricted to certain groups of people, including at various times only the prophets, Hebrews, Jews, or Levites. During the Dark Ages of the Apostasy, it had been removed altogether from the earth. Of course, it had *never* been available to the unworthy or to women. Katy ignored the foot in his mouth. Yes, but, she insisted, that was back then when the Israelites were the exclusive chosen people. But wasn't the Gospel of Jesus Christ supposed to go out to all nations, and especially when it was restored? Why should we single out blacks to discriminate against?

Ah! the teacher replied, there are good reasons for that, which he proceeded to explain at length. Perhaps he thought of this as a "teaching moment." He reminded them of the war in heaven in the pre-existence, how we all chose up sides, and how some spirits, even though they had voted for Christ's plan against Lucifer, were less valiant in the cosmic struggle than others. Our circumstances and conditions of mortality, he continued, are dependent on our actions and our stage of progression in the pre-existence. This was obviously only just and right. Therefore, we know that those of us in the Lord's church today, whether by birth or by being in a position to hear and willing to accept the missionaries, were those who were valiant and had reached a higher state of progression in the pre-existence. Those who were least valiant in the pre-existence and, presumably, were at the bottom of the class, eternal progression-wise, were not ready to receive the Priesthood, and thus the Lord in his mercy had

decreed they must wait until he declared they were ready, which he did in 1978. How blessed we are to have a living prophet to receive that revelation!

Katy sat stunned, hardly able to process this information. If what she understood her teacher was saying was correct, Mormons officially believed that blacks were inferior to every other race, and especially to Mormons. Her religion was racist. Could this really be true? In desperation she glanced around at her classmates. Surely they would share her shock. To her dismay, they were all smiling and nodding in agreement, apparently well versed in the logic and divine justice of this earthly hierarchy. "But . . . but, how do we *know* this about blacks? And, I mean," she stumbled, "how did we decide whose skin is really black? And how dark did they have to be?"

"Ah, good question," he replied. "Actually, it's based on lineage, descent from Cain. You've heard of the curse of Cain? When Cain killed his brother Abel, the Lord cursed him and his posterity as to the Priesthood. The black skin is really only the mark of the curse. Here, let me read about this to you from *Mormon Doctrine*."

Mormon Doctrine? my daughter wondered. This stuff is in the official book of Mormon doctrine?

The teacher turned to the entry on "Cain" and read as follows:

As a result of his rebellion, Cain was cursed with a dark skin; he became the father of the Negroes, and those spirits who are not worthy to receive the priesthood are born through his lineage.¹

There was a cross reference to "Negroes," which the teacher duly looked up:

In the pre-existent eternity various degrees of valiance and devotion to the truth were exhibited by different groups. . . . Those who were less valiant in the pre-existence and who thereby had certain spiritual restrictions imposed upon them during mortality are known to us as the *Negroes*. . . . Negroes in this life are denied the priesthood; under no circumstances can they hold this delegation of authority from the Almighty (Abr. 1:20-27). . . .

The present status of the Negro rests purely and simply on the foundation of the pre-existence. Along with all races and peoples he is receiving here what he merits as a result of the long pre-mortal probation in the presence of the Lord. . . .

The Negroes are not equal with other races where the receipt of certain spiritual blessings are [*sic*] concerned, particularly the priesthood and the temple blessings that flow therefrom, but this inequality is not of man's origin. It is the Lord's doing. . . .²

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd edition (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 109.

2. *Ibid.*, 526-7.

"So, you see," the teacher smiled, "when you understand the plan of progression, it is obvious that the church is not really racist, despite what outsiders may say. Is that clear to everyone now?"

Alas, the Norman girl's hand was up again. "But you just read, 'the Negroes are not equal to other races.' How is that not racism?"

"As Brother McConkie explains," the long-suffering teacher replied, "this is not man's doing . . ."

"Yeah," Katy interrupted, "he blames it on God. Who is this McConkie guy, anyway?"

The teacher described the late apostle, what an authority he was on the scriptures, and how inspiring his talks and books were. People all over the church benefitted from *Mormon Doctrine*, which was an inspired and invaluable reference tool. He related how the first edition had contained some errors, but, at the request of the First Presidency, had been modified for subsequent editions. His was a second edition copy, he pointed out, so it could be relied upon. Anything objectionable had been removed. This was, in fact, Mormon doctrine.

Unfortunately, my daughter was still having trouble with the association of skin color and cursing by the Lord. However, both the teacher and other class members cited passages from the Book of Mormon, which explicitly state that the Lord cursed the Lamanites with a dark skin. For example:

And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity . . . wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightful, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.³

Further:

And the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression and their rebellion. . . .

And this was done that their seed might be distinguished from the seed of their brethren, that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions which would prove their destruction.

And it came to pass that whosoever did mingle his seed with that of the Lamanites did bring the same curse upon his seed.⁴

"I hope you caught that reason for the curse of a dark skin," the

3. 2 Nephi 5:21.

4. Alma 3:6, 8-9.

teacher noted. "It was to prevent intermarriage between the races, which would likely result in the apostasy of the Nephites. Now listen to this: the curse could be removed." He read:

And it came to pass that those Lamanites who had united with the Nephites were numbered among the Nephites; And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites;⁵

"But couldn't that just be the prejudice of the Nephites who were writing about their enemies?" Katy objected.

"Oh, no, the Book of Mormon is inspired. The Lord would not have allowed his prophets to make such mistakes in writing scriptures." On this point the class was in firm agreement against my daughter. The equation was clear: dark skin = wickedness and divine cursing; white skin = highly favored of the Lord.

Katy was distraught, unable to hold back her tears. "That just can't be right," she protested. Some of the other girls tried to comfort her. Their advice, in line with that of the teacher, was that she should pray about it, so that her mind could be enlightened and she could understand and accept these truths. But she didn't *want* to accept them. Despite the loving arms and concerned words of her classmates, she felt very alone. She realized that she must be very wicked to be resisting the combined testimonies of the scriptures, the express doctrinal pronouncements of a General Authority, her teacher, and her classmates.

A short while later, as Priesthood opening exercises were breaking up, the long-suffering teacher accosted me in the halls, briefly to explain the problem my daughter was having and suggest that I might want to talk to her about it. I'm afraid he was not expecting the reaction he got from me. Let's just say I did not side with the majority in his class.

In reflecting on this incident, I realize that I have been somewhat naive in my assumptions about where the church is on the issue of race. I had supposed that the 1978 revelation on the Priesthood had not only changed our practice, but had moved us beyond the speculative rationalizations we had been repeating to each other about it. But the apparent fact that every other adolescent in our ward freely espouses those same teachings implies that this theoretical racism is what they are being taught in their homes by my peers, their parents. A couple of years earlier, one of the adults I home taught expressed dismay over this very situation: that despite the fact that we would now ordain blacks, the previous policy, combined with our doctrine of the pre-existence, still means we are racist. Just in the past few weeks I had a similar discussion with a

5. 3 Nephi 2:14-15; ct. 1 Nephi 12:23; 2 Nephi 30:6; Jacob 3:8; Mormon 5:15.

fairly well-read adult ward member. She had never heard of any doctrinal correction or re-interpretation on the reason the priesthood had been withheld from blacks.

I do not think my ward is atypical or radically right wing, at least on the Mormon spectrum, a suspicion bolstered by my son, who is currently serving a mission in the bosom of the church—Salt Lake City South. There, he has run into a number of both members and missionaries who share the doctrinal assumptions and understanding my daughter encountered here in the wilds of Ohio. In fact, Jessie Embry cites several black members who reported being taught the Cain/pre-existence rationales even after the church began to ordain blacks.⁶ And a web page entitled “Blacks and the Priesthood” maintained on the internet by an amateur Mormon scholar uses selective quotes from the 19th century to try to establish the priesthood ban’s origin in revelation to Joseph Smith.⁷ I suspect most members assume that the 1978 revelation is similar to the Manifesto: it is a change in practice only, and does not affect the underlying doctrine. So just as we apparently still believe in plural marriage in heaven, we seem bound to accept the ultimate inferiority of the black race. The church’s silence on this issue loudly supports the assumption that the change has been in practice only, not theory.

I believe that, for historical, doctrinal, moral, and practical reasons, the church needs to officially and emphatically repudiate the pre-1978 rationalizations for withholding priesthood ordination from blacks. However, the church recently declined to do just that in response to rumors that we would observe the 20th anniversary of the change by disavowing previous racist explanations of the priesthood ban. The 1978 official declaration, according to President Hinckley, “continues to speak for itself.” Unfortunately, the news story did not include the declaration; rather, the headline included the summary, “racial statements part of doctrine.”⁸ I suppose it is unrealistic to expect a PR-wary bureaucracy to publicly proclaim our past ignorance, but the consequences of not doing so may hurt us more in the long run. Without such a disavowal, not only will the press continue to assume the worst, but our own ill-considered doctrinal speculation will continue to infect our faith with racial prejudice. To overcome this block, we need to re-establish and clarify the principle of *progressive* revelation, as opposed to the notion of prophetic infallibility,

6. Jessie L. Embry, *Black Saints in a White Church* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 75-76.

7. See www.mormonlinks.com. Cf. Alan Cherry and Jessie L. Embry on “Blacks” in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 1, which soft-pedals the issue while implying that any ordination of blacks in the 1830’s was an aberration. See below, pp. 11-13.

8. “Mormon teachings won’t be changed,” by Mike Carter, *Associated Press, Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 19, 1998.

which seems to have become so widely assumed if not precisely articulated. It is time that, at least individually, if not yet as a Church, we repent in our minds and in our hearts of esteeming our brothers and sisters less than ourselves. Otherwise, we can scarcely claim to be disciples of Christ, much less saints.

Our culture places little value on historical studies or understanding. For too many of us, our attitude toward the past is summed up by the dismissive phrase, "You're history!" History is about dead or irrelevant people; history is dead. Except for a few genealogists and Mormon history buffs, most of us in the church are blissfully ignorant of our past outside the anecdotes and panegyrics we encounter in correlated lessons. We have little or no sense of the development of Mormon doctrine and practice or its relationship to the environment in which it grew. Change is controversial and potentially disturbing, particularly when it concerns religious beliefs. As this applies to the racial restrictions on the priesthood, all but a few courageous dissidents assumed that this was taught by Joseph Smith as it was revealed to him. Apparently, most of us still believe that. Fortunately, history decidedly refutes that version.

I remember when I first came home from my mission—it was the late '60s in the full flower of the civil rights ferment—a former companion was telling me about a class he was taking at the Institute at the University of Utah. Lowell Bennion was explaining to them how the ban on priesthood ordination of blacks originated in political and social difficulties faced by the early Mormons, and was not a revealed principle. I was aghast at such impudence and rebuked my wavering friend accordingly. He was obviously on the road to apostasy to entertain such thoughts. And who was this Lowell Bennion character, anyway? I was thankful I would soon be returning to BYU where such heresies were not countenanced.

A few years later Lester Bush's article came out in *Dialogue* laying out the historical evidence point by point with ample documentation.⁹ By now I was in graduate school back east, besieged by activist fellow students, and had moved to a more open-minded or, at least, wishy-washy position. Bush documented Joseph Smith's sanction of the ordination in March, 1836, of Elijah Abel, a free black, to the office of Elder and later in the same year to Seventy. Abel continued to exercise his priesthood even after the church stopped ordaining other blacks.¹⁰ Bush demonstrated that the church's pull-back from extending full fellowship to blacks origi-

9. Lester E. Bush, Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11-68.

10. *Ibid.*, 11. See esp. Newell G. Bringhurst, "Elijah Abel and the Changing Status of Blacks within Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 23-36.

nated as an attempt to defuse the charges of abolitionist sentiment against the Mormons in Missouri by their slave-holding neighbors during the volatile period following the Missouri Compromise of 1820.¹¹

There was no worse charge against someone in that part of antebellum America than that of abolitionism. Mark Twain portrays this ethos in the agonizing guilt of Huck Finn over his failure to turn in his raft-mate Jim, who was attempting to escape from slavery. But when Jim is betrayed by someone else, Huck has to face what he is doing. Realizing he is incapable even of praying because of his sinful compliance in a slave's escape, Huck gives in to his conscience and writes a note to Jim's rightful owner, revealing his whereabouts.

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell.¹²

Unfortunately for Huck's peace of mind, he kept on thinking. After recalling all the good times and troubles they had shared and Jim's gratitude for saving him from capture, he reconsidered the piece of paper he had signed.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again, and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.¹³

Raised in that culture, Huck could not justify abetting Jim's escape from slavery; he knew he was a moral degenerate and a coward for doing so.

To demonstrate that the Mormons were not abolitionist troublemakers and, thus, that they were being unjustly persecuted or threatened,

11. Ibid., 11-22. See also Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: 1979), 48-49, 322.

12. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 316-317.

13. Ibid., 317-8. Cf. Oliver Cowdery's estimation of schemes of emancipation as "folly . . . destructive . . . [and] devilish" in Bush, "Negro Doctrine," 15.

William W. Phelps, the editor of the local Mormon newspaper, declared in 1833 that blacks would not be admitted into the Church, not even free blacks.¹⁴ Later, Joseph Smith himself published the objections to abolitionism, alluding to the biblical curse pronounced on the presumed ancestor of the Negro race: "Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren."¹⁵ In his article Joseph specified that these were "the views and sentiments I believe, as an individual";¹⁶ he did not claim to be speaking as a prophet. His assumptions about blacks carrying a divine curse were common coin in nineteenth-century America and, in fact, extend hundreds of years back in Christian tradition. Only secondarily was the curse on blacks linked to Cain in an interpolation also picked up by Mormons, tracing the lineage of Canaan back to the first murderer through the wife of Ham, one of Noah's three sons who was also the father of Canaan. This latter point is important because, whereas the curse on Cain was ambiguous in the biblical text, that on his supposed descendent Canaan, recorded in Genesis 9:25 (just cited), was specifically understood to doom his posterity to slavery. Defenders of that view could, therefore, declare the enslavement of blacks to be God's will and decree.

In this context, it is striking that during all of this discussion, there was no suggestion that the curse pertained to the priesthood. Many years later Zebedee Coltrin claimed that the prophet had instructed him as early as 1834 not to ordain Negroes as he was preaching to them in the south. But since Coltrin is the same man who ordained Elijah Abel to be a Seventy two years later, this proscription, if genuine, cannot have been generally applicable to the race. It was an expedient to reassure slave owners suspicious of Mormon motives in proselytizing in their midst.¹⁷ In fact, persons of every color were officially invited to worship in the Kirtland Temple in 1836, and later in the Nauvoo Temple.¹⁸

In fact, by the time the church had established itself in Nauvoo, there was no more rhetoric in support of slavery by Joseph Smith or the Mormon press. In 1844 the prophet boasted that there were no slaves in Nauvoo and included in his short-lived presidential campaign a plan for emancipation which was vigorously disseminated by missionaries throughout the country.¹⁹ Bush concludes his review of this era with the statement that:

14. *Evening and Morning Star*, "Extra" [1833], quoted in Bush, "Negro Doctrine," 12.

15. Genesis 9:25. See *Messenger and Advocate*, 2 (April 1836), cited by Bush, "Negro Doctrine," 14.

16. Bush, "Negro Doctrine," 50n21.

17. *Ibid.*, 17. Coltrin made his statement in 1879. See *ibid.*, 59n113.

18. *Ibid.*, 17-18.

19. *Ibid.*, 19-20.

There is no contemporary evidence that the Prophet limited priesthood eligibility because of race or biblical lineage; on the contrary, . . . he allowed a black to be ordained an elder, and later a seventy, in the Melchizedek priesthood.²⁰

Although Joseph Smith can be described as a progressive in the area of race relations,²¹ his survivors were not so liberal. Brigham Young revived the idea that the Hamitic curse justified Negro slavery, and the 1860 census listed Utah as the only western territory with slaves.²² President Young stated privately in 1849 that "the Lord had cursed Cain's seed with blackness and prohibited them from the Priesthood," and published the prohibition in the *Deseret News* in 1852.²³ In that same year, in an address to the Territorial legislature, he declared, "any man having one drop of the seed of [Cain] . . . in him cannot hold the Priesthood, and if no other Prophet ever spake it before I will say it now. . . ." ²⁴ It seems clear from the historical record that it was indeed Brigham Young, in contrast to Joseph Smith, who decreed that blacks were to be categorically excluded from ordination to the priesthood. This was based on the popular view of biblical genealogy, to which Young interpolated his idea that Cain and his posterity were being punished for depriving his brother Abel of the possibility of having *any* descendants.

This punishment of the sons for the sins of the fathers was clearly at odds with the Mormon rejection of original sin on the principle that men should be punished only for their own sins and not for another's transgression. Speculation about a connection of racial restrictions to worthiness in the pre-existence began as early as 1844 with Orson Hyde and was elaborated upon by Orson Pratt in 1853. Initially this was in reference to slavery, not the priesthood.²⁵ The later interpretation came about toward the end of the 19th century by various church authorities, notably George Q. Cannon and B. H. Roberts. Roberts was also apparently the first to cite the Book of Abraham from the Pearl of Great Price:

Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first pa-

20. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

21. In contrast to the general, low opinion of the innate capacity of blacks, the prophet attributed their failings to their enslaved condition. But like most of those in his age who were similarly enlightened, he advocated strict racial segregation at such time as they might be liberated. See *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [hereafter *TPJS*], ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 269-70.

22. Bush, "Negro Doctrine," 25.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 26; cf. 31.

25. *Ibid.*, 27.

triarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father, who blessed him with the blessings of the earth, and with the blessings of wisdom, but cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood. Now, Pharaoh being of that lineage by which he could not have the right of the Priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham, therefore my father was led away by their idolatry.²⁶

This passage is confusing in several ways, not just syntactically. In the initial verse Pharaoh, although righteous, was cursed by Noah "as pertaining to the Priesthood," but in the following verse the priesthood restriction is due to his lineage. Even more striking, there is no mention of race or color here. Bush details a number of other problems in making this the scriptural linchpin of the church's policy. But by the time this citation came into vogue around the turn of the century, the belief that blacks were descended from Cain via the wife of Ham, Noah's son, had become well established and was assumed to be the background for this scriptural passage.²⁷

Additional discussion ensued among church leaders over how much "Negro blood" a person had to have to be considered tainted and how this was to be determined. Eventually the brethren reverted to the opinion of Brigham Young and ruled that "no one known to have in his veins negro blood (it matters not how remote a degree) can either have the priesthood in any degree or the blessings of the Temple of God; no matter how otherwise worthy he may be."²⁸

As President Hinckley pointed out to Mike Wallace, all that is in the past. But it is our past, and it is not a pretty sight. Can anyone seriously deny that we as a church and as a people, however innocent our intentions, have been racist? The real question is: where do we go from here? For it is past time to move on. If we had been listening carefully to our leaders, not to mention the Spirit, we would have long since done so.

Already in 1969, the First Presidency issued a statement that the priesthood restriction concerning blacks was "for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to men."²⁹ In 1978, a few weeks before President Kimball announced the change, a church spokesman declared to the press that "[a]ny reason

26. Abraham 1:26-27.

27. Bush, "Negro Doctrine," 35. Note that Abraham 1:23-27 does *not* establish, as claimed by the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism's* entry on "Blacks," that "the descendants of Cain were to be denied the Priesthood of God." See note 7 above.

28. First Presidency pronouncement, cited in Bush, "Negro Doctrine," 38.

29. Quoted by Embry, "Black Saints," 70. There are several indications that President McKay considered the priesthood ban to be policy, not doctrine, but was unable or unwilling to push his views onto his colleagues in church councils. See Armand Mauss, "The Fading of Pharaoh's Curse," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1981): 11, 32.

given . . . [for priesthood denial] . . . except that it comes from God, is supposition, not doctrine."³⁰

However, the most explicit statement to come from a church leader about the error of our past doctrinal speculations was from Bruce R. McConkie himself. Two months after the announcement of President Kimball that priesthood ordination would henceforth be "without regard for race or color," Elder McConkie spoke to a gathering of Seminary and Institute teachers as follows:

There are statements in our literature by the early brethren which we have interpreted to mean that the Negroes would not receive the priesthood in mortality. I have said the same things. . . . All I can say to that is that it is time disbelieving people repented and got in line and believed in a living, modern prophet. Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world . . . We get our truth and our light line upon line and precept upon precept. We have now had added a new flood of intelligence and light on this particular subject, and it erases all the darkness, and all the views and all the thoughts of the past. They don't matter any more. It doesn't make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before. . . . It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this subject. As to any slivers of light or any particles of darkness of the past, we forget about them.³¹

When Brother McConkie admonished us to *forget everything* that he or any other authority has said on the subject contrary to the new revelation, I think he meant "everything": an unequivocal repudiation of the long history of speculations on race, lineage and the pre-existence. Our new knowledge erases "all the views and all the thoughts of the past."

Unfortunately, this statement has not been widely or officially publicized. Nor did Elder McConkie bother to revise his printed views on "Negroes" in order to correct his own admitted errors on the subject when *Mormon Doctrine* was reprinted in 1979. The book is commonly and disparagingly referred to as "McConkie Doctrine," but it remains oft-cited and popularly authoritative, as my daughter recently discovered. His retraction seems to have died with him. And it is very difficult to document any other statements supporting a non-racist doctrinal revision. I recall reading or hearing early on that President Kimball had counseled members in a stake conference that we should stop speculating about the pre-existent status or earthly curse on blacks, since we now

30. Cited by Mauss, "Fading Curse," 27.

31. Quoted in *ibid.*, 34-35.

knew that they were *only* speculations and that they were in error. But I have been unable to track this down.³²

The church's reticence to speak out in a way that would expose past error is understandable, given our claim to be guided by the Lord through revelation to a living prophet. But we ask too much of this doctrine. We want to be more Catholic than the Papists. Consider the irony: Roman Catholic doctrine proclaims the pope to be infallible, but most Catholics don't really believe it; whereas Mormon doctrine rejects the idea of infallible leaders, but we Mormons refuse to accept that. The Lord's Anointed, we insist, will never lead us astray; and by this we seem to mean that there is no room for learning through their mistakes or expressing flawed personal opinions. To be fair, the Catholics have the disadvantage of a longer history to dampen their zeal regarding their leaders' virtues. With our fresher perspective, we can view our entire history as an unwavering march toward fulfillment and perfection.

Unfortunately, this folk belief does not stand up to scrutiny. The so-called "New Mormon History" has shown our historical progress to have been a complex weaving and tacking, trial and error, that the sanitized official histories obscure. Some examples: the failure of the Missouri prophecies; the devious and free-wheeling beginnings of plural marriage, including pre-Manifesto prophecies that we would never relinquish it, and equally devious post-Manifesto attempts to perpetuate polygamy; the Adam-God doctrine; and, more recently, the largely failed Indian Placement Program and the general disappointment in the Lamanite missions in spite of Book of Mormon prophecies to the contrary.³³

Joseph Smith had to remind his followers that "a prophet was only a prophet when he was acting as such";³⁴ he was obviously not always sure when that was until after the fact. Brigham Young warned that one of his greatest fears was that the Saints would "settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders" without thinking or praying for their own confirmation and understanding.³⁵ Despite our fervent desire for infallible leaders, the Lord has given us human ones, who, although they are undeniably good men and occasionally transcend the usual limitations of the veil over mortality, mostly struggle to cope with ambiguity along with the rest of us. They grow up with cultural biases, and their thinking is structured by

32. But see his condemnation of white superiority in "The Evil of Intolerance," *Improvement Era* (1954), 423.

33. See, e.g., Tona J. Hangen, "A Place to Call Home: Studying the Indian Placement Program," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 71-96.

34. *Documentary History of the Church* 5:215-216. See also *Joseph Smith: Selected Sermons and Writings*, ed. Robert L. Millet (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 22, 24; and *TPJS*, 315.

35. *Journal of Discourses* 9: 150.

human language. When God speaks to them, he must do so "in their weakness, after the manner of their language," as the Doctrine & Covenants tells us.³⁶ We should not be surprised that Joseph Smith, although himself a progressive on race, did not question the American cultural mythology about the descent of Negroes from Cain, or that Brigham Young amplified the curse they supposedly inherited from skin color to exclusion from the priesthood, or that subsequent Mormon leaders elaborated on these themes. But neither should we attribute such bias to God, who has repeatedly insisted on the equality and eternal value of every person in his sight. The truth was there before us; we did not have ears to hear.

Although there are hints of universalism in the Old Testament, for the most part the focus is on Israel as the chosen race. Jesus combated such a birthright mind set in the parable of the Good Samaritan, as well as in his repudiation of the Jewish attitude that they were righteous by virtue of being descended from Abraham.³⁷ But elsewhere Jesus indicated that his mission was limited to the House of Israel,³⁸ and it was not until after his death that Christianity moved decisively beyond racial exclusivism.

The realization that "God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" came as a revelation to Peter, literally and figuratively.³⁹ Even after that experience, Peter struggled to implement the incorporation of Gentiles into the body of Christ. The most radical exponent of universalism, and at times an adversary of Peter on that score, was Paul, who stated emphatically that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."⁴⁰ The Gospel obliterates all such temporal distinctions.

Ironically, it is the Book of Mormon which applies this principle to skin color, already implicit in Paul's statement. The Lord, declares Nephi,

... 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.⁴¹

One could scarcely imagine a more explicit repudiation of racism. But

36. D&C 1:24.

37. Luke 10:25-37; John 10:33-59; Matthew 3:9 (=Luke 3:8).

38. Luke 10:5-6; 15:22-28.

39. Acts 10:34-35; cf. 15:5-11.

40. Galatians 3:28; Romans 10:12. For the dispute with Peter, see Galatians 2, esp. vs. 11-14.

41. 2 Nephi 26:33.

what about all the other passages in the Nephite scripture, which seem so clearly condemnatory with regard to dark-skinned people. Were the Book of Mormon writers racist, as my daughter suggested? There is plenty of evidence to support the charge, and if it is true, they share this sin with the vast majority of the human race. Perhaps we ought to forgive them for it and move on.

But is it possible that we are reading our own racism into the Book of Mormon text? In 1981, the First Presidency changed 1 Nephi 30:6, which had read, "and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a white and delightsome people," so that it now reads "pure and delightsome people." This is in accordance with a correction made for the 2nd edition of the Book of Mormon in 1840, but the change did not make it into the third and subsequent editions. Douglas Campbell recently analyzed this change and the usage of words implying skin color such as "black," "dark," and "white" in the Book of Mormon text. He notes that Lamanite skin is no more black than it is red, as our culture has categorized Native Americans, nor is Caucasian skin actually "white," at least not until it is time to call the undertaker. Campbell concludes that the Nephites used the color white and white skin as a metaphor for purity and righteousness, and black or dark skin as metaphors for depravity. He cites particularly Mormon 9:6: "ye may be found spotless, pure, fair, and white, having been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb."⁴² This symbolism should not be hard for us to grasp, with our baptismal and temple clothes, not to mention the white and black hats for those of us who remember cowboy movies. I believe that when our hearts are purified of racism, we will read the Book of Mormon with non-racist eyes and hearts, despite any remnants of racism that may remain in the text. I am not convinced that Campbell succeeds entirely in exonerating the Nephite prophets, but the 1978 revelation to President Kimball reaffirms that God is not a racist. Any indications to the contrary, whether in scripture or from the pulpit, are, in Book of Mormon terminology, "the mistakes of men."⁴³ Any group which proclaims itself to be a chosen people, set apart and favored of the Lord, faces the temptation to look upon those outside the group as less valued or worthy, and therefore deserving of whatever lower status or ill fortune they are called upon to endure. The rationale for denying blacks the priesthood, particularly with regard to the pre-existence, is a classic example of this tendency. I once had a small taste of what this might be like for them. A few years ago I read a paper at a Sunstone Symposium about the need for some changes in the temple

42. Douglas Campbell, "White' or 'Pure': Five Vignettes," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 119-135.

43. Title page and Mormon 8:12, 17.

ceremony.⁴⁴ I had few illusions about the obscurity and futility of my presentation. Imagine my surprise when I learned that those very changes, along with some others, were being implemented that same weekend. (Naturally, I took this as a confirmation of the inspiration of the Brethren). Shortly thereafter, I, along with several others, was contacted by the national media for comments regarding the changes. I was quoted favorably with respect to what the church had done, as were the others. Eventually, all of us were called in by local authorities for varying degrees of reprimand or discipline. In my case, my bishop, who had read my Sunstone paper before I delivered it, and found nothing objectionable, now informed me that my temple privileges would be revoked for a year, but could be restored after that time if I repented. When I asked him what I needed to repent of, he said he didn't know, but that he would ask the stake president. When he did, he was told only that "the decision has been made; there will be no discussion." I was left to conjecture about what I had done wrong and what repentance was needed.⁴⁵

Now imagine you are a black person converted to the LDS church prior to 1978. You soon learn that the priesthood is absolutely necessary to attain the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom, for which every Latter-day Saint should strive. Then you are told that your skin color indicates that you were born into a lineage which cannot hold the priesthood or receive temple endowments or eternal marriage because of something you either did or failed to do in the pre-existence. Of course, because of the veil you cannot remember in what way you sinned or neglected your duty, nor can anyone else, and there is no revelation to enlighten you on your past failing. The Atonement, which otherwise removes all guilt from every child born into this world up to the age of accountability,⁴⁶ somehow does not fully apply to you. You are anxious to grow and progress, willing to forsake all your sins, but it is impossible for you to repent since you do not even know of what to repent. You are stuck with the consequences indefinitely, and have only the vague prospect that in the Millennium or the next life, after everyone else has had the chance, you might get yours.

Amazingly, a few of those souls endured the worst of that era and remained with us. Thankfully, they did not have to endure to the end in that state of Mormon limbo. But the question remains, why did they have to wait so long? If, as history indicates, the Lord did not dictate the policy

44. A version of the paper was published as "A Kinder, Gentler Mormonism: Moving Beyond the Violence of Our Past," *Sunstone* 14, no. 4 (August 1990): 10-14.

45. See Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 33-34.

46. Moroni 8:11-12.

of withholding the priesthood from blacks, why didn't he inspire the leaders of his church to restore those privileges sooner—say, after the Saints had left Missouri?

I believe the scriptures, mingled again with history, provide the answer. Mormonism subscribes to the principle of continuing and progressive revelation, as stated in the 9th Article of Faith: "We believe all that God . . . does now reveal, and that he will yet reveal many . . . important things. . . ." The Lord unfolds his word to us through his prophets, line upon line and precept upon precept, only as we are able to receive it.⁴⁷ Until recent years, we as a people were not prepared to accept full racial equality. As we have noted, the early Saints, even those sympathetic to abolitionism, shared most of the racial prejudices of their age. Elijah Abel stands out precisely because he was an exception, and not just regarding ordination. If Joseph Smith's views were ahead of his time, they are nevertheless anachronistic, judged by today's standards. And Brigham Young's ideas on race, a considerable step back from his predecessor's, were probably much more representative of the Mormon people as a whole. The Saints, concerned with establishing a civilization in the western wilderness and then surviving the anti-polygamist onslaught, were hardly concerned with pioneering racial egalitarianism. In their isolation, improving race relations was not high on anyone's agenda. Even after Little Rock, we Mormons, at least those of us in Utah, were still a pretty conservative and sheltered lot. I must have been about 12 (in the late '50s) before I saw an actual black person pass through my home town of Lehi. My wife Kerry recalls that her grandmother used to panic whenever she saw a "colored" stroll along her Ogden sidewalk. She had been brought up to think of them as sub-human, if not downright evil.

It was not until the civil rights era, which coincided with the worldwide missionary expansion, that Mormons started to think seriously about the "problem" of blacks and the priesthood. There is no indication that any president of the church before Spencer W. Kimball petitioned the Lord on the issue, although certainly President McKay began to move to a more liberal interpretation of the policy.⁴⁸ As the Lord and experience have told us, we are not likely to receive if we don't ask.⁴⁹ The church was not ready—yet.

My generation, latter-day baby-boomers, grew up with the civil rights movement. For many years we were besieged, but valiantly resisted the logic of critics of the Church's policy on blacks. Finally the protests and boycotts hit BYU sports. *That* got our attention. Our consciousness at last was raised, our consciences pricked. By 1978 we were ready.

47. Isaiah 28:9-10; 2 Nephi 28:30, 29:9; D&C 98:12, 128:21.

48. See Bush, "Negro Doctrine," 45-48.

49. 2 Nephi 32:4.

Every American of my generation remembers vividly two public events: Kennedy's assassination and Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon. Mormons recall a third with equal clarity. I was in the bursar's office at Duke University, explaining why I needed another extension on a bill, when a news bulletin was read matter-of-factly on the radio in the background: the Mormon church would no longer deny priesthood ordination to blacks. No one else in the office raised an eyebrow, but I was speechless with excitement. I rushed out to the car where Kerry was waiting. "You'll never guess what was just on the news," I said. "Think of the most fantastic thing you can imagine."

"Russia just renounced Communism?" she ventured.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "Come on, something at least conceivable."

"The Millennium is here," she joked.

"Close!" I exclaimed. Then she figured it out.

"No!" she said, and she was right. It really *was* supposed to wait for the Second Coming. But then, so was Communism.

I think of the Millennium as a time of universal brother/sisterhood when peace and righteousness will reign, when we will esteem every neighbor as ourselves. It still has not arrived. Nor will it, I am certain, until we repent of our racism and learn to judge others not by the color of their skin, but by their characters. We must get past our myths about ancestry and speculations about pre-earth life to the revealed truths of our spiritual kinship, the worth of souls, and the efficacy of baptism and the Atonement. If there is neither black nor white with the Lord, neither can there be with us. To claim to be his disciples otherwise is hypocrisy; it is *we* who are marked with a curse. Let us turn our hearts to the greater light and knowledge that we have received and forsake the darkness of the past.