

Time to Let Go of Columbus

James Singer (Diné)

For me, as a Native American member of the Church, I approach the hero worship of Columbus perhaps more critically and apprehensively than the average member would. I was taught that he was a man of God and vital to the Restoration of the gospel. This ideology promotes the supremacy of whiteness and justifies the moral necessity of conquering and oppressing Indigenous peoples and stealing their lands so that settler-colonial society could persist in perpetuity. By itself, this is abhorrent, but moving beyond that and choosing to incorporate Columbus as a part of the Church's teachings is dangerous.

Establishing Columbus as kicking off the events of the Restoration means accepting a kind of circular reasoning that eliminates agency. Here's that logic: "The genocide of Native Americans happened so that America could be established, where the Restoration would take place." This statement, like many things pertaining to Natives, is accepted as normal and coherent, though I doubt other tragic events could be justified in the same way. Imagine if someone were to say that the Holocaust happened so that the Jews could establish Israel. Or that the enslavement of millions of Africans was necessary for the American Civil War to occur. They are connected events, but it is too simplistic to think that *a* directly led to *b* and furthermore, that *a* by necessity *had* to lead to *b*, or even that *a* justifies *b*.

More than once I've witnessed this dubious logic deployed to explain away the suffering of Natives and their near-complete annihilation. To my face, I've been told that although tragic, it was prophesied, and so completely *acceptable*. The Lamanites were wicked, they say, so their descendants had to be destroyed at a later date. Whatever happened to "men will be punished for their *own* sins"¹ and not for the sins of their fathers?

1. Articles of Faith 1:2, emphasis added.

In response, I have detailed the horrific actions Columbus perpetrated, hoping to cast doubt on his assumed role as man of God. Under his command, he and his men murdered for sport and fed the bodies to their dogs, sometimes while the victims were still alive. Columbus wrote about the demand to rape girls as young as nine or ten. To this, I'm told that sometimes God uses bad men to fulfill his word.

Maybe I just do not understand the mind and will of God. I have always believed in a God of love and mercy. I cannot imagine he would delight in the bloodshed of so many of his children and then watch their descendants remain in an oppressed and marginalized position in society. From a viewpoint that all events happen because they serve some future good that privileges the "right" group, it is easy to see the good Columbus did for that group. But ignoring the devastating effects it had on Native peoples means we choose to employ a dishonest and incomplete outlook. The excuse goes beyond insensitivity; it is essentially the promotion of white supremacy justified in the name of God. I believe we, as a church, have to be better than that. We have to rise to a level worthy enough to be called God's church. That's why I believe it is time to let go of Columbus.

In 1978, God revealed to the leadership of the Church that racial hierarchy was undeniably wrong and antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This truth was so important that it was canonized, making it so everyone could enjoy full membership in the Church, irrespective of race.² That is why I am hopeful that we, as a church, can accept that venerating Columbus as a man of God and necessary for the Restoration is wrong—morally and logically. We don't need a revelation from the Lord to tell us that. He already sent it.



2. "Official Declaration 2," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2?lang=eng>.