

PERSONAL VOICES

The New Revelation: A Personal View

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BECAUSE I SPENT ONE YEAR of my life as an undergraduate student at a Nigerian University, the June 9, 1978 announcement by the LDS Church First Presidency ended a period of internal unrest, a trial by fire. In the words of a friend: "Now I feel whole!"

My unrest began in 1964 when I attended Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria as one of two white students. My first year of college was exhilarating as I came to see my British and American expatriate teachers as the anomalous ones in the sea of black faces. Nigerian students looked out for me and, by their friendly actions, made me ashamed of the hatred vented in America toward James Meredith in Mississippi and Martin Luther King in Alabama. At the time I had little doubt as to who was most civilized.

Returning home to Salt Lake City one year later, I experienced profound cultural shock in relating my year's learning to family and friends in the Church. My attitudes were those of another world, and the bottom line, the underlying assumption behind any exchange of views with fellow Mormons, was the policy of priesthood exclusion. Vignettes stand out: a neighbor accusing my family of being so "un-Christianlike" as to consider selling our house to a black, thereby ruining the life savings of so many neighbors—that word, "un-Christianlike;" an opinionated Sunday School teacher lecturing for an entire hour on his particular views toward blacks and the priesthood, and then calling on me, the obvious dissenter, to close with prayer; a Nigerian convert in Salt Lake City expressing his desire to return with missionaries to his congregation to share newfound gospel insights, with or without a change in the priesthood policy.

During the sixties, although the issue was talked about frequently in church settings, I felt the majority of the explanations were specious. I remember my feeling of "Aha!" when I first read that the "mark of Cain" idea originated with Protestant Christians outside of the Church but was somehow assimilated by it. To me that argument reflected a nineteenth century racism which should have

been laid to rest by the second Article of Faith, which explained that men would be punished for their own sins.

The other rationale, explicated by Stewart and Lund, that blacks were somehow "less valiant" in the preexistence, was common, but singularly unconvincing to me: the same justification is used by Hindus to explain the untouchable class, i.e., bad behavior in a previous existence leads to social exclusion in the present. Why would God mark a people with a dark skin just to keep them socially stratified? Wouldn't God put men alongside others who could help them solve their problems? How could I face my black African friends and explain that I was in some way superior to them because of actions taken in another life?

I eventually came to recognize that a major impact of the priesthood prohibition fell upon the psyche of the white Mormon. Some openly advocated discrimination; others "compartmentalized" conflicting positions, drawing upon one side or the other depending upon the setting. Others stayed uncomfortable with judgment in abeyance. The dissonance of believing high ideals of human dignity, of equality, and of an impartial God, and at the same time being called upon to justify a policy of discrimination led to considerable discomfort for both blacks and whites in the Church.

The day came when the issue could no longer be discussed in church classes without intense discomfort. As pressure from outside the Church grew, the topic became taboo except for small groups in informal settings. I appreciated articles in *Dialogue* and discussions with friends that kept the issue alive for me. The well-documented Lester Bush article and the response by Eugene England entitled "The Mormon Cross" were particularly helpful. I resonated to the parallel drawn by England between Abraham asked to sacrifice Isaac, contrary to all he had been taught and held dear, and Mormons who sacrificed standing with colleagues and their own intellectual consistency. The concept of progress from a lower law of priesthood exclusion to a higher law of including blacks appealed to me, especially in putting the onus of responsibility with the white majority in the Church. It was reassuring to learn that Joseph Fielding Smith, when challenged to find scriptural support for the pre-existence explanation, had acknowledged other viewpoints on the subject.

The historically-based arguments advanced by Lester Bush and Stephen Taggart had considerable appeal as explanations of how we as a Church arrived at the policy of exclusion. Starting in the days of persecution in Missouri, the doctrine appeared to have grown by small but precedent-setting steps. The irony of the Church's backing away from an abolitionist posture in the pre-Civil War period to find itself internally bound to discriminate on the basis of skin color seemed a strong case for a present policy reversal. The problem left by each of these explanations was the adamant stand of recent church leaders. By implication, the leaders' inspiration to guide the Church, on this issue at least, was limited or distorted by the strength of traditional assumptions rather than revelatory insights. If that conclusion were accurate, then one could question the basis for other church claims and, in the extreme, even the worth of reforming the institution in such limited fashion.

At one point in my own thinking, I faced the question of whether or not to zealously pursue a change in policy in spite of consequences. The futility of

publicizing and embarrassing the Church has been lived out by Douglas Wallace, the disaffected lawyer from Washington. I loved the Church, its ideals and its teachings, too much for that. I was experiencing a growing testimony that God does, in fact, respond to prayer. During this time, I lived in Salt Lake neighborhoods near two recent Presidents of the Church and several Apostles. I watched them take morning walks and I heard them speak forthrightly in Church. I came to trust that the Lord did, in fact, lead his church and would respond by revelation in his own time and in his own way.

At one point in my reading of the Old Testament during graduate school days, I found an explanation which made sense to me. It allowed for divine direction but, like England, put the onus for delay upon the readiness of the white majority. Leviticus 21:17-23 prohibits handicapped Levite men from officiating in priesthood ordinances. Why were they barred? Assuming that his scripture was given by an unchangeable God, the handicapped person could not be unacceptable in God's eyes, because God formed him and "is no respecter of persons." (Romans 2:11) The answer had to be that *men* would despise the handicapped. To maintain respect for the ordinances, God chose not to have the handicapped officiate in Old Testament times. During New Testament times and in the latter days, however, when people were able to accept the handicapped, this restriction was superseded. We are told in Doctrine and Covenants 42:52 that those with infirmities who lack faith to be healed but who "believe in me, have power to become my sons; and inasmuch as they break not my laws thou shalt bear their infirmities." Similarly, when we Mormons were able to accept blacks, we were called to live a higher law and to accept people of all races and without restrictions.

A close friend with similar concern over the church policy had related to me his receiving a personal confirmation from the Lord in this matter. Such an assurance came to me after I had resolved to go ahead on faith. The instance was sparked by the attendance of a racially mixed couple at our sacrament meeting in Logan. I received an answer to personal prayer that the priesthood prohibition would be lifted soon, likely by revelation. That witness was a comfort to me then and is a testimony to me now. I believe that the higher law arrived officially on June 9th of 1978. I also believe that this revelation came according to the Lord's and not man's timetable.

Most impressive to me in the wording of the press release was the image of church authorities pleading with the Lord in the upper room of the temple for new revelation. Along with many others I had hoped and prayed for many years that church leaders would be that concerned.

The potential for the Church now exceeds our comprehension, with past barriers and eventually long-standing prejudices laid aside. The twenty-sixth chapter of Alma, where Ammon glories in the Lord over the results of his Lamanite mission, appears as a direct parallel to our day. In some aspects, its application in our time is now fulfilled; in other ways it is prophetic:

My brothers and my brethren, behold I say unto you, how great reason have we to rejoice . . . And now, I ask, what great blessings has [God] bestowed upon us? Can ye tell?

Behold, I answer for you; for our brethren, the Lamanites, were in darkness . . . but behold, how many of them are brought to behold the marvelous light

of God! And this is the blessing which hath been bestowed upon us, that we have been made instruments in the hands of God to bring about this great work.

Behold, thousands of them do rejoice, and have been brought into the fold of God. (Alma 26:1-4)

I share that joy in the clearing of the way for full fellowship for blacks in the gospel, with priesthood rights available and temple blessings extended.

The reasons given to Ammon and his brethren to dissuade them from approaching the Lamanites sound strangely familiar to our age.

For [the Nephites] said unto us: Do ye suppose that ye can bring the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth? Do ye suppose that ye can convince the Lamanites of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers . . . whose hearts delight in the shedding of blood; whose days have been spent in the grossest of iniquity; whose ways have been the ways of a transgressor from the beginning? (Alma 26:24)

Who has not heard of the supposed loose morals of American (and African) blacks, of the perils of our urban ghettos, of the barbarities of Africa or of centuries of presumed ignorance? All contain half truths, half un-truths.

But Ammon's optimism and enthusiasm for the work could not be contained. The success that he and his brothers experienced in converting their enemies was in many ways a greater miracle than the angels they witnessed or the physical obstacles they overcame. And in all things, Ammon gave his thanks to God:

Yea, blessed is the name of my God, who has been mindful of this people. . . . Now my brethren, we see that God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth. Now this is my joy, and my great thanksgiving; yea, and I will give thanks unto my God forever. Amen. (Alma 26:36-37)

The parallel is strong. We, too have cause to rejoice. Opportunities for black missionaries, bishops and General Authorities are ahead. New missions, better acceptance of missionaries among the public and temple work for all peoples should be some of the results. The revelation comes in fulfillment of prophecy, out of the goodness of God. It will cause anxieties and tensions for some who will now need understanding and prayers by others in their behalf. But the most profound change will be a healing of the heart under a higher law, an end to the trial by fire and the dismantling of the "Mormon Cross." My heart is full. The Lord does care.