

# RACISM<sup>1</sup>

James C. Jones

Brothers and sisters, when I was a teenager, my favorite apostle to listen to was Dallin H. Oaks. I appreciated that he was to the point, kept his sentences on the shorter side, and didn't mince words. One of my favorite memories from back then was when he began a talk about divorce by saying, "I have felt impressed to speak about divorce." I appreciated that he was willing to speak on a topic that he acknowledged evoked strong feelings, and I appreciated that he threw it out there at the beginning. Ironically, this is my way of letting you know that I have failed to find a delicate way to introduce my topic, which similarly tends to evoke strong feelings.

So, brothers and sisters, I wish to speak frankly about the subject of racism. Part of me wants to discuss it because we don't really talk about it a lot in the Church. If you open your Gospel Library app right now and search general conference for the word "racism," you'll get three results. One is two sentences from 1995, and the other two, while more recent, are one sentence each and say the exact same thing because one quotes the other. Now, if you search for "pornography" in general conference, you'll get results for days. I can tell you that I know pornography to be an issue, not only because many are deeply affected by it, but because it's something that we regularly talk about. However, because racism isn't mentioned regularly in conference, we may not be well equipped to deal with issues of race inside or out of our chapels.

The other reason I want to discuss this issue is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about reclamation. Jesus Christ came to reclaim us from sin and death. The four-fold mission of the Church can be summed up as

---

1. Given during sacrament meeting at the Longfellow Park meetinghouse in Cambridge, Massachusetts on February 24th, 2019.

reclaiming our ancestors through temple work, reclaiming ourselves by perfecting ourselves, and reclaiming one another by helping the poor and needy and preaching the gospel. I know, brothers and sisters, that that last one won't happen unless we rid ourselves of racism and take steps to help others do the same. Let me tell you how I know this by telling you what I learned about sheep recently.

The first thing I learned was that for every hundred sheep, God creates a black sheep (or brown or gray or spotted). The second thing I learned is that the black sheep are how shepherds know how many sheep they have. So if you have five black sheep, you have 500 sheep. The third thing I learned is that in the old West, the black sheep were called "markers" and were used the same way shepherds used them. An old saying they used was, "once your markers are in, your flock is in." This last piece gave the parable of the lost sheep a whole lot more meaning for me. I'd like to believe that the shepherd in the parable knew his flock was incomplete because his marker was missing. He left the ninety-nine not only because every sheep is valuable, but because the flock would not be complete otherwise. That's important. The flock is not complete without the black sheep.

Brothers and sisters, I'm not concerned with talking about why racism is bad. I believe I'd be hard pressed to find anyone in this room who feels otherwise. Plus, the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the leaders of the church, even the whole of the gospel of Jesus Christ declare that "God is no respecter of persons," that "the lord looketh on the heart," and that "all are alike unto God"—"black and white, bond and free."

What does concern me is that I don't see more people who look like me in this room. According to the Higher Education Research Institute, black folk are the most likely to seek religion, and they rank highest in eleven of twelve spirituality categories. Since the Church regularly ranks high in growth, it would stand to reason that there would be more of us here, yet here we are not.

What does concern me is that when the subject of the priesthood and temple ban comes up, there are still people comfortably affirming belief in divine authorship despite there being no evidence of the same and much evidence to the contrary. Additionally, one should consider the spiritual and emotional implications of blaming God for the spiritual dispossession of black saints. To accept that God wanted us to suffer for 126 years without the blessings of the priesthood and temple is to accept Brigham Young's original, though now disavowed, reasons for that suffering. "If there never was a prophet or apostle of Jesus Christ spoke it before, I tell you this people that are commonly called Negroes are the children of Cain, I know they are; I know they cannot bear rule in the priesthood, in the first sense of the word." We cannot put that on our Father in Heaven, brothers and sisters.

What does concern me is that too often our missionaries and members are not prepared to have conversations about racial issues in the Church's past with black members and investigators. Why isn't the ability to talk openly and honestly about this a priority, especially when it's such a stumbling block for black Saints and investigators?

What does concern me is that there are additional stresses on the black member of the Church that have spiritual as well as mental and emotional implications. To demonstrate this difference in experience, I borrowed a list of questions, modeled after the prompts in Peggy McIntosh's essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." These questions are meant to determine from their answers alone whether or not the one answering is a Mormon of color. For example, do you worry about the racial attitudes of your leaders, teachers, and peers? If you forget to do your ministering, don't respond to emails, show up late to meetings, or otherwise make mistakes, do you worry that people attribute these things to race? If you behave in ways that don't fit the church norm, do you worry people attribute it to your race? Do you see yourself widely represented in Church materials and other media? If you feel isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance,

or feared in the LDS community, do you fear it's because of your race? When you think of pioneers, do those people look like you? Can you choose whether the Church's legacy of racism will affect your religious experience? Would anyone tell you that your skin color is the result of sin? Do you experience the dissonance of attending church with people who support political policies or other rhetoric that oppresses people of your race? I'm quite certain I answered those questions differently than most of you and that does concern me.

What concerns me is that a common lament I hear from black Saints is that we feel alone or invisible in the very places we surround ourselves with those who have covenanted to be their brothers' keepers. A friend of mine told me a story where she visited a predominantly black ward on the same weekend that black men Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were killed by police officers. Many in the congregation were still shaken by the events. The counselor conducting the service told the congregation that the bishop, who happens to be white, would like to address the congregation after the final speaker. Brothers and sisters, there was an audible gasp in that chapel. Again, this is a predominantly black ward three days after these high-profile killings that have traumatized much of black America. The anticipation was palpable. The bishop got up and began addressing the congregation with the words, "I'd like to tell you about a trip my family and I took to Idaho . . ." I don't know how Jesus felt when he came across Peter after the latter had just denied the former three times, but I suspect it was something like what the black members in that room felt. This happens often enough on a macro level as well. For example, when the Church released a statement on the Paris terror attacks, but not the ones in Kenya around that same time, or when the Church released a statement on the Vegas and synagogue shootings, but not the Charleston Nine.

What concerns me is that, despite early Saints being subjected to racially motivated and state-sanctioned violence in Missouri, I see today

a disturbing number of Saints who are apathetic or hostile toward racial minorities who seek redress for the same.

In summation, what concerns me is that despite the gospel of Jesus Christ condemning racism, despite just about everyone in this room agreeing that it is bad, and despite the fact that even the white Mormon pioneers experienced racial violence, the Church is still significantly affected by racism, which raises the questions, “Why is this the case?” and “How do we address it?” I’m only interested in answering the former question inasmuch as it helps us answer the latter, and I want to point to Brother Darius Gray—former president of the Genesis Group and spiritual mentor to many black Saints—for some answers.

He writes in an LDS.org blog post on healing the wounds of racism that we must first acknowledge racism. Like I said at the beginning, we don’t really talk about this issue as a church, and contrary to what some may believe, no problem as significant as racism goes away by ignoring it. Ida B. Wells—educator, journalist, and cofounder of NAACP—adds her witness that the only way to right wrongs is to shine a light upon them. Silence is not an option. Silence is complicity with the status quo and an affront to our covenant to “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places.” It is an affront our covenant to “comfort those that stand in need of comfort.” It is an affront to the second great commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Brothers and sisters, while I can acknowledge the discomfort of engaging in this difficult conversation, are our covenants not worth far more than our comfort?

The next thing Darius suggests is taking personal inventory and recognizing racism in ourselves. It’s important to note that most racism isn’t as overt and hostile as wearing a Klan hood or having @apurposelife’s Twitter account. Darius gives some examples of what this kind of racism looks like, and I added some more personal examples for good measure: It looks like being proud of yourself for behaving well with someone of a different race. It looks like less compassion toward those of a difference race when they experience poverty, war, famine, crime,

etc. It looks like jokes and disparaging remarks related to someone's race. It looks like being quick to blame the Spanish-speaking ward when something breaks or goes missing in a multi-unit building. It looks like a mission president honoring a request from an investigator to dismiss a brown missionary so he can be taught by two white ones instead. It looks like an apostle complimenting African members on their innate enhanced spirituality without acknowledging that their spiritual resilience and strength may be a natural consequence of surviving centuries of exploitation and colonization. It looks like a white person submitting unsolicited criticism to the seven black women who put on the black LDS legacy conference because she didn't feel represented. It looks like refusing a deeper look into the gospel and the Church as they relate to people of African descent because we don't feel that affects us. As King Benjamin said, "I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin; for there are divers ways and means," but we have been counseled to come unto the Lord that he may show us our weaknesses with the promise that he will "make weak things become strong" unto us if we humble ourselves before him. The last tip Darius gives aids us in that pursuit.

We must listen to those whom we regard as the other. Many years ago, I sang in the BYU Men's Chorus under the direction of Rosalind Hall. A common word of advice she gave us was to listen louder than we sang. Being able hear those around us put us in a better position to blend with each other, which consequently made us a better-sounding choir. How much better would we be as a church if we listened louder than we sang? I can tell you this is easier said than done, but I must acknowledge that it may be our best shot at reclaiming one another. I bear testimony that this work is honoring our baptismal covenants, it is fulfilling our mission to proclaim the gospel, and it is fulfilling our mission to perfect ourselves and complete our flock that is the human family.