

# THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A GOSPEL CULTURE

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The Pauline image of the body of Christ provides us with a gorgeous image that every part of the Church as it is expressed through the diverse cultures abroad are vital for its proper functioning. Bonhoeffer enlivens this image by suggesting that “Christ exists as community,”<sup>1</sup> and to my mind there is no one cultural community that is the vital organ for the whole body. Rather, the conditions for a living church are that all of its diverse parts are working, honored, and respected.

To paraphrase Paul: “the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now, if the New Zealand Church should say, ‘Because I am not Australian, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the Scottish Church should say, ‘Because I am not English, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were German, where would the sense of vibrancy be? If the whole body were European, where would the sense of color be? But in fact, God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The Chinese Church cannot say to the Japanese Church, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the Samoan Church cannot say to the

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The author would like to thank Steve Maina, Director of the New Zealand Church Missionary Society for much of the inspiration for this paper following his excellent presentation at Laidlaw College, Christchurch, March 2017.

1. Joel Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: A&C Black, 2010), 37.

Tongan Church, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, the South Pacific parts that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the African parts that we think are less honorable should be treated with special honor. And the South American parts that seem unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while the presentable parts like the big and wealthy American Church need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:14–27).<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the idea of a "gospel culture" interrupts and compromises Jesus' heart for the Church because it seems to require a suite of cultural losses for those at the borderlands. Living in a singular, transplanted gospel culture that imposes a laundry list of behavioral expectations that are recognizable to the metropole but are a burden to the margins involves an existential violence. It asks those of us in the borderlands to sever our limbs of self and to leave them outside the door of the meetinghouse in exchange for Mormon belonging. In this transaction, we lose the vitality of our cultural selves and we deprive the body of the Church the life that our parts can bring to it.

To illustrate: An existential violence is inflicted upon Māori, and therefore upon the body of Christ, when Māori women are told that their femininity will be recognized in their submission to male authority; when Māori women are told that their bodies should be made small and quiet, their voices soft; when Māori women are deprived of their inherited right to use that same voice to sing a man into silence should he dare to speak publicly in a way that does not comport with the wishes of the people; when the sexual power and energy of a Māori

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2. Adapted from Kenneth L. Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 1940–41.

woman's body is silenced in the wake of this oppressive insistence that her only creative power is in childbirth; when Māori women are asked to surrender their mana to white, male US church authorities, US curriculum, and systems that cause Māori people to culturally disappear; when Māori people are told that they should inhabit an identity that renders them literal descendants of Lehi and that they are in a unique covenantal relationship with God because of that lineage, and then that identity that replaced their own tribal identity is silenced away because of its impossibility; when Māori are made to feel self-conscious or worried for participating in the rites and customs of their people; when the use of the Māori language is unwelcome in church meetings; when Māori are instructed that protest is not something that good Mormons do even though those laws being protested might be the cause of their own oppression.

Too often the very cultural differences that root Māori in the ground where they develop a strong sense of self and community have been experienced by visiting authorities as out of sync with the teachings of the Church, and therefore unworthy of good Mormons. Granted, there are some practices in every culture that do not comport well with spiritual becoming and don't offer the kind of social transformation that might be recognized as the kingdom of God or Zion. We could start, however, by pointing the finger at Utah to identify the many cultural practices that do not seem to be at the heart of Christianity but somehow have found ideological, policy, and theological place. The way Mormonism is popularly practiced at the metropole and transplanted around the world places the moral/legal (i.e., attention to rules and behavior) above the relational aspects of Christianity (i.e., attention to God's relationship with us, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with the earth). Therefore, I could have my temple recommend revoked for drinking a cup of tea as a gracious gesture of hospitality in England or Taiwan, but it is unlikely that there would be any formal consequence

for me if I were to espouse white supremacist ideas in Sunday School that alienate and diminish people of color.

“Gospel culture” has become a ubiquitous term in the Church that reminds us non-Americans that we are obligated to pursue a distinctive way of life common to all members of the Church. Elder Dallin Oaks has admonished people from all cultures “to climb to the higher ground of the gospel culture, to practices and traditions that are rooted in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> That gospel culture, according to Elder Oaks, derives from the plan of salvation, the commandments of God, and the teachings of the living prophets. However, that is not where culture comes from.

Culture is a complete way of life. Culture arises over time and includes a whole raft of human behaviors—what we consider important to know, what we choose to believe, how we respond through artistic expression, what we consider to be right and wrong, our community agreements, our daily habits, how we socialize our young, the customs we preserve, the languages we speak, and the practices that grow out of being in relationship with our physical environment. As a colonized people, Māori have had significant disruptions and assaults on their cultural systems, and they have been tempted to grab on to Mormonism as a cultural prosthetic, something that offers a way of being that replaces that which has been lost. Except that one religious tradition, particularly one from the Great Basin, mountain home of the Mormon pioneers, is an inadequate substitute for indigenous people in the South Pacific.

The gospel culture, as currently understood, will not revitalize a language that holds all the secrets and wisdom of an indigenous person’s ancestral past. The gospel culture as it is currently described by LDS authorities will not arouse the resistance needed to claim and demand the material and political return of resources that were taken from a people in a slew of historical legal violations. The gospel culture will not

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3. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Gospel Culture,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2012/03/the-gospel-culture?lang=eng>.

make room for Māori to find the missing parts of the self that have been torn from them and their families by colonization. The gospel culture will not make Māori white, nor will it teach them to be proud of the color of their skin, the movement of their body, the shimmer of their thick wave of ebony hair, the arc of their generous lips, the spread of their nose, the twinkle in their chocolate almond eyes, or the thickness of their legs. Nor will it arouse pride in the mythologies that make sense of those beautiful bodies. Disney does a better job of that these days than Mormonism, despite all our “children of Lehi” talk. Moreover, the gospel culture has little capacity to be that needed bridge of enlightenment to make sense of the indigenous self. The best it can offer, as currently constituted, is a cultural prosthetic and some temporary redemption and lift for those suffering a loss because of colonization or class inequality. However, gospel culture, as presently understood, will not change the system that got people there in the first place.

Furthermore, the injunction to live a gospel culture is more often than not directed at the Other. It is commonly used as a measurement for how well converts in the Global South are measuring up to the standards of the West and is rarely used to measure the spiritual health of Utah Mormons. Therefore, it is not innocent. And having had it used in my country to paternalistically chastise us for anything we might do that does not comport with the sensibilities of a Utah authority is demeaning.

What is needed, perhaps, is that we come to some agreement as to what the plan of salvation and the teachings of the prophets and the scriptures mean. Even then, however, it is impossible to arrive at the correct meaning because all of our interpretations come out of our own cultures—as well they should.

Let me illustrate:

When LDS missionaries went about telling people that Joseph Smith was a prophet, Pākeha, white New Zealanders, said, “I’ll follow him.”

Māori said, “Of course! We have prophets too. Here’s one. Her name is Wetekia Elkington.”

When missionaries presented New Zealanders the Book of Mormon, Pākeha said, “A book of commandments to tell us what to do!”

Māori said, “This book tells us how God mandates our occupation and entitlement to our land and sovereignty.”

When missionaries said, “Look to the life of Jesus as your exemplar,” Pākeha said, “Jesus was kind to everyone; I should be kind too.”

Māori said, “Jesus was a brown, indigenous person who was colonized like me. His politics were radical and beautiful and compassionately fierce. I should do what he did so that I’m not captured by colonial oppression like Jerusalem’s religious elites.”

So, whose hermeneutics wins? Whose way of interpreting the prophets, the scriptures, and the plan of salvation will dominate in this cultural war? In the past, it has been Utah’s right to set the discourse, create the curriculum, and require compliance with their understanding of the gospel culture. However, I want to propose that this needs to stop. I am a frequent enough visitor to Utah and a good enough cultural analyst to know that as much as I love Utah, it is no poster child for Zion.

The problem is that the Utah Church believes that their interpretations and stories of the Church are widely shared by diverse communities, that baptism into the Church is an agreement of sorts that the way that Utah thinks about the faith is the way everyone should think about the faith, regardless of their race, ethnicity, and language. But this is simply not so. Our socialization is not incidental to how we experience and interpret faith, it is central. Those of us in the borderlands have been told repeatedly over the years to be Mormon before anything else. This places a terrible burden on us to become something we are not and can never be. The best we can do is pretend when Mormon missionaries and General Authorities come by to survey the cultural perimeters. Unfortunately, their visits have us searching for their approval, and the approval of our cultural fathers. But the confusion of trying to become something we are not sometimes injects a strange kind of orthodoxy into our communities and we see the growth of a pretense that finds us

trying to correct one another's Mormon cultural mistakes, thus pushing community well-being and spiritual thriving further out of our reach. The more we look like middle-class Utah Mormons, the more accolades, praise, and leadership we get. We notice how quickly and absolutely American expatriates in New Zealand are deferred to as having a more excellent perspective on how to do Mormonism than those locals who have put years of service into our community.

Thus, the adage "If it works in the West, let's import it to the rest" needs to be tempered with its counter adage: "If it's not working in the West, stop exporting it to the rest." There is a way in which our Americentric cultural obligations to Mormonism are making impossible the fresh wind of the spirit that the Church needs to survive with relevance and expansiveness moving forward. Gospel culture as a way of obligating the Mormon Other to sympathize with the White Western Cultural Capture of the Church is a failing idea and says more about the spiritual impoverishment of those who deploy it than it says about its possibilities. As Barbara Kingsolver so beautifully writes, "Everything you're sure is right can be wrong in another place."<sup>4</sup>

What do I mean by the White Western Cultural Capture of the Church?

The West has come to shape, inform, and manage Christianity into sympathy with its own interests. The Church writ large has come to measure itself in keeping with the demands of racialized, class-based, privatized capital. What does this mean?

- It means that we grapple with a church today where the face of it is multiracial and increasingly sits in the Global South or among immigrants, but the leadership continues to be white and Western.
- It means that adherence is largely oriented around individual salvation rather than group and world transformation, that faith

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4. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper, 1998), 505.

has become a product on the religious marketplace, and that we transact with the Church for salvific returns.

- It means that it has become difficult to walk back racism and class inequality. The Church has proof-texted the scriptures to find evidence for skin color privilege that sees white prosperity as associated with God's blessings when it's really based on the theft of the land, labor, and well-being of the world's poorest.
- It means that an emphasis is placed on money and buildings and growth as a measure of Church vitality instead of measuring the heart of the faith through dialogue, partnership, relief of the poor, improving systems, and paying attention to relational well-being. The fact is that money can never purchase spiritual maturity; sometimes buildings are just buildings, and numbers rarely give you an accurate picture of social and personal transformation.

Notwithstanding, Utah continues to be a sending culture rather than a receiving culture. The metropole feeds us on a diet of pioneer stories, we grow up knowing the names of places of which we have no geographical conception, we know names and anecdotes, we hear their wisdom, we are required to quote them. Sometimes we get a mention at general conference—a nod to some experience by some GA as to our foreign faithfulness—but largely we are the forgotten majority as the Utah Church continues to hold itself up as the set standard.

So this leads one to ask: is there a cultural mandate? Does God have a heart for cultural diversity? Is Zion premised upon the need for homogeneity?

In an exegesis of Genesis 1:28, Nancy Pearcey writes, “The first phrase ‘be fruitful and multiply,’ means to develop the social world: build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws. The second phrase, ‘subdue the earth,’ means to harness the natural world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, and compose music. This passage is



sometimes called the Cultural Mandate because it tells us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations—nothing less.”<sup>5</sup>

Thereafter the scriptures acknowledge the natural state of cultural diversity, calling everyone not into sameness but into the body of Christ as practitioners of faith from their own places of understanding so that everyone is enlivened and benefited by the wisdom of the other, because no one culture can see all things. A culture's prosperity or mobility or access to resources gives the people no more advantage in Christian discipleship than someone born into impoverishment. Wealth and prosperity are not signs of God's beneficence—anyone who has been to an LDS temple should know exactly who is responsible for that kind of spiritually beleaguered doctrine. Zion, our unique theological heritage, the location of our faith's greatest yearnings and aspirations, might be oneness—a unity of people—but it isn't premised on our imitation of each other. Yet this is what the idea of the gospel culture is often understood to be, and it can be rightly criticized for what it does to people outside of the dominant white Utah Mormon culture. For instance, Soong-Chan Rah points out:

In the Western, white captivity of the church, a danger exists that all people of color will strive for “honorary white people” status. We will strive to be recognized by whites, oftentimes by mirroring or mimicking white approaches to theology and white standards of ministry. In our quest to become “honorary white people,” we end up loathing the unique way that God has created us in our cultural context. This self-loathing yields a denial to the church of a fuller understanding of the gospel message from all different angles and perspectives. The challenge of the church is to empower the marginalized to recognize the gift that is the cultural mandate—that their culture is an expression of being

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5. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 47.

made in the image of God (*imago dei*) and must be represented at the table of believers.<sup>6</sup>

How do we get to the place where everyone is invited to the table of believers, and where everyone is considered jewels in God's crown, their wisdom vibrant and useful for growing a faith that endures and enriches and a society that challenges a world of exclusion, violence, exploitation, injustice, patriarchy, colonialism, indignity, poverty, and abuse? We need in the first instance to cease imagining that one culture can be transplanted onto those people living in another culture in the hopes of achieving Zion.

Kenneth Bailey argues that "the gospel is not safe in any culture without a witness within that culture, from beyond itself." He continues, "In every culture the message of the gospel is in constant danger of being compromised by the value system that supports that culture and its goals. . . . The stranger to that culture can instinctively identify those points of surrender and call the community back to a purer and more authentic faith."<sup>7</sup> We need each other's differences to undo our attachments to any cultural expression that is not useful to the building of Zion and to the peace that the world so desperately needs.

I'm going to end by providing some ideas in short order that might be useful in helping us think about how we can enter into deep and meaningful partnership with each other so as to resurrect the body of Christ from its Western cultural capture.

We can start by reforming missions. Missions are places of encounter, and we are simply not leveraging their power to create a flow of intercultural wisdom across the world. Of the old pedagogical model of mission, Frantz Fanon rightly points out: "The Church in the colonies

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6. Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 139.

7. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 165–66.

is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor."<sup>8</sup>

When I was in Utah last month, I attended a mission homecoming in Draper mirroring many homecomings I have witnessed over the years. Outside of the small field of that missionary's labor—in this case, Samoan-speaking South Auckland, New Zealand—it became clear to me once again that LDS missionaries characteristically use limited tools to minister to a diverse people. They come back home misunderstanding or oblivious to the rich cultures that have much to teach all of us. The returning missionary's heart and mind are too often empty of the deep learning that might contribute to an intercultural understanding that could serve both the missionary and the missionized and therefore enliven the body of Christ. I cannot help but think if that is all missionaries come back with, they are likely not missionaries, they are colonizers.

On that note, I would also like to address the impossibility of requiring all congregations to mimic the organization of church units in Utah. Are we even a little bit cognizant of the cultural tax we are exacting from those who must reproduce in their communities the Utah Church with its hard edges, impossible expectations, and its lack of openness to ideas beyond itself? The Church is destroying local leadership or leaving it in the hands of people who aspire to be presidents and bishops (which is often a sign of some kind of mental health failing). We at the outskirts are almost never given the opportunity to dream and envision how the gospel might best take root in our own cultures.

Secondly, there must be some acceptance of compound world-views. Cartesian dualities are a luxury for people who do not need to develop the creativity and inventiveness needed to survive. It is tyranny. Requiring one single rigid and unyielding identity is not a privilege; it is a curse for all.

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8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 42.

With that in mind, I would like to share a story of the value of cross-cultural hermeneutics. Recently an evangelical church was established in Nigeria, and the American missionaries were debating whether they would allow local leaders to administer this fresh new congregation. A cultural anthropologist was called in to help them gather the information to make that determination. The anthropologist placed the Nigerian converts in one room and the Western missionaries in another and asked them to offer an exegesis of the story of Joseph in Egypt. When the groups had finished they were asked: What is this story all about?

The Western respondents were emphatic: It is about the blessings that flow if we keep God's commandments. The Nigerians were equally emphatic: It is most definitely about the injunction God gives us to be loyal to and love our families no matter what. Now, who was right? Moreover, is that even a question we should be asking ourselves?

Two anecdotes from two different American Mormons serve to illustrate why we need to question the notion that it is possible to create a gospel culture, a distinctive way of life, common to all members of the Church:

I served on the high council in the Berlin Stake back about twenty years ago. They knowingly did things differently, sometimes as if to make a point, always with a wink and a nod. The biggest "infracton" by far was that the wards did not pass all the funds upstream, but held on to an arbitrary percentage to hedge against a rainy day. When I challenged the first counselor (now a Seventy), he smiled and reminded me how Germans know a thing or two about preparing for hard times. I participated in an audit, and I know that some of the wards had put away as much as (at the time) approximately \$20,000. This also meant, however, that they funded some awesome activities. Also, the stake paid a professional organist to play at a stake conference. The stake had a very formal Gold and Green Ball, with tickets at approximately \$50 per couple. I protested. I asked how people of limited means could attend. The stake president said that stake members saved all year. Sure enough, my wife and I were under-dressed and out-classed as the Germans showed up in tuxedos and

gowns. There was a professional orchestra, catered food, and it kicked off with a traditional, formal promenade led by the presidency. Whenever there was a potluck, members who brought items submitted bills for reimbursement for whatever they brought. Weekend in-service meetings kicked off with Kaffeetrinken, or coffee—all right, it was always Kneipp or Caro brand Malzkaffee (barley/chicory coffee)—and cakes and sticky buns from the bakery. That made the meetings far more tolerable than what I was used to.

And here's the second experience:

I didn't serve outside of the US, but rather southern California. I served in extremely rich wards and the members there wore lots of costly apparel, silks, fine-twined linen, had many cars and possessions, and all manner of precious things. I never really saw that local custom squashed. Actually, it seemed like it was promoted.

Is there a gospel culture?

Certainly there is a gospel, but there are many cultures, and having the humility to see courageously and with openness exactly how the gospel shoots through those diverse cultures without measuring its expressions against Utah Mormon culture specifically and the white, Western cultural capture of the Church, without dictating the language, the clothing, the music, and the manner of worship will be Mormonism's greatest pioneer journey yet.<sup>9</sup>

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9. The author would like to thank Steve Maina, Director of the New Zealand Church Missionary Society for inspiring these reflections.