

ROUNDTABLE: SHOULD THE CHURCH
OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
APOLOGIZE FOR HISTORICAL RACISM?

“THE BEST OF US”:
A CONVERSATION
WITH CORNEL WEST

James C. Jones

James C. Jones interviewed Dr. Cornel West in February 2023 in New York, New York.

JONES: One of the first things that I wanted to just ask, Dr. West, is about your general experience or even your introduction to Mormonism or to our world. I do know that Chase N. Peterson was the president of the University of Utah and there is an intersection of the two of your resumes at Harvard.

So can you tell me a little bit about what that relationship or that encounter was like? What role did Chase N. Peterson have in that particular phase of your life?

WEST: Well, one is, my brother, I want to begin by saluting you. I want people to know that you have been exemplary in terms of what it means to be a person of integrity, courage, love, both open-mindedness, but also taking a stand, you know, with a backbone so that in that regard, I mean, if you represent the public face of Mormonism, Mormons got a magnificent future! And I tell you, I've been very, very blessed to meet such high-quality Mormon folk. My dear brother David Holland at Harvard, who was a distinguished historian. He was just a magnificent

human being in terms of kindness. He was my dear colleague, has always treated me with deep love and respect. And then Brother Chase, he was the first Mormon I really met. He was the head of admissions at Harvard.

He actually hired David Evans, who was the Black brother from Arkansas with a degree from Princeton, Tennessee State. They together fundamentally transformed the multicultural diversity and multiracial diversity at Harvard. They together admitted over 85 percent of the Black folk in the history of Harvard in the few years they were together.

It's unbelievable! Now it happened in 1970 up until—it was right at the moment where Harvard opened up its white supremacist doors and allowed all these folk to come through. And it's fascinating that you would get my magnificent brother Chase—Mormon brother, straight outta Utah—and David Evans, straight out of Black Arkansas.

They worked like hand in glove. It was a beautiful thing, and I was blessed to write the foreword to the memoir of Brother Chase Peterson. In fact, when he asked me, I said, man, you don't realize how big an honor this is. And we spent time together. When I would go to Utah, we were on radio, we did national public radio together for the book and so forth.

So that I have been blessed to meet the best of Mormonism with yourself and those two. And my hunch is, you know, there's got to be some much lower quality Mormon brothers and sisters out there! Because that's exactly true with my own church, Shiloh Baptist Church. You know, we had some of the best people and we had some of the worst people in the church.

Just like I got some of the best and the worst inside of me, you know, so that's just who we are as human beings made in the image and likeness of an almighty God. But I'm so glad you began on this note, because I certainly have a certain bias of deep positive orientation toward the Mormons owing to the particular Mormons I have been blessed to get a chance to know—you, Chase, and Brother David.

JONES: Thank you so much, Dr. West. And thank you for clarifying that we have multitudes in us. I think about this a lot, particularly with members of my own faith, I definitely can see that, you know, I see the best of us, I see the worst of us, and sometimes I see more of one than the other. And that makes me either elated or profoundly discouraged or even depressed on occasion. So I appreciate you saying that. That calls me in a little bit and also gives me cause for reflection. So thank you for sharing that.

We got some regular debates going on within Mormonism regarding race, regarding a variety of other forms of oppression or bigotry, whatever the case is.

One of the hottest debates right now is around the temple and priesthood restrictions that were laid on Black people for approximately 130 years, that those restrictions were lifted in 1978. So, a while ago, but nonetheless, we cannot deny the effect of that particular discrimination. Less than about 1 percent of the American Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is African American, even here in Harlem, a neighborhood, that's about 40, 45 percent Black, the Harlem LDS congregation is only about 25 percent Black on its best days, and we just barely got a Black man in the presiding body of this congregation. And I don't remember when the last time we did something like that was, but point is we have a legacy. We have a history of racism that needs to be dealt with, but one of the first things that a lot of people feel like we should do as a Church is corporately confess to our crime of discrimination against Black people—to apologize for it. And, if you can believe it or not, there is debate on whether or not the Church should do that.

Now, based on what I've just told you or what you just generally know, how would you feel—do you feel, actually, that the LDS Church should corporately confess to the sin of racism and if the answer is yes or no, why or why not?

WEST: Well, first, I would first look at it as a Christian, which is to say through the lens of the cross, and all of us fall short.

And this is true for every religious denomination. It's true for every person, especially those of us who have been so deeply shaped by a nation—an empire—that is shot through with white supremacist legacy, past and present. There's just no doubt about that. Beginning with the treatment of Indigenous peoples and then enslaved Africans and so forth, we've got anti-Jewish attitudes shot through our Christian denominations so we cannot deny that. So the question becomes, "What evil inside of us is?" It's not a question of just looking at the evil in others—"What evil inside of us is operating and what are the conditions under which we want to be changed and transformed?" And I would think that repentance and apologies are a part of the healing process because all you're doing when you apologize is you are acknowledging that which has been rendered invisible. And yet, even as it's been rendered invisible, there's human beings down there suffering. There's Black folk been suffering, There is people suffering and so forth, and we know that we are made in the image of God like anybody else, with the same status, the same significance, the same sanctity, the same dignity.

You know, I had a wonderful run-in with the brother in Italy. What was his name?

JONES: Ah, yeah, Dallin Oaks, right?

WEST: Yeah! Dallin Oaks. He and his loved ones though. He is a wonderful brother, you know. He got a wonderful spirit about him, and he was so open and warm and welcoming in that sense. And yet all of us know, he and I, roughly the same age, we grew up under the Jim Crow-like conditions, so how could we not be affected by how we grew up? No matter how committed we are to our own distinctive faith—it's not distinctive because it overlaps in very deep and profound ways. So, it is just a matter of being candid.

I think there's a fear of people apologizing because they feel as if somehow they are being associated with the conquerors and the slaveholders and the colonizers and that solely because of their skin color or

skin pigmentation, that they somehow are being targeted—not demonized—but targeted in a critical way. And we simply say, “Look, we—and this is part of the legacy of Martin King and Fannie Lou Hamer—That this is a love affair.” We wanna create a context where people can apologize about the legacy and the beneficiaries of white skin privilege as it relates to the vicious legacy of white supremacy, but in such a way that they recognize they’re not being tarnished with the brush of the white supremacy of their ancestors. They can choose and go another way, and they have!

Man, I never talked about this with Brother Chase, but Chase and I reveled in each other’s humanity and had marvelous times, and his wife and his family, we’ve had marvelous times. Now, if I were to sit down with Brother Chase and say, “Now tell me about your granddaddy.” [Laughter]

“Tell me about your granddaddy in relation to Jamal and Leticia and Ray Ray.” I don’t know what he would say. His granddaddy could be a very extraordinary vanilla brother who fought against white supremacy. But my hunch is he was deeply shaped by his time too! And he would say the same too: “Brother West, tell me about *your* granddaddy.”

Oh, I’ll tell you about my granddaddy, pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, who had a loving spirit, who invited white folk into his church at all times. Who told me, “Cornell, don’t you ever, ever hate white people. You hate the sin, not the sinner. You hate white supremacy without hating white people.”

That’s what I was told. I believe it to this day. That means what? That means that we all are shaped for better or worse by those who came before, but we can make choices now. So apology in some ways is a weak response because after apology comes some kind of action . . .

JONES: Some kind of reparation.

WEST: Exactly! Some kind of action. But this is not quid pro quo. This is the truth of the past, the damage done, and the attempt to repair the damages done in some way. It’s not about money. It’s about the soul of

a congregation, of a denomination, of a nation, of a people. It's about your soul, it's about my soul, and all of us, our souls fall short.

I think that's the thing that a lot of our white brothers and sisters have overlooked. You see, when we call for apologies or reparations, somehow they think that we're looking down on them and imposing this definitive judgment on them and condemning them. No, not at all. There's white supremacy inside of Black people. There's white supremacy inside of Black institutions. And that has to be wrestled with. It's just that the black skin lack of privilege for so long and the white skin privilege for so long are major effects and consequences of the institutions, of the structures, of the attitudes, of the perceptions of too many white supremacists in the making of this nation and country.

JONES: So thank you, first of all, for saying that an apology is not gonna be enough because my next question was going to be what might this look like, this apology, because I'm of the opinion that the best apology is changed behavior. And what might that behavior look like? Because we have seen examples of corporate confession from some Baptist, some Methodist churches. We've seen it modeled well what this corporate confession might look like. But, for the LDS Church, I can't help but wonder what might an apology look like for us where we have kept Black folks out of full fellowship, kept them out of leadership, kept them out of temples. In some cases, kept them out of pews. And now we're at this point. Even though Black people are the most likely demographic in the US to seek religion, 13 percent of the population, we're still around 1 percent of the American LDS population. So, based on what you've seen in the good examples of the people who have actually done corporate confession, what might this apology, or what might a proper restitution, if I can use that word—what might that look like for us do you think?

WEST: Well one, I think that it would be a matter of digging deep into the rich wells of the Mormon tradition and saying that when we excluded precious Black people, that was not the best of us. That was not the best of Mormonism. There's another side of Mormonism. We

have spiritual and scriptural resources in our tradition that bring critique to bear on white supremacy and we can do that as Mormons.

And we could do that in such a way that—it’s a matter of embrace so that Mormonism looks better and stronger and more loving and more courageous and more true to Jesus and Joseph Smith and all the others. And I’ll say it this: if Mormonism can attract a magnificent artist like Gladys Knight, one of my favorite singers of all time, then I know—cuz she’s a wise sister and she’s a great artist—that she got something going on inside of her that leads her to that. And the same as true for James [Jones] and his parents and so forth. Something is going on that’s important, that’s rich, that’s deep. And all Mormonism has to do is to say, “The worst of who we are was at work in our exclusion of these precious Black folk made in the image and likeness of God. We’re not only sorry, we’re going to execute policies in such a way that it accents the best of Mormonism.”

JONES: [Laughter] Sorry. The next question I got is literally a poetry, and it leads into what you just said. This is the best of us. And you’re totally right about that because what I wanted to highlight was just this paradox of us having this past, this history, this legacy, yet us having a theology that is, in my estimation, profoundly inclusive, profoundly expansive, profoundly radical, and revolutionary, and affirming.

Whereas I do see our history in our past. I see whole sections, whole chapters of the Book of Mormon that are so affirming of Black people that read like whole treaties or cries of Black America that I can’t help but wonder how people have missed this the entire time. Like that was probably one of the greatest victories yet tragedies to me when I first decided to pursue this course was the fact that I could see things other people couldn’t, simply because I was a Black American.

I could hear my people’s cries in the text. I could hear the best of us. I could hear and see the radical and the revolutionary, the expansive, the robust, the beautiful. And like you just pointed out earlier, Dallin Oaks grew up in Jim Crow. He’s a straight white man who grew up in

Jim Crow and pretty much everybody else on his level in Church leadership is a white man that grew up in America during Jim Crow. So, it's no wonder that I've never had anybody unfold the scriptures to me in a way that affirms what I just shared with you. I don't understand how or why predominantly straight white leadership born in the Jim Crow era would know that or would be able to and would consequently be able to teach it. I'm so glad you highlighted that.

WEST: Well, I'll give you a fascinating analogy which really doesn't hold, but I say it to be highly provocative. One of the greatest of the Afrikaner Christians—close friend of Desmond Tutu—was named Beyers Naudé. He was the head of the South African Council of Churches. He invited me to come to South Africa—underground cause it was against the law to go from America to South Africa at that time. And I had to be an honorary white in order to get through the airport.

And so we were underground with Tutu and Allan Boesak and others. And Beyers Naudé, his family was one of the founders of the Afrikaner Brotherhood and Theology. And this is apartheid. This is not just exclusion [from the] organization the way it was with the Mormons in the past, this was a whole apartheid society across the board with a built-in subjugation of Black folk in every sphere of life.

And I went to the Afrikaner Group—99 percent Afrikaner. See, I'm the only Black brother in this whole vanilla crowd. And I read and I said, "We believe in a God of a persecuted people. We believe in a God of the oppressed that allowed us to move so many miles to migrate. The lot was with us in the most excruciating circumstances and adverse conditions."

And a guy jumped up and said, "We don't want to hear all of this liberation theology from James Cone and others." I said, "I'm reading from the Afrikaner Formulation in 1905 against British imperialists!"¹ I said, "This is your history! Because you were a persecuted people. You

1. *Dialogue* editors are unable to locate this particular document that Dr. West is relaying from memory.

were oppressed people. Yes, you oppressed others—Black folk—but they were fighting the Boer war against the British.”

I said, “Liberation theology’s not alien to you. The problem is you were too narrow in your tribalism and the best of your tradition is universalism that embraces everybody. So this is not James Cone. This is an Afrikaner theologian in 1903.” I said, “This is the best of your tradition. I’m reading about you, and I believe in the best of your tradition as a Christian.”

Now, of course, the Mormons are not Afrikaners in the same vicious way, but the white supremacy has still been there in a deep way. And I could go back to the best of Mormonism and read about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, tied to a God of the persecuted and subjugated and demeaned and demonized. I mean, Mormonism’s been one of the most demonized groups in the history of the American Empire. You got Indigenous peoples, you got Black folks, you got Jews. Mormons are on that list! Including Abraham Lincoln and others who wasn’t in love with them in his own way. So then the question becomes, well, let’s look deep into the wells of the best of Mormonism.

You can look deep into the wells of the best of any oppressed people, and you’ll find, lo and behold, especially if they’re serious about their belief in an almighty God who looks low and who cares for the orphan and the widow, and the fatherless, and the motherless and believes in trying to ensure that the good news can be made available all around the world, in every corner of the globe because of that good news that you already received.

I said, “Hey, I mean Mitt Romney, you got to go! Put in your two years brother!” It is something built into the sense of joy to spread the good news and when it’s not ugly and coercive in an imperial way, there’s nothing wrong with trying to sit down and talk to folk to share the good news in one’s own life.

That to me, is so much of the best of Mormonism and that is what needs to come back with power and potency for the future of Mormonism to be what I think it can be.

JONES: Yeah. You did it again. Dr. West. You just, I mean, you brought up the history of Mormonism. You understood and acknowledged that we too were once an oppressed people. As a new religion in the Americas. And I think often about the fact that we were once an oppressed people and think how we got from there to here.

Now, like there's already been a lot of work done about that transition, that kind of institutional code switch that Mormonism did. But I fully agree with that. We really need to dig back into it. And it, what you just said has echoes of the development of the social gospel here in America.

I'm thinking a lot about Rauschenbusch in particular and Gladden and these other folks who kind of came in with the social gospel and how their efforts were trying to recover the best of the Christian tradition and how that started basically, at least for Gladden and Rauschenbusch that it was the suffering of others.

So, I wanna ask, how do you feel that tradition might be recovered? I mean, I got my thoughts, but how does that typically look or how do you think that might happen for us in terms of recovering the best of us?

WEST: You know, I think that every moment in the history of humankind, there is a struggle taking place on the battlefield of the souls of each and every one of us past and present. With greed, hatred, envy, resentment, insecurity, anxiety, and the countervailing forces against it—love, service to the weak, compassion for the vulnerable, humility, integrity, honesty. And those countervailing voices always appear weak and feeble because so much of human history is, as Hegel said, it's a slaughterhouse.

Edward Gibbons said it's a history of crimes and follies. And as Christians, we understand the history of the species that's so much of the history of domination and subjugation. We try to create those interruption moments, those *kairos* moments that can turn us around to push the greed inside of us, the hatred and injury, resentment inside,

push that far enough away so we can become new beings. And a love or that freedom and love and love and freedom that is distinctive in so many ways with the Christian gospel.

And when you look at it that way, then the question becomes, “What are the conditions under which the best of the species, the best of Mormonism, can flower and flourish?” And it’s only by means of example. Only by means of example. Emanuel Kant says examples are the go-kart of judgment. When you find those Mormons who muster the courage and love to say, Jamal and Latisha are as much a part of the human family as those who have been part of the Mormon family, they have to cut against the grain. Brother Chase was cutting against the grain. I loved the brother. Not just cuz he cut against the grain. He is just a wonderful brother. But the very fact that he did that was courage. He knew that the best of Mormonism was something worth fighting for.

And I would say the same thing about my own tradition. You see the Black church got all kinds of blindness and faults and foibles, and we have to cut against the grain. These days, you gotta cut against the commodification of religion and the marketization of religion so that success, worldly success and financial success become the idols, the dominant idols of our day.

No, no, the best of Mormonism says “God is almighty.” That dollar might be mighty within the world, but God is all and God has a calling for us. And the calling is not just our careers. God’s got a vocation for us. Vocation’s not just a profession. And when you understand what that vocation and calling is, it has a whole lot to do with loving kindness to others and steadfast love to the least of these. That’s what Walter Rauschenbusch understood as a Baptist. Now he’s a German Baptist and I’m a Black Baptist. So we got overlap, we got differences. But this is true for any denomination or any religious tradition, I think, actually.

JONES: So that brings me to kind of wondering on this subject of leading by example. We have a little bit of a problem in the Mormon Church in

terms of checks and balances. We don't really have—there's not really a way for the common man to hold them accountable with the way that the Church's power structure is set up.

It's very centralized. And even when they give us the ways that we can express any kind of dissatisfaction with the way things are, whether it be the Church's lack of strategy, policy or curriculum when it comes to racism, the lack of Black people in leadership, or the lack of queer voices who are making queer policies, we don't really have a way to check that. So what might accountability look like for an institution like ours that doesn't necessarily have those checks and balances?

WEST: That's a wonderful question, brother. I don't think I'm equipped to answer it because I don't know enough about the internal dynamics of the Mormon Church.

I know it's fascinating, complicated, and complex with its own rich history, and it's not static. It's changing over time, like any tradition. But I don't really know enough. But I'll tell you this, that when I look at other examples, I'll give you just, just probably the greatest Catholic in early modern Europe was Erasmus.

Now in 1559, all of his works are put on the index of prohibited texts—his own church! His own church because the truths that he was putting forward about the corruption of the clergy and the indulgences in terms of paying people—asking for people's money to get into heaven.

The same thing that Martin Luther would make so much of. Erasmus was making the points, but he stayed in the church. Luther made the same points, he said, "I got to break." He said, "No, Luther, I'm not breaking with you." James Buchanan, another great figure, held on as long as he could, and then later became Presbyterian in Scotland, but he held on for a long time too.

Well, so it is with Mormonism. If Mormonism wants to run out some of its high-quality people who want to preserve the best of Mormonism by means of whatever it is—excommunication, marginalization,

pushing to the periphery—then you fall into the worst of the other denominations. Mormonism is not alone.

All these denominations do that. Martin Luther King Jr. was booted out of the National Baptist Convention by J. H. Jackson, another Black preacher. He had to form his own convention. He's still a Baptist, but he had to form his own convention. Why? Too much prophetic juices flowing. Martin, you got to go.

Now they all want to claim them. The Catholic Church today, "Erasmus is one of our greatest figures in the history of our tradition." You put him on the index of prohibited—Ah! That's the history of traditions that have to learn their lessons and say we were wrong in what we did. We were wrong in pushing our prophetic voices.

A whole wave of folk. Queer voices. It could be women's voices. It could be Black voices or brown voices. When they have a genuine love and concern and are fundamentally committed to the spreading of loving kindness to each and every one of us and they're still cast as heretics, traitors, public enemy number one, we're fallen to the worst of our history.

If we learn and say, "Oh lo and behold, we've got to reexamine ourselves. We don't have a monopoly on the truth at this moment because we are fallen human beings like everybody else." Chase got a point. How do we keep the vitality of the tradition alive? And you don't keep it alive by ossifying or petrifying it.

There's got to be an engagement, and there's got to be ways in which the best of the tradition can be held onto as you're beginning to meet new circumstances and new conditions. And when it comes to race or gender or sexual orientation or empire, all of these challenges are very real. The challenges inside of us and our souls, the challenges outside of us in our society.

JONES: Well, if I can just hang on to one thing that you said in there. You talked about the prophetic, when you talked about Erasmus, when you talked about Luther, and they needed to speak up, but they often had

to speak up in ways that were not institutionally sanctioned. I fear, but also am a little excited that this might be what the Mormon Church has to come to, and not that I think that people are going to have a problem with that, but at the same time, it shouldn't be that way. And you know, might be excommunication, might be marginalization, might be disfellowshipment, just like you said. There are ways that those stories can end.

But what I'm hearing—because I am familiar with the tradition, I do believe I understand the way the dynamics operate within the tradition—for me, as somebody who ticks every box of Mormon respectability, nearly every box of Mormon respectability, I don't feel like excommunication is off the table for me. I don't think they are gonna do it, but I don't think it's off the table, even though I meet every box, because at some point, to adequately address the things that are going on in Mormonism with regard to race, with regard to gender, with regard to orientation, I cannot operate within the same parameters of the institution that set those parameters. And I do fear excommunication. I'm not scared of it. I mean, if that's the worst they can do to me, I'm not scared, but what I'm hearing is that to be prophetic is to engage in an act of courage that could potentially be costly.

WEST: No, there's always a high cost of discipleship. There's no way around it. We wrestled with this in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer and James Baldwin class together last year, you know what I mean?

And Bonhoeffer and Baldwin have no monopoly on truth, but my God, they exemplify levels of the love and courage and the willingness to be true to what they understand they're calling to be. I mean, what I would say with you is what we see in the case of, you know, Erasmus and others.

You don't want to ever allow anybody to excommunicate your relation with God. And your calling and that as you decide to remain within the Mormon Church with a sense of humility—cuz you got

much to learn from the best tradition. This is not just you bringing the truth. No. This is you residing. You've been shaped and molded by the Mormon tradition.

And there's a rich tradition. But with you refusing ever to be excommunicated from your God and your faith, that is a critique of the institution. You're holding on. And that's something that must always be one possibility and option among a host of others.

But I mean, in many ways, it's in God's hands in terms of calling you. And it's in the Church's hands in terms of, are they sensitive enough, courageous enough, open-minded enough to see God working through you? Not just to see James, but to see God working through you to make Mormonism the best that it can be.

And sometimes the institution makes bad choices. We've known that. Mormons are not alone. Every religious institution across the board, across nations, has made bad choices in terms of pushing their prophetic figures to the side. Now prophetic figures can sometimes be wrong too. That's where our humility comes in.

And myself, of course, as a Christocentric Christian, you see—you know, we Baptists, brother, it's "love Jesus and the rest is commentary." Oh, that's a wild position. That's why we've got in such deep trouble. And that's why sometimes our congregations can be pure chaos, whereas Mormonism is much more tied to hierarchy and order.

I can understand that. There's wisdom on both sides. We don't want too much chaos.

JONES: We do say something similar though! We say that it all comes down to Jesus Christ or the atonement of Jesus Christ and everything else is an appendage.

WEST: Is that right?

JONES: That's true. Yes, sir.

WEST: That's what Mormonism say? Dang, I thought we Baptist had something new!

JONES: You said it yourself. The truth can be found in a variety of different places.

WEST: Exactly. But that's really what it is. Now, of course, you know, loving Jesus and being taught the atonement of Jesus is a whole lot.

JONES: It's a lot to unpack.

WEST: That's why our humility—exactly, it's a lot to unpack in terms of the kind of lives we live and the kinds of fruit we bear.

But sometimes our institutions are too obsessed with the foliage and aren't concerned with the spiritual fruits of love.

JONES: That's probably one of the most frustrating things to me. I was on Twitter the other day and I saw somebody say something along the lines of, you can tell 95 percent of how faithful a Mormon is based on how they feel about queer people. And that will tell you everything you need to know. And I just remember thinking to myself, "That is sad. That is pathetic. That is awful that you have essentially reduced the entirety of our faith to disliking queer people." And I'm just like, that is a profound example of missing the mark because our theology, and you know, we've said this already, but it's far more expansive, far more robust, far more life-giving than that. Than us merely absolutely discarding and disliking queer folks.

WEST: Absolutely, but it's amazing, though. I mean, Jesus himself is silent on the issue. Jesus himself says over and over and over again you got to love thy God with everything inside of you and love thy neighbor as thyself.

JONES: I would argue that is saying something, though.

WEST: That's saying a whole lot, and it's embracing of people across gender and race and nation and sexual orientation. So why, how could somebody say 95 percent of what it's about? It's just about targeting this particular slice of humanity? It's a major clash in the fundamental Mormon commitment to the atonement of Jesus and the rest is an appendage. Or what we Baptists would say, "Love Jesus and the rest is commentary." But we have the same thing among, you know, my fellow Baptists. Many would say the same thing about precious queer brothers and sisters.

JONES: Yes, sir. And that kind of brings me to one of the last things I wanna bring up, which is the role of the Church when it comes to social ills.

I'll just bring Rauschenbusch back in here one more time. He says something along the lines of, "If people are suffering because of politics and economy, then the church has to address the human suffering because of politics and the economy." Now, my church personally is notoriously apolitical.

We don't speak to a lot of what ails our society, which is one thing that I do struggle with, but I just wanted to get your feelings on the role of church in addressing social ills. Because to claim, as our church does, to be the restored church of the brown-skinned Palestinian, Jewish Jesus Christ, who was lynched by the Roman Empire—he was lynched by the state. And it stands to reason that if we claim to be disciples of that Jesus Christ and be the bearers of the same church that he had, restored on the earth today, then we should be the first and we should be the best at addressing society's ills.

That is my general feeling. But how do you feel about the role of the church when it comes to addressing society's ills? I've heard you say several things in your different writings. I listened to you at Proctor, like last year at Proctor. You said something that was like so profound to me. It's burned into my memory. You said two things, but the one I'm

thinking of right now is that you cannot drive the money changers out the temple when you're on Pontius Pilate's payroll.

WEST: Oh, you can't follow Jesus when you're on Pontius Pilot's payroll. Well, it's hard to really be with Moses if you're on Pharaoh's payroll. That's true. But I think human beings can have an integrity in whatever context they find themselves. The question is how do you work it through us like Nathan working with the King David?

But I would say this. That I do not for a minute believe that my precious brothers and sisters in the Mormon Church are apolitical. Not at all. I believe that they have their own political biases in terms of how they vote. In terms of whether they're open to different peoples in their neighborhoods and in their schools and churches. Of course, the Mormons are in no way homogeneous and monolithic. You got a whole lot of different kinds of Mormon brothers and sisters. But it's never been apolitical. You couldn't be apolitical. There's no way, under the conditions of persecution and oppression, that you can act as if the nation-state doesn't exist. They trying to crush us. They're trying to crush us.

Finally, we find a place where we can begin to flower and flourish, but we have to preserve the conditions for us flowering and flourishing. That's a political move. You either adjust and accommodate to the powers that be, and you make certain kinds of arrangements—allow us to do this and we won't do that—that's a political arrangement.

But in addition, when it comes to Black people, if my precious brothers and sisters of the Mormon Church had one out of three of their males, between eighteen and twenty-five incarcerated or on parole, if 40 percent of their children were living in poverty, if they were dealing with the bombardment of degradation and tax on Black beauty and Black intelligence and Black moral character, and just change that to attacks on Mormon beauty and Mormon intelligence and Mormon moral character—and there have been such attacks in the Mormon past. If that were the condition, there's no way under God's heaven that

the Mormon Church would say, “We are apolitical.” No way. It’s a matter of not just privilege, but of blindness, and that blindness should be shattered by the example of Jesus, shattered by the atonement of Jesus, shattered by the love of Jesus.

Why? Because Jesus rightly says, “We are first and foremost a spiritual people.” Which means we have a way of pushing back indifference, pushing back callousness, pushing back coldness of heart, pushing back meanness of spirit. And when you push those back, there are political consequences.

So I don’t believe Mormons should be first and foremost political. No, I’m a Christian. I’m not first and foremost political. I’m a follower of Jesus! But to follow Jesus has political consequences. And that’s why we’re highly suspicious of the world’s secular schools of thought and isms and so forth and so on. We talking about a love and a faith and a hope that cuts through all of these isms, but it does look at the world through the lens of the cross.

And that’s a whole different way of looking at the world. I’m telling you, you can’t look at the world through the lens of, you know, Wall Street or Silicon Valley or the Pentagon, even Congress. No, no. You gotta look at the world through the lens of some spiritual and moral views of the world. You see when Brother Mitt Romney says what he says about Sister [Marjorie Taylor] Green, he’s not hating on her. He’s simply saying, “On moral and spiritual grounds, you are wrong, sister. And you in my party!” Now, I got my other critiques of brother Mitt Romney I won’t go into now, but giving my love for the brother. But, at that moment, you can still see the best of Mormonism coming through and most Republicans won’t say a mumbling word. That says something. That says something.

I do want to give him credit, even given my strong critiques of him on other issues. And in that sense—I do believe that the work that you are doing and all of your courage and love and humility and concern about preserving the best of Mormonism—I hope and pray that the

Mormon Church at the highest levels of its hierarchy learns and listens and heeds to what you actually and the others are trying to say.

JONES: As do I. And I think that's a wonderful note to end on. Pretty much answered all the questions I had here and more, and I think the people listening are gonna be incredibly grateful.

WEST: Oh, but I salute you dear brother. Indeed, indeed, indeed, indeed.

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