

The Fading Curse of Cain: Mormonism in South Africa

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[Author's note: The following essay was written in May 1991, fifteen months after Nelson Mandela walked free after nearly twenty-eight years' imprisonment. His departure from jail accelerated a largely peaceful political revolution that culminated in his election as president in May 1994. It was the first South African election in which all races could participate. But the revolution has not always been painless. Shedding apartheid has been a difficult process, requiring modification of repressive laws and cultivation of new attitudes between brothers and sisters. This essay explores that process of conversion.]

IT TAKES ABOUT AN HOUR TO TRAVEL from the Mormon church in Johannesburg to the one in Soweto. And those sixty minutes present an open window on the world of difference between "black" South Africa and "white" South Africa.

I was in Soweto that Sunday morning attending fast and testimony meeting at the Soweto Branch of the church. I had driven to the place where the meetings are held, in the Dikou Elementary school in Orlando West, one of the many sections or "suburbs" of South Africa's biggest black township. Soweto has a population of somewhere between one and three million Africans, depending on whether you believe the government numbers or the more reliable statistics of market researchers and housing companies.

In fact, Soweto is not so much a township as a giant conglomeration of Black Local Authorities (its name is actually an acronym for South Western Townships, referring to its geographic relationship to the Johan-

nesburg metropolis), each gradually repositioned there after decades of social engineering meant to assure that no white would have to live within walking distance of a black he or she did not employ. Nowadays, each major "white" city in South Africa has an adjoining "black" township, generally separated by several kilometers of industrial "buffer zone."

Soweto is violent even in the best of times: what kind of normal social life can exist in a "city" which began as a "temporary" reserve for migrant laborers who had no right to own property, conduct commerce, organize freely, or petition for redress of community grievances?

But this weekend in May was a time of particular "unrest." The previous Sunday I had been in the township on foot, asking the people I encountered, in the best Zulu-English I could muster, for directions to the local elementary school. At that hour, unknown to me, ten people were killed following the funeral procession for the "mayor" of Diepmeadow (a Soweto township) who had been assassinated a couple of days earlier in an AK-47 ambush. But the only sign of tension or violence possibly caused by this event came when the driver of the minibus "combi" taxi I was taking from Dube to Diepkloof swerved out of his normal route—chattering with passengers in Zulu, several of whom wanted to get out—to avoid coming close to a procession of slogan-chanting and red-bandanna-wearing Inkatha Freedom Party members.

For the last decade, being a town councilor or official employed by the government had not been a safe occupation for black South Africans. Rightly or wrongly, they have been seen as agents of the apartheid state—and all the more contemptible because they were putting a black face on repression initiated and orchestrated by the white state. Along with black policemen and soldiers, they had been among the first victims of violent township protest. Their homes had been burned with Molotov cocktails. They had been subjected to the grisly "necklace"—a brutal punishment in which, in a frenzy of anger and accusations, a tire is placed over the victim's neck, his arms are hacked off, and he is doused with petroleum and burned alive.

The murder of Diepmeadow's "mayor" was significant because of his membership in the Inkatha Freedom Party of Zulu Chief Mangosutho Buthelezi—one of the signs marking the transmutation of the violence in South Africa's black townships from mobs against military police to battles between political factions. Buthelezi's prominence came from his position as chief minister in Kwa-Zulu, a black "homeland" for Zulus in Natal, the southeastern province of the country. Widely regarded as more moderate in his demands on the government of F. W. De Klerk's National Party than Nelson Mandela's African National Congress has been, Buthelezi was pushing to get a larger chair at the negotiating table, and

many said that Inkatha's recruitment drives in traditionally ANC-supporting areas like Soweto were the spark that let the fire fly in the carnage that engulfed most of the townships of the Transvaal Province after August and September 1990.

Despite the gruesome quality and depressing frequency of this violence, it was not so pervasive that it was unavoidable. I had been to Soweto dozens of times: normally I traveled with everyday Sowetans in one of the fleet of mini-bus combi taxis, a newly emerging and frequently used form of black-owned and black-controlled transportation. The only violence I had ever witnessed had been on the part of the South African Defence Force—tear-gassing, chasing after, and then whipping Soweto Day (16 June) protestors with their rhino-hide *sjaamboks*. Moreover, although a white person always attracts attention in the townships, the attention is almost always friendly and solicitous. I have always enjoyed the experience of going there.

So on this fast Sunday I was also the only white in this congregation of my church, a church in which we whites, in the last decade, have counted ourselves lucky if we had at least one black among us. But just as the negative of a photograph contains the same image as the print, so too was this worship service conducted in the same manner, and in exactly the same spirit, as meetings held in my own white-bred ward in suburban Washington, D.C.

In fact, I had something of a feeling of *déjà vu*, cutting out of church after sacrament meeting and Sunday school in the Johannesburg Ward in order to hop over to the Soweto Branch. For a time when I lived in the Virginia suburbs, I would leave my home ward after sacrament meeting so that I could also attend the more diverse Washington II Ward meetings held in the top floor of the National Press Club. (Whereas Washington, D.C., a traditionally "black" city, has "white suburbs, Johannesburg, a traditionally "white" city, has "black" suburbs.)

In fast meeting in Soweto, I was sitting next to Sister Julia Mavimbela, former president of the Relief Society for the branch. When she stood up and bore her testimony in English (I would say that offerings were equally balanced between English, Sotho, Tswana, and Zulu, although the branch presidency presided and conducted in English) I thought of scriptures speaking of love driving out fear: "Be not afraid of sudden fear. For the Lord shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken" (Prov. 3:25-26); "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7); "Wherefore, fear not even unto death, for in this world your joy is not full, but in me your joy is full" (D&C 101:36).

Sister Mavimbela was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ on 28 November 1981, when she was sixty-three years old. Ten years later, she was a bundle of energy, constantly involved in numerous projects to better her family, her community, her people, and her church. Although she didn't know it when she agreed to be baptized by the two white missionaries whom she had met when they were all helping to clean up a boys' club in Soweto, 28 November was the same day her father passed away when she was only four years old.

To Sister Julia (which is what she asked me to call her soon after we met on my first Sunday in Soweto), this "coincidence" is significant because it was a connection with her dead ancestors that sparked her initial interest in the church during one of the visits the missionaries made to her house. In an interview with Brigham Young University Professor of Church History and Doctrine Dale LeBaron, Sister Mavimbela recounted that she reluctantly agreed to let the two white missionaries at the boys' club come visit her at her house.¹ "They came, took seats, said a prayer with me, and explained who they were. Then they started the first lesson—which carried no weight with me. 'I can't be moving from one church corner to another,' I told them.

"They made another appointment and left. What was strange to me is that I just felt they should come, so I let them continue to come.

"On the second visit, they saw a wonderful picture of my wedding, and they asked, 'Who is he?'

"'Oh, he has passed on.'

"'Do you know that you can be baptized for him?'

"Something opened in my mind. 'Take baptism for him? In what way?'

"They explained how.

"I said to them, 'Look here, Elders'—I had started addressing them as Elders—you have startled me. I am a black, and in other churches when you speak about the dead, you get excommunicated. Now you come and tell me about my dead. You've got a different message. Come again.'"

The wonderful picture on the mantle of her small but cramped living room is a black-and-white photograph of a much younger Julia and her husband. He was the founder of the Black-African Chamber of Commerce in Johannesburg and was killed in a car crash in 1955. "It was quite clear that the other man involved in the accident was on my husband's side of the road. He was white. Most of the policemen were white," recounts Sister Mavimbela. But "the police said, 'The careless drivers are the blacks.'"

1. See Dale F. LeBaron, *All Are Alike Unto God: Fascinating Conversion Stories of African Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 146.

It was soon after she joined the church—at a time when the church had very few black members—that the Johannesburg Stake president asked her to give a talk at a special regional conference. “The Lord told me just to tell my people how I had felt when my husband tragically died, and how the laws of my country wouldn’t satisfy me with the truth, because of my color, but how I had since found myself moving to a very happy state of life,” Mavimbela said.

For white South Africans, that turned out to be a pretty bold message, most of whom are not accustomed to letting black South Africans tell them—even with love—how the laws of their country don’t satisfy blacks with the truth, nor with justice. But, in fact, Sister Julia had long been involved in constructive projects to overcome the bitterness and hatred of each other that are very much alive among both white and black South Africans.

Soon after the 1976 riots in Soweto (which began on 16 June after police opened fire on a group of students protesting against their schools’ use of Afrikaans rather than English), Sister Julia founded an organization called Women for Peace, a community service group that worked on local development projects. This led to her involvement in the National Council of Women in South Africa, a multi-racial group that works on gardening, planting trees, improving streets, and upgrading the quality of services in their townships.

The first Sunday that I attended church in Soweto, I took an immediate liking to Sister Mavimbela, formerly president of the branch’s Relief Society. I had read a short article about her in the April 1990 *Ensign* magazine, and in the back of my mind I was keen to meet her and find out more about the kinds of activities in which she has been involved. But I hardly needed to introduce myself before we eagerly took down each other’s phone numbers and contacted each other at least a half-dozen times over the next several days, exchanging ideas and bustling with persons to contact in our respective lines of work. She had worked with numerous national women’s and religious organizations, and invited me to attend a gathering with her in which she addressed a white suburban women’s group about the advantages of herbal gardening, and how various plants can be used both medicinally and in food storage.

The next Sunday I was back in Soweto visiting Sister Mavimbela in her lovely furnished house in Dube on a small but well-tended plot of land (and a huge garden out back) in this older section of Soweto. I saw the wedding photograph hanging in the living room of her cramped living room—I imagine it was in the same place where those Elders first saw it ten years ago. Near it I saw a framed photograph of the Salt Lake temple and a color photograph of Spencer W. Kimball. (Sister Mavimbela says that this photograph occasionally gets confused with the image of

former South African state president P. W. Botha—a man disliked among both blacks and whites—who ruled the country with an iron fist throughout the 1980s.)

I had just signed her visitor's log (which reads like a Who's Who of international Mormondom), and she had just started to show me her scrapbook from the trip she took to America to address a BYU International Women's Conference, when we suddenly heard the music of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The South African Broadcast Corporation, the near-complete television monopoly held under tight government control, had religious broadcasting every Sunday afternoon, and every other week the Mormons were allowed a sliver of time. I must admit that it was emotional to be so far from home and yet so near to Zion. I shed a tear in Julia's "matchbox house" where I, Julia, and four of the children she cared for hummed along to the choir's rendition of "God Be With You Till We Meet Again."

In fact, Zion is growing quite rapidly in South Africa. On that same day of death in South Africa's townships, I witnessed the symbolic death—and rebirth—of six people entering the waters of baptism. Three were in Soweto and three in Johannesburg.

I hadn't anticipated the ones in Soweto. At sacrament meeting, in addition to enjoying the warmth and friendship of the congregation—who kept greeting me, insistently asking if I were a missionary—I learned that there would be a baptismal service at 12:30 p.m.

So I travelled with half the congregation in an over-crowded minibus taxi to the luxurious (by Soweto standards) house of Dolley Henrietta Ndhlovu. Three teen-age boys had committed to be baptized, and when we arrived we went to the garage, where a large cylindrical wire frame held a blue vinyl liner filled with water. The only other white people there (or in the sacrament meeting held previously) were the two assistants to the president of the Johannesburg South Africa Mission. The American baptized the boys and the South African confirmed them members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I was upset that no one from the branch presidency was there, that only a handful of white people came, but it was so powerful to know that the simple things about to take place in this garage were so important—to these boys and to all of us. The new members had heard of the church through a woman named Gladys, a Latter-day Saint who, as I understood her through the translation Sister Julia provided, had been helping out in the choir of one of the Zionist Christian churches and had told them about the Mormon church and its meetings at Dikou Elementary.

Zionist churches are an interesting phenomenon in southern Africa. They combine indigenous beliefs with Christian ones. Whether ancestors are worshiped or not, they do play an important role in the Zionists' reli-

gious identity. Zionists are very visible in South Africa, if for no other reason than the fact that every Saturday and Sunday they walk about the streets and parks of the cities with distinctive blue, white, or green garments, bearing a five-pointed star set against the colored background (different colors represent different churches within the movement) that they wear during the rest of the week.

Zionists tend to be found among the more impoverished and less educated blacks. All of them that I tried to talk to on the streets or in taxis struggled with English, if they spoke it at all. Often they had no church building, so they found an open space in the Sunday afternoon sunshine to serve as their place of worship. Zionists also tend to be very conservative, socially (they don't drink or smoke) as well as politically. They generally stay out of politics completely (certainly they stay out of activist, ANC-oriented politics) but nevertheless gave a standing ovation to then-state president Botha when they invited him to speak at one of their annual Easter conventions. Botha relished the opportunity—and strengthened his opinion that “peace-loving” blacks of South Africa were on his side, no matter how deceptive that conclusion would have been at the time.

Better educated black African Christians often belong to the mainstream religious denominations, the largest of which are the Anglicans, Methodists, and Catholics, each of which makes up about 10 percent of the total population in South Africa. The leadership of these and other well-recognized Christian denominations come together in the South African Council of Churches, an important group that played a major political role during the time in which the state of emergency was in effect (1985-90) because so many *bona fide* political leaders were detained or imprisoned. The mantle of religious authority allowed people like Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu, Methodist minister Frank Chikane, and Dutch Reformed Church presbyter Beyers Naude (an Afrikaner who had broken ranks with the majority of his people in the 1960s) to speak freely without much fear of political persecution. Even so, prior to his elevation to head the SACC, Chikane had been brutally detained, and Naude had been a “banned person”—unable to speak in public, write for publication, or even meet with more than one person at a time in his own home—until 1984. By virtue of winning the Nobel Peace Prize in that same year, Tutu became almost totally immune to government pressure. His lionization by the international media made it possible for him, almost single-handedly, to lead the campaign for economic sanctions against South Africa—which left many white *and* black Anglicans severely disgruntled—while the government could do nothing to silence him.

Although these mainstream religious denominations—whether led

by blacks or whites—may have strong political and social commitments against apartheid, they shun all talk about incorporating indigenous beliefs into their worship. Sister Julia—who had been both Baptist and Methodist prior to joining the church—knew that talk about one’s genealogy was forbidden in these churches lest it be taken as ancestor-worship. In an article written more ten years ago on “Mormonism in Black Africa,”² Newell G. Bringhurst described some of the beliefs and practices in Mormonism that appeal to residents of Africa: belief in a plurality of Gods, pre-existence, eternal progression, apocalyptic millennialism, the idea of a church led by a living prophet, the ability to perform sacred ordinances for one’s dead ancestors, and an emphasis on the virtues of a strong family. “Since many of these Mormon concepts are similar to those found in traditional indigenous African cults and in independent Christian denominations, there is a tendency for isolated African Mormons to deviate from accepted Mormon doctrines and modes of worship and lapse into African ones,” Bringhurst wrote, speaking particularly about isolated areas in Nigeria and Ghana.

In South Africa, however, black Latter-day Saints are likely to have come from a thoroughly westernized background, no matter what form of Christianity they practiced before they joined the church. And they are overwhelmingly likely to have been Christians of another sort before becoming Mormon. In his interviews with 400 African Latter-day Saints, Dale LeBaron found that over 390 had adopted some form of Christianity before accepting Mormonism. Moreover, even if African members were inclined to “lapse into African modes of worship,” they currently exist in an integrated church structure in which they are the minority—and in which they are happy to be equal fellow-citizens in the household of God.

In spite of apartheid, South Africa in the past fifteen years has become one of the world’s premier multi-ethnic societies. Urbanization of the workforce has brought integration to the economy and is currently bringing it to other areas of society: housing, education, and recreation. Blacks and whites work side by side. Although most blacks are at the bottom of the ladder and most whites at the top, that too is changing as more blacks matriculate from high schools and go on to enter universities and the work force. Representative of this type of well-educated South African is another young man I met at that baptismal service in Soweto.

Between the baptism and confirmation of the three boys, the missionaries asked Ambrose Nkeske to bear his testimony. Brother Ambrose is a well-dressed eighteen-year-old who could easily fit in at any suburban American high school or college. In fact, he attends Pace College, the only

2. See Newell G. Bringhurst, “Mormonism in Black Africa,” *Sunstone*, May/June 1981.

private school inside Soweto. I had visited Pace before and was acquainted with Ambrose's English teacher. Ambrose has been adopted by Sister Dolley Ndhlovu, a good friend of Sister Julia who accompanied her on her trip to Salt Lake City. It was through Dolley that Ambrose heard about the church and became a member almost two years ago. He is finishing Standard Eight (equivalent to the tenth grade in the U.S.). His goals are to go on a mission after his "matric" year and then attend college at BYU. In this respect, he's like many young white Mormons I met that May evening at another baptismal service in Johannesburg.

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Among both whites and blacks, South Africans have a deep and abiding love-hate relationship with the United States. "Europeans" (a euphemism for whites) look at the wide open spaces in their country and see the mythic American frontier. "Africans" look to black culture in America and see jazz, the civil rights movement, the legal and political equality of a people who suffered under a legacy of slavery and exploitation.

This love affair turns sour, however, when the United States starts to intervene in South African affairs. When Republican administrations under U.S. presidents Nixon and Ford provided assistance and advice to the South African government in some of the darkest days of apartheid, America's credibility rating dropped in the eyes of anti-apartheid leaders, who increasingly started attacking American "imperialism." On the other hand, when the Democratic-controlled U.S. Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986—a blunt instrument that severely curtailed trade between the two countries—white business leaders thought that America had lost any standing it had to arbitrate the South African quagmire.

Naturally, there are differences between the history and culture of the two countries, but the analogy between America and South Africa can shed light on very diverse subjects—from race relations to religion.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Mormonism to the outside world is the Book of Mormon. Brigham Young or polygamy or the Word of Wisdom may be more widely present in folk knowledge, but an acquaintance with the Book of Mormon confronts the reader with two compelling facts about the American continent: it is another place where Christ visited and lingered for a season—the place where Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built. Second, the Book of Mormon explains that native Americans are of the House of Israel—a Hebraic lineage to whom the word of God must be brought through missionary work.

When I told this story to James Dryja, a friend active in the

anti-apartheid movement, he was impressed by the book's apparently enlightened view toward native Americans. I added that for many years this positive view about the origins of one group of non-Europeans was demeaned by a different view about the origins of another group of non-Europeans, the Africans.

Just as this favorable view towards American Indians had some bearing on the strong presence of missionaries and the rapid growth of the church in South America, so too had the pre-1978 prohibition preventing blacks from receiving the priesthood forced church leaders to urge patience upon those in black African countries who had heard about the Book of Mormon and pleaded with the church to send missionaries. For many years, to baptize an African was to mark him as a second-class citizen in the Kingdom of God, unworthy, for whatever reason, to receive all of the Father's blessings. But as hard to bear as this condition must have been for African Mormons in countries like Ghana and Nigeria who had come into contact with the restored Church of Jesus Christ, at least it did not coincide with—and give implicit support to—a system of social and political organization based upon complete separation of the races.

Moreover, while American or European blacks were at least allowed the opportunity of baptism during this time period, in South Africa blacks had to wait. Moses Mahlangu, the Elder's quorum president when I visited Soweto, learned about the Book of Mormon in 1966, fourteen years before he was allowed to be baptized.³ He told me that during much of this time he showed up at the church building in Johannesburg every Sunday—rain or shine—and would have to wait outside. After meeting with the mission president, he was told that attending the same church as whites would be a violation of civil law. After the church applied to the government in Pretoria and received special permission to baptize blacks, Brother Mahlangu and three others came into Houghton, one of the wealthiest white sections of Johannesburg, for special gospel lessons on Sundays and Thursdays. The day before he was going to be baptized in the late 1960s, word came from Salt Lake City that the gospel was to be preached first to whites in South Africa, then to blacks. He waited longer, until Spencer W. Kimball finally rescinded the church's prohibition of blacks receiving the priesthood.

South Africa, like America, was settled by God-fearing Puritans—Calvinists who believed, as did the inhabitants of John Winthrop's "City on a Hill," that they were an elect generation, chosen of God to build new Jerusalems on their respective continents. But something happened when these people—Dutch, German, French Huguenot—ventured into the heart of Africa, cutting themselves off from their own written traditions

3. See LeBaron, 159.

and continuing to live a seventeenth-century agrarian life in an eighteenth-, nineteenth-, even twentieth-century world. These people—the Afrikaners—became the “white tribe of Africa.” They created their own language and brooked no compromise with black tribes against whom they declared that they would accept equality “in neither church nor state.” Rian Malan’s autobiography, *My Traitor’s Heart*,⁴ speculates about the journey across the Rubicon taken by his ancestors from British-ruled Cape Town civilization—fault-ridden and worldly—into the illiterate frontier country where blood and revenge were the only law.

Can one continent be blessed and another cursed? Protruding from the steppe a couple of miles outside of Pretoria rises a monument to a ghastly victory, the Battle of Blood River in 1838. December 16, perhaps the biggest holiday of the year for white South Africans, commemorates the “Day of the Covenant” when Johann Pretorius swore that if God protected him from the Zulus (who had attacked a company of pioneers whom they thought were invading their land in northern Natal), the Boers (“farmers” in Afrikaans) would forever honor that day. Circling their wagons, the Afrikaners fired shots at the approaching Zulu tribe. Not one Boer was lost, but on that day Tugela River became Blood River after it was stained by the bodies of Zulu King Dingaan’s warriors.

The Mormons’ trek across the American Great Plains followed the Afrikaner *Vortrekker* by only a decade. Like the Afrikaners, the Mormons sought an independent country far removed from “imperial” rule. Like the Afrikaners, the Mormons sought accommodation—through negotiation *and* gunpowder—with native tribes. Like the Afrikaners, the Mormons had a strict moral code and disdained the ungodly world. Paul Kruger, president of the Transvaal Republic at the time gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand (named after the “White water reef” of pure gold below ground), was reputed to have read no book in his entire life except the Bible. Maybe the Mormons were lucky that the gold-diggers only passed through Utah, and didn’t stop then to bring Babylon with them.

Given all this, perhaps it is surprising that the majority of Mormon families in South Africa are not Afrikaners, but English-speaking descendants of Scotch, Irish, and British emigrants. At dinner one night with Brother Samuels, patriarch of the Johannesburg Stake (the son of a Scotch emigrant), and his family, I learned just how much the Afrikaner is tied to the family-oriented Dutch Reformed Church. The DRC remains one of the strongest faiths in South Africa—not just among Afrikaners, but also among “coloreds” and Africans as well. Although it has come in the past several years to see the errors of apartheid, its members still look with

4. Rian Malan, *My Traitor’s Heart* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990).

great suspicion upon a religion so foreign as Mormonism.

Almost all of South Africa's history, in fact, has been dominated by this conflict between the loyalty of the South African English to the mother country and a quest for independence on the part of the Afrikaner. Hence the Boer (or South African) War, which the British won militarily but lost morally. The images of disease and death inflicted on Afrikaner women and children in British "concentration camps" (that term's origin) still have emotive power. Afrikaner prime ministers have ruled the country ever since, after the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, although their desire for national sovereignty was sublimated through the mainly English-speaking "United Party" that governed until 1948.

Apartheid (literally, "separate-ness" in Afrikaans) was also justified on theological grounds. Theologians in the Dutch Reformed Church used the term to capture the Afrikaners' aspirations for control of "their" country in the National Party's 1948 political platform. After a stunning surprise victory over the United Party, they also captured the world's attention with their goal of separating the races and ethnic groups of South Africa into their own separate enclaves. Like too many amateur Mormon "theologians," the architects of apartheid also used biblical arguments about the "curse of Cain," the "lineage of Ham," or the "seed of Canaan" to justify the inferior position into which they put the Africans of their country. (One can only speculate what these theologians would have come up with had they had access to the concept of pre-existence.)

This racialistic streak may be the most embarrassing similarity between the Mormons and the Afrikaners. Mormons struggled long and hard before finally relinquishing their political ambition to constitute their beloved state of Deseret as a theocracy, finally yielding to secular rule with the consolation that nonetheless the rule they accepted flows from a "divinely inspired" Constitution. Whatever its faults in implementation, this is a constitution that mandates the vital principles of individual liberty and equal justice under law—noble principles, the blessings of which no Afrikaners (nor any other South Africans)—ever enjoyed.

At times we Mormons seem to rival the Afrikaners in our finely-tuned loyalty, which can sometimes become blind obedience to authority—both political and religious. While the Mormons of Joseph's and Brigham's day saw gaps between obedience to God's law and obedience to man's law, the contemporary Mormon desire for respectability seems to have swung so far on this pendulum that any challenge (either individually or as a group) to the political status quo in whatever country we inhabit (including Latin America and the former East Germany as well as South Africa) is looked upon with great suspicion.

At least in the United States—where there is no crisis of governmental legitimacy, where the difference between Republicans and Democrats is slight indeed—the contemporary Mormon tilt toward the former hardly stifles anyone’s political expression. In South Africa, however, where most members, if pressed, would tend to support the National Party (perhaps with a minority of wealthier members voting for the more liberal pro-business, anti-apartheid Progressive Federal Party and its successor, the Democratic Party), politics is seen as a dirty game to be avoided if possible. As did the Christians in Paul’s day, I can understand why a minority religion would take this position to protect itself and its members from persecution. But, after living for several weeks in 1988 at a Mormon-run boarding house on the fringes of Johannesburg, I was most frustrated by the almost total indifference and lack of involvement on the part of white South African Mormons in the affairs of their country.

If black branches like the one in Soweto are forced constantly to be aware of troubles in their country and the difficulties that those troubles make for them, one could yet attend a ward in Johannesburg and not know that this country was riddled with difficulties. One of the blessings of the church is its existence “outside of the world” and its ability to provide solace and refuge from the world’s concerns. But this strength must then be used in the world as we become “anxiously engaged in a good cause . . . to bring to pass much righteousness” (D&C 58:27).

Certainly many of the whites in South Africa know and understand how blacks are wronged in their country. Sometimes the problems of South Africa seem too big to be tackled politically, but the Mormons I encountered were making too few attempts to reach out across that great abyss between white and black. In fact, for an organized group of 17,000 people, Mormons have lain remarkably low in South Africa. Perhaps we could learn a lesson from another persecuted minority. The Jews in South Africa have had a disproportionate impact, not just upon business and commerce—and in established political parties such as the PFP—but in extra-parliamentary organizations that are working to build bridges which can reassure whites that they have a future in Africa, even as they contribute, bit by bit, to meet black aspirations.

Mormons in South Africa speak of “the blacks,” using the same propagandistic terms that the Afrikaner nationalist government has been feeding to its population for the last forty years. Like other whites in this country, Mormons often see blacks—as a group—as an omnipresent threat. Individual black members, including those who lived in the “white area” of Johannesburg, were openly fellowshipped into the church in all cases that I saw, but there was almost always an effort, in the whites’ minds, to set this person or that person apart from “the blacks” as a collective entity. Though prejudiced by their past, South African Mor-

mons are *not* more racialistic than most whites.

Whatever else the gospel does, I believe that our knowledge of Christ's life and mission makes us reach beyond the iniquity of seeing people as "groups." Yet because Mormons know that justice will prevail in the end, they sometimes become indifferent about working to make sure that it prevails right now. I have grown to accept Fourth of July fast and testimony meeting presentations on the "inspired" nature of the Constitution of the United States, but I cannot accept the notion that the historic South African Constitution is either ordained of God or worthy of respect.

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I first came to South Africa in August 1988 at a time when, though officially banned the previous February, the United Democratic Front was celebrating its fifth anniversary on college campuses. Since its inception in 1983, the UDF has been closely aligned (both by virtue of its political goals and personalities) with the African National Congress. Throughout the 1980s, however, it had to be circumspect about that subject. The UDF was in fact originally organized to fight against ratification of the new constitution that then-Prime Minister Botha had tried to sell to white voters in a "reformist" referendum in 1983. After years of increasing economic integration in the 1970s and early 1980s, even the National Party had been forced to admit that the goal of "grand apartheid"—separate "homelands" for each of the country's numerous racial groups—was untenable. In Botha's words, the Afrikaner must "adapt or die." The question was *how* to adapt.

Botha decided to co-opt the "coloreds"—the mixed-race descendants of Afrikaners and Africans—and the "Indians"—the South African-born descendants of peasant sugar farmers who were shipped in from India. Both "groups" are less numerous than whites, and Botha calculated that if he could create a tri-cameral parliament, each house having seats proportional to the "ethnic group's" population, each having responsibility over its "own affairs," that would grant more legitimacy to the entire parliament's rule over "general affairs" (i.e., the political affairs of the nation). Of course, the constitution also vested highly centralized—almost dictatorial—powers in the newly created executive post of State President, to which Botha, leader of the National Party, was naturally the heir. The result of this constitutional tinkering was a disaster. By raising the expectations for self-government among some of the non-whites while completely ignoring the African majority, Botha unleashed a firestorm of protest and unrest, and then reacted militaristically with a repressive wave of detentions and police violence. The years 1984, 1985, and 1986

were among the worst years that South Africa had seen.

Things were a little bit quieter by 1988. Although the state of emergency would still be in effect for another year and a half, it was surprising how free was the political discussion that could take place (at least in the major cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria, and Durban) as the future of the country settled down into a kind of negotiational hold.

But other forces of a far more peaceful and hopeful nature were at work in helping to build the new, non-racial South Africa.

When I first came down to South Africa, I was surprised by how much racial integration there was in all of the major and even minor cities. I was also impressed by the continued feelings of love and goodwill that exist across the color line, particularly in the many non-racial organizations established in all fields of interest and walks of life. Most of all, I was impressed by the indomitable spirit of perseverance that motivated so many people to continue in the face of such tiresome challenges in their lives.

In my own life, I needed some of the perseverance and charity that I saw in them. I had attended an international political conference in Swaziland, the peaceable kingdom next door. Eventually my American friends left—they, unlike I, had jobs back in America—and I bade farewell to one of them on top of Table Mountain in Cape Town, the flat beauty frequently covered by billowing clouds that makes that city my candidate for the most beautiful city in the world.

Sometimes when our eyes behold a new world before us, our minds can't comprehend how much it has to offer. The week I spent hitchhiking up the coast until I made it back to Johannesburg remains one of the most vivid weeks in my life—not so much for the sights or the people who opened their doors to me—but because of my personal struggle to know what I should be doing.

I finally found my niche in Hillbrow, Johannesburg's only late-night area, a place and a name that has come to symbolize the rapid racial integration taking place in South Africa. I landed a job writing for the *Weekly Mail*, one of the major "alternative" or anti-apartheid newspapers in the country. I wrote about the de facto demise of the Group Areas Act, how the government had been forced to tinker with it and ultimately, in 1991, to abolish it. This law, which effectively had been unenforced during the previous five years in neighborhoods like Hillbrow, was on its way out purely as a result of quiet yet determined action by thousands of individuals who decided that they could no longer live by a law that determined where they must live according to the color of their skin.

It was in this line of work that I met James Dryja, the (white) owner of an old movie house and a citizen who had long worked for the recognition and acceptance of Hillbrow as a multi-racial area. On my first trip

to South Africa he was active in the Progressive Federal Party and ran as their candidate from Hillbrow in the municipal (all-white) elections, campaigning to make Hillbrow an open area. When I had the opportunity to visit South Africa for a month in April/May 1991, the biggest change I encountered was that instead of finding PFP and National Party election booths outside the local supermarket on Saturday, it was the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party that were soliciting financial and moral support from the black *and* white residents of Hillbrow. And now James, who was one of the first persons legally married to a non-white since the Mixed Marriages Act was abolished, was as active in local affairs as ever, helping the African National Congress to establish support and form the basis for growth among all races in Hillbrow.

It was through James that I met Peter Mbotembeni, a (black) resident of Hillbrow who had attracted some attention when he joined the Hillbrow Residents Association in 1989. When he decided to study ceramics there several years ago, Peter was one of the first black students at the Witwatersrand Technikon (or technical college). He lived in a student house in the neighborhood (where I would frequently go for dinner).

But this story really begins when Peter heard about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and decided to investigate it. During my return visit in 1991, he had almost committed to be baptized. We had several long conversations about the church, about the gospel, about Jesus Christ and what he means to each of us. Peter was baptized in the Johannesburg Chapel on 30 April, the same day as was an Afrikaner named Louie and a young Zulu girl who didn't speak much English, whose mother was a member of the Johannesburg Ward.

God writes straight with curved lines, runs a Portuguese proverb. I could have had no better blessing in South Africa than to introduce this rock of a soul to the members of *my* church at *his* baptism, to participate in confirming him a member of the Church of Jesus Christ, and to fellowship that evening with the white and black Latter-day Saints (sharing my own straight, curved line testimony of God) on the grounds of the Johannesburg temple. It is in this temple that we are welcomed back home—into a home blessed with the presence of a father who loves all of his children.