

From Calcutta to Kaysville: Is Righteousness Color-coded?

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RECENTLY THE BISHOP OF A NEARBY WARD addressed the young people of our stake on the subject of making correct choices. In the course of his remarks he assured these young men and women that they were special spirits, reserved to come to earth in the last days to stand as witnesses for the Lord and to spread his gospel throughout the world. He explained that this was a reward for their righteous actions in the premortal existence.

He contrasted their situation with those who were less righteous and therefore less blessed in their earthly circumstances and referred to those living in the streets of Calcutta, relating their impoverished status to their less-than-valiant premortal behavior.

Having just adopted an infant girl from Calcutta, I was amazed to find that without meeting her the speaker could immediately assign her to the lower caste of the less valiant. When I spoke with this gentleman later, he said he was very sorry if I had been offended, but these ideas were not just his own; they were official Church doctrine.

This incident has prompted me to seek answers to these questions: What are the popularly held beliefs regarding the relationship between our premortal existence and the circumstances of our mortal life? Are these beliefs consistent with the scriptures and the statements of Joseph Smith, or do they merely reflect American cultural biases? Are they consistent with the most recent statements of Church authorities?

POPULAR BELIEFS

In its simplest form, the doctrine states that certain spirits, righteous in the premortal existence, have been reserved to come forth in this time and place. Ezra Taft Benson stated: "The finest group of young people that this world

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has ever known anything about has been born under the covenant into the homes of Latter-day Saint parents. I have a feeling that in many cases at least these choice spirits have been held back to come forth in this day and age when the gospel is upon the earth in its fullness, and that they have great responsibilities in establishing the kingdom" (CR, April 1951, 48).

For many Church members this statement lacks completeness. If there are "choice spirits," then there must be "less-than-choice spirits." If there are "these homes" and "this time" for the choice spirits, then there must be "those homes" and "those times" for the remainder. According to Orson Pratt the spirits "held back to come forth" were more noble and intelligent. The Lord had not kept them waiting thousands of years "to send them among the Hottentots, the African negroes, the idolatrous Hindoos, or any other of the fallen nations. . . . They are not kept in reserve in order to come forth to receive such a degraded parentage" (JD 1:63).

Joseph Fielding Smith described these choice spirits as the faithful and obedient in the premortal existence. "There is a reason why one man is born black and with other disadvantages, while another is born white with great advantages. . . . Those who were faithful in all things there received greater blessings here, and those who were not faithful received less" (1926, 154).

To the characteristics of nobleness, intelligence, faithfulness, and obedience Orson Pratt added another dimension: "If all the two-thirds who kept their first estate were equally valiant in the war . . . why should some of them be called the chosen in their spiritual state to hold responsible stations and offices in this world, while others were not?" (1853, 55)

Many Church authorities felt that varying degrees of premortal intelligence, faithfulness, and obedience were understandable and expected. But failure to be valiant in defending the Lord could not be excused; punishment was necessary, and that punishment was a degraded mortal existence. As Mark E. Petersen commented, "Can we account in any other way for the birth of some of the children of God in darkest Africa, or in flood-ridden China, or among the starving hordes of India, while some of the rest of us are born here in the United States? . . . Because of performance in our pre-existence some of us are born as Chinese, some as Japanese, some as Indians, some as Negroes, some as Americans, some as Latter-day Saints" (1954, 12). This theme was echoed with a markedly racist tone by Melvin J. Ballard:

Of the thousands of children born today, a certain proportion of them went to the Hottentots of the south seas, thousands went to the Chinese mothers, thousands to Negro mothers, thousands to beautiful white Latter-day Saint mothers.

Let us not imagine that in this dispensation we shall do the work for the dead Chinese or Hindus. Not at all. I expect it will take one thousand years to complete in our temples the ordinances looking to the salvation of the House of Israel. It will take all Latter-day Saints and all that we can do to take care of our own branch — of our own house (1932, 19–20).

Though Joseph Fielding Smith popularized the "less-than-valiant" explanation, his early writing had a tentative tone. "It is a reasonable thing to believe that the spirits of the premortal state were of varying degrees of intelligence

and faithfulness. . . . However, to dwell upon this topic and point out certain nations as having been cursed because of their acts in the pre-existence, enters too much on the realm of speculation” (1924, 565).

A few years later George F. Richards also noted a lack of authority for this view. “I cannot conceive our Father consigning his children to a condition such as that of the negro race, if they had been valiant in the spirit world. . . . [However,] we have no definite knowledge concerning this” (CR, April 1939, 59).

As this theme was repeated in articles and sermons, however, the concern that “we have no definite knowledge” seemed to be forgotten. By 1958, when Bruce R. McConkie restated Joseph Fielding Smith’s views in *Mormon Doctrine* (p. 269) for many the belief had become doctrine.

Alvin R. Dyer (1961) explained that the three divisions of premortal spirits (valiant, not valiant, and those who rejected the priesthood) came to earth through the three sons of Noah (Shem, Japheth, and Ham) into their lineages (chosen, adopted into the chosen, and cursed) to create the races (white, dark, and colored) who will be resurrected to their foreordained glory (celestial, terrestrial, and telestial). This connected race, nation, time, and place to premortal valiancy. It followed that if a nation or race was less valiant, then each individual member was less valiant.

Statements about interracial marriage perhaps most accurately indicate pervading racial attitudes. Brigham Young’s feelings were recorded by Wilford Woodruff: “If any man mingles his seed with the seed of Cain the only way he could get rid of it or have salvation would be to come forward and have his head cut off and spill his blood upon the ground. It would also take the life of his children” (Woodruff 4:97, spelling modernized).

Arguing against the intermarriage of white and black, B. H. Roberts quoted from *The Color Line, a Brief in Behalf of the Unborn*, in the 1907 *Seventy’s Course in Theology*: “That the negro is markedly inferior to the Caucasian is proved both craniologically and by six thousand years of planet-wide experimentation; and that the commingling of inferior with superior must lower the higher is just as certain as that the half-sum of two and six is only four” (p. 166). It was easy for Roberts to accept the supremacy of the white race and the inferiority of other races. Almost forty years earlier the *Juvenile Instructor* had taught:

In it [the Caucasian race] are included the people of nearly all the nations who have ruled or now rule the world; those who are the foremost in the arts, sciences, and civilization. All the other families of men are, as a rule, unequal to them in strength, size, beauty, learning and intelligence.

[Last] in order stands the Negro race, the lowest in intelligence and the most barbarous of all the children of men. The race whose intellect is the least developed, whose advancement has been the slowest, and who appear to be the least capable of improvement of all people (Cannon 1868, 141).

In response to popular beliefs the Utah legislature passed a law prohibiting “marriages between persons who are Negro and White and between Mon-

golians, members of the Malay race or Mulattos, Quadroon, or Octoroon, and a White person" — a law which was not repealed until July 1965 (Section 30-1-2, Utah Code Annotated, 1953). Two years later the United States Supreme Court overturned all such laws, leaving South Africa as the only modern nation still prohibiting interracial marriages (*Loving et ux v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 [1967]).

Statements by Church authorities against interracial marriage have continued through the 1970s. In 1946 J. Reuben Clark said, "Do not ever let that wicked virus get into your systems that brotherhood either permits or entitles you to mix races which are inconsistent. Biologically, it is wrong; spiritually, it is wrong" (p. 492). When asked why the Church discouraged interracial marriage, Hugh B. Brown responded, "I'm a farmer by nature. . . . I know the wisdom of selecting the future parents of future generations of animals. The Church takes the position that we ought to be as careful, at least, when we select our mates as we are when we select the future parents of our animals" (Campbell and Poll 1975, 286). The First Presidency even discouraged "all social relationships and associations between the races" because of the concern that they might lead to such marriages (First Presidency to Harris 1954).

Spencer W. Kimball's statement in 1965 was the first to remove the stigma from interracial marriages. "Now, the brethren feel that it is not the wisest thing to cross racial lines in dating and marrying. [However,] there is *no* condemnation" (p. 15). His views did not change even after the 1978 revelation on the priesthood. In June 1978 he admonished students "to marry within their own race. There is nothing wrong with any other course, but it is generally better if two people can have the same background and similar experiences before they're married" ("Whirlwind," 1978, 8). These two statements constitute the current official Church policy on this subject.

SCRIPTURAL AND CULTURAL ORIGINS

The scriptures only briefly refer to our premortal existence and make no mention of the valiancy of spirits there:

Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee (Jer. 1:5).

He hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).

I was in the beginning with the Father and am the Firstborn; . . . Ye were also in the beginning with the Father (D&C 93:21-23).

Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones (Abr. 3:22).

Even before they were born, they, with many others, received their first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth (D&C 138:56).

While the scriptures give no details about our premortal existence, they are very clear about the universality of the gospel. During his mortal ministry the Lord directed his message "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt.

10:6). Immediately after his resurrection he commanded his apostles, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

Almost immediately Paul began carrying Christianity out of its narrow cultural and geographic confines into "all the world," a task which the Church continues to do today. Paul knew "that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34-35).

The Book of Mormon presents the same view of the gospel in 2 Nephi 26:33: "He [Christ] 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." Joseph Smith reaffirmed that the Lord would judge all men fairly and equitably, "not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but 'according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil;' or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, India: he will judge them, 'not according to what they have not, but according to what they have'" ("Baptism," 1842, 759). Joseph Smith viewed interracial marriage with blacks differently than with other races. In an 1831 revelation Joseph stated that, in time, the Saints should intermarry with the Lamanites and Nephites (Foster 1981, 134-35), while in 1844, as mayor of Nauvoo, he fined "two negroes for attempting to marry white women" (HC 6:210).

How much do these ideas reflect American cultural biases? The United States has always been celebrated as a nation where immigrants from all nations and races would be considered on their personal merits, not their color or culture. Unfortunately this description more closely resembles the creative concept of a public relations firm than an accurate reflection of our history.

Racism in the United States was recorded as early as 1655. Peter Stuyvesant, recruiting a military force to defend New Amsterdam, rejected a number of Jewish settlers attempting to join the guard because of "the disgust and unwillingness" of the citizen soldiers to serve with them, or to "be on guard with them in the same guard house" (Ecclesiastical Records, 1:340).

Statements directed against blacks have set the standard for racist rhetoric. In 1866 Benjamin Humphries, governor of Mississippi, declared, "The Negro is free, whether we like it or not. . . . To be free, however, does not make him a citizen, or entitle him to social or political equality with the white man" (1866, 183).

Thirty years later American history leaflets were still proclaiming "that the African Negro is destined by Providence to occupy this condition of servile dependence. . . . It is marked on the face, stamped on the skin, and evinced by the intellectual inferiority and natural improvidence of this race. . . . They are utterly unqualified not only for rational freedom but for self-government of any kind" (Hart and Channing 1893, 5).

Asians have not fared much better. Concern regarding the increasing Chinese immigration during the second half of the nineteenth century prompted Edwin Meade, a lawyer and legislator, to describe the Chinese as "a mere animal machine, performing the duties in his accepted sphere, punctually and

patiently, but utterly incapable of any improvement.” He further declared their brain capacity to be so far below that of the Caucasian as to render them “unfit for free government” (*Chinese*, 1878, 297).

United States Senator Albert J. Beveridge in supporting the war against Spain for the Philippines asserted that Filipinos are a “barbarous race . . . not capable of self-government. How could they be? They are not of a self-governing race. They are Orientals” (*Congressional Record*, 1900, 708).

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States government feared a Japanese invasion of the West Coast aided by Japanese-Americans. These citizens were prohibited from entering certain areas, and the government relocated many of them to detention camps. In 1944 the Supreme Court reaffirmed its previous approval of this policy, stating that the war “situation demanded that all citizens of Japanese ancestry be segregated” (*Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 223 [1944]).

All of these statements are founded on the concept of white supremacy. In 1858, Stephen A. Douglas stated that “in my opinion this government of ours is founded on the white basis. It was made by the white man, for the benefit of the white man, to be administered by white men, in such a manner as they should determine” (Jones 1895, 70).

In 1920 Lothrop Stoddard, a popular commentator on social and political matters, wrote, “Two things are necessary for the continued existence of a race: it must remain itself, and it must breed its best. Within the white world, migrations of lower human types . . . must be rigorously curtailed. Such migrations upset standards, sterilize better stocks, increase low types, and compromise national futures” (p. 301).

These few selected quotations accurately reflect the American culture during the emergence of the Church’s doctrine regarding the premortal existence. The statements of Church authorities regarding non-white races seem to echo these cultural biases rather than reflect any insight found in the scriptures.

How did these culturally and personally held beliefs become accepted Church doctrine? Armand Mauss has provided substantial insight into this process. First, beliefs are imported from the prevailing culture. Specific doctrinal themes are integrated with these beliefs into a popular folklore. Second, these ideas receive authoritative endorsement by some Church leaders. At this stage they are often expressed in tentative terms or as personal statements. Over time the ideas are repeated, the previous reservations are forgotten, and the beliefs are elevated to an official status. At that point they exist independently of those who first expressed the idea. Even though they are not canon (scriptural or revelatory doctrines), they are accepted by Church members with the same force (Mauss 1981, 33).

The doctrine of valiancy in the premortal existence was developed exactly according to this sequence. Commonly held cultural beliefs regarding race were combined with uniquely Mormon themes. The Book of Mormon, the “keystone of our religion” and “the most correct of any book” available to the Saints, continually equates white skin with righteousness and dark skin with

sin and degradation (see 2 Ne. 5:21; Jacob 3:8; Alma 3:6; 3 Ne. 2:15). In this way the shared culture and the revealed religion reinforced each other.

In addition, the Saints found support for these beliefs in the experiences of their missionaries. Newell Bringhurst describes a number of these, of which the following is typical:

Latter-day Saint missionaries, however, had limited success in converting the Asian Indian. As a result, the Saints viewed these reluctant east Asians in an increasingly unfavorable light. Frustrated missionaries described the unreceptive Indians as mental "slaves bound with superstitions strong cords" who deserved to remain "a nation of servants." The Saints, in looking for a concrete reason for the limited appeal of Mormonism in India, seized upon what they perceived as the Indian's "inferior" ethnic racial composition (1975, 190).

In marked contrast the missionaries' message was well received by the white Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian nations.

These experiences reinforced the ideas drawn from Mormon culture and from the Book of Mormon — dark-skinned people are ignorant, superstitious, unrighteous, and generally inferior, while white-skinned people are intelligent, industrious, and desirous of accepting the Lord's message. From this cultural, scriptural, and personal basis, these ideas went on to become first authoritative and then official.

Existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote that humans have an irrepressible urge to know the knowable. He neglected to add that we also have that same urge to know the unknowable and few guidelines to distinguish between the two. Culture is based on our ability to understand the relationships between events that, at first glance, appear to be chance occurrences. Explanations of these relationships become the foundation of scientific and religious thought. Explanations where there are no relationships become the foundation of prejudice.

Church authorities may feel about the spiritual world the way scientists feel about the natural world — for every unanswered question there is an explanation to be found. Things happen the way they do for a reason. If the reason is not obvious, it is only because we have not discovered it. In spiritual matters this discovery should be the result of revelation, but sometimes the reasons discovered are only cultural biases masquerading as revealed truth.

CURRENT ATTITUDES OF CHURCH LEADERS

There is, however, an undercurrent of enlightenment in the Church. Not all authorities have expressed racist views; notable exceptions are James Talmage, Spencer W. Kimball, and Howard W. Hunter. While believing that there was a relationship between our premortal existence and our mortal life, Talmage clearly understood that the blessings of the earth are not to be confused with the blessings of God. "Our condition, position, situation upon the earth," he wrote, "must be the result of causes operating before we came into possession of our mortal bodies. Now let it not be assumed that the man who counts himself most blessed in the things of the earth was, therefore, most deserving, for

the things of earth may not be, after all, the greatest blessings of God" (1908, 992).

As early as 1949 Spencer W. Kimball was reminding the Saints, "Who are we that we are so preferred in the kingdom of heaven? What have we done that we are entitled to so many blessings? What did you individually do that made you superior to your other darker brothers and sisters? Was it something you did? Well, maybe it was because you were fortunate enough to be born in Latter-day Saint homes. . . . And yet, are we any better than those who have been deprived? And who are we to differentiate?" (E. Kimball 1982, 236-37) It is important to note that he says "fortunate" while others were saying "deserving." He continues his plea for tolerance: "Take this message back to your people in the stakes, that they leave off their racial prejudice. Racial prejudice is of the devil. Racial prejudice is of ignorance. There is no place for it in the gospel of Jesus Christ" (p. 237). But, like Talmage's message, his ideas were overwhelmed by the popular view of white superiority.

More recently Howard W. Hunter has spoken clearly and forcefully in defense of equality:

The gospel of Jesus Christ transcends nationality and color, crosses cultural lines, and blends distinctiveness into a common brotherhood. . . . *All* men are invited to come unto him and *all* are alike unto him. Race makes no difference; color makes no difference; nationality makes no difference. . . . As members of the Lord's church, we need to lift our vision beyond personal prejudices. We need to discover the supreme truth that indeed our Father is no respecter of persons (1979, 72, 74).

While no Church authorities are speaking in favor of interracial marriage, the most recently available divorce statistics argue against the claim that these marriages are significantly more prone to disruption. In the United States in 1982, those states reporting race recorded 346 divorces per 1,000 same-race marriages and 351 divorces per 1,000 mixed-race marriages (Vital Statistics, 1982). In the previous year the corresponding statistics were 364 and 365. No comprehensive study has been done regarding the causes of divorce among interracial couples. The few brief studies available indicate that the majority of interracial couples report their racial differences as a positive force in their marriage, while none claimed these differences as a factor in divorce (Porterfield 1978, 104-5).

The decade of the eighties has seen subtle yet significant changes in the attitudes of Church authorities toward nonwhite races. First, public statements of Church authorities regarding our premortal existence have taken on a new tone. Boyd K. Packer in his October 1983 general conference address asked, "Why the inequities in life? Some so rich. Some so wretchedly poor. Some so beautifully formed, and others with pitiful handicaps. Some are gifted and others retarded" (1983, 20). But he did not answer with the old maxims. Instead, he left these questions unanswered. In Bruce R. McConkie's final book, his certainty of previous years is absent. He wrote, "When and where and under what circumstances are the 'noble and great ones' sent to earth?"

. . . There are no simple answers. Our finite limitations and our lack of knowledge of the innate capacities of all men do not let us envision the complexities of the Lord's system for sending his children to mortality" (1985, 35).

Second, and more important, the racial stereotypes of the last century are beginning to disappear. In his October 1987 general conference address, Alexander Morrison spoke in glowing terms about black Africans, "a people prepared by the Spirit of God." He described them as "anxious to learn and quick to understand, attentive and responsive, spiritually sensitive, thirsty for the living water and hungry for the bread of life, . . . and eager to obey the commandments of Christ" (1987, 25).

The teachings of Church authorities regarding nonwhite races are changing. Whether our understanding of the gospel is pushing aside the old cultural biases or whether current, more enlightened cultural views are allowing us to more fully comprehend the gospel's universality is unimportant. What is important is that the doctrine is changing and it is changing in a major way. On 9 December 1987 an official Church news release described the belief in the superiority of one race or color over another as "abhorrent and tragic" ("Statement," 1988, 74).

Unfortunately, Church authorities rarely emphasize such statements. They either simply stop teaching the old beliefs, or they start teaching the new beliefs without acknowledging that there ever was a different view. This approach places a difficult burden on Church members. The "truth" learned from parents and Primary may not be today's truth. The "truth" which is then taught to our children may not be today's truth.

Speaking of third-world nations and the ever-expanding programs and publications of the Church, Boyd K. Packer said: "Now, we are moving into those countries, but we can't move *there* with all the baggage we produce and carry *here*! We can't move with a 1947 Utah Church! Could it be that we are not prepared to take the *gospel* because we are not prepared to take (and they are not prepared to receive) all of the things we have wrapped up with it as extra baggage" (1987, 10).

Part of the Church's extra baggage which has now officially been jettisoned is the belief in the inferiority of nonwhite races. Church members must now follow by jettisoning their own outmoded "1947 Utah Church" cultural biases. Leaders like Howard W. Hunter and Alexander Morrison have made a significant contribution to this process. As we leave these prejudices behind we can more easily accept the differences in our Father's children and more freely delight in their diversity.

Each day as I see my daughter, I am reminded of the miracle that preserved her life and brought her to us. I sense the love and joy of her unique spirit and see the beauty of her black eyes and brown skin. There are those who do not know of the miracle, who do not choose to feel her love, and who see only the difference, not the beauty, of her skin. While I cannot protect her from cruel remarks made by children on the playground, I will never tolerate those same remarks made by adults from the pulpit.

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