

# HOW A MORMON ENDED UP AT UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY: A STEP TOWARD RACIAL JUSTICE AND A BETTER CHURCH

James C. Jones

Four years ago, I was living my best life as a touring a cappella singer. The sum of my ambition was to make great and meaningful art and create the first a cappella group to play the Superbowl halftime show. For years, a photo of the colorfully lit MetLife stadium was my lock screen as a gentle and constant reminder of that goal. Today, I have just finished my first year of graduate school studying Black liberation theology in hopes to create a more complete and enriching Mormon theology that validates marginalized folks and, by extension, creates a space that is more in line with the integrated and diversified New Testament church that Christ intended. As much as I love the restored gospel and the Church, this is the last place I saw myself.

I used to clown returned missionaries who couldn't seem to let go of their missions. They would continue to dress like missionaries weeks after their return, talk endlessly about their missions, and pursue academic tracks that led to working in Church education. In retrospect, I see that loving the Church, the gospel, and the scriptures so much that you want that to be your vocation isn't the worst thing, but, at the time, it read like fanaticism to me. I loved the scriptures and the gospel too, but I felt my ministry lay in a different academic path and aggressively acted accordingly.

Time would tell me, however, that my ministry wasn't in the academy at all—at least for this season of my life. I wasn't a great student, and school stressed me out. As I prepared for graduation, I got rejected by every program I had hoped would improve my odds of advancing my academic and professional career, including the only grad school to which I applied. When Teach For America rejected me a second time, my ego had had enough and I forsook academia for the arts with no intention to return.

In the decade since I made that decision, a lot has happened that ultimately reoriented me back to the academy and to theological studies in particular. First, the job I took after graduating from Brigham Young University took me to Boston, Massachusetts. I immediately noticed a refreshing difference between the congregations I attended in Utah and congregations in Boston. These were the most educated people I had ever worshiped with in my adult life, and it was the safest I had ever felt being my authentic self at church. Some of the Saints had also organized local events to have Latter-day Saint scholars, thinkers, influencers, and leaders share their expertise, experience, and testimonies. The first event I attended like this featured a discussion on womanist theology by a Harvard- and Howard-educated Black Latter-day Saint scholar. I could not have gotten that anywhere else in the world.

Second, the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown happened. They weren't the first unarmed Black men to be gunned down by the police or white vigilantes, but they were the first high-profile cases in the age of social media. They were for millennials what Rodney King was for Gen Xers. Their deaths were catalysts to what would become the rallying affirmation and organization #BlackLivesMatter, in addition to other civil rights organizations. Everyone had an opinion. The most troubling ones to me were, regrettably, from members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—people I had considered friends, people I've prayed and preached the gospel with. The callous response to Black pain—my pain, my family's pain, my community's pain—was

inexcusable for any of the Saints. To make matters worse, going to church was not the balm of Gilead it should've been for Black members. Most of the time our pain was ignored, and if it was mentioned at all, it was straight up minimized. There was no mourning with those who mourn or comforting those who stand in need of comfort. When I went to interfaith vigils to mourn properly, I was almost always the only Latter-day Saint present. I would not accept that this was the best the Church could do in the face of racism and Black pain—not the restored Church of the same Christ who was literally lynched by the state for threatening corrupt political systems that oppressed the marginalized.

Third, the exclusion policy of November 2015 happened. For many of the Saints, including myself, this was something of a crisis. Somewhere at the intersection of my close associations with queer people, my inability to theologically and rationally justify such a policy, and my disdain for bullying and discriminatory behavior, I had to confront queer pain and my faith and figure out how to reconcile the two. Ultimately, the question wasn't how to reconcile my faith and queer pain—our theology already validated queer life when I honestly looked at it. What I needed to come to terms with was what that knowledge requires of me as a person of faith. Peace would not come if I didn't hold our institutions accountable to the Christ we read about in the scriptures, and that meant challenging policy that denied the *imago dei* in our queer siblings, that denied all were alike unto God, and that denied God was no respecter of persons. Anything less would be cowardice and dishonesty on my part. I wasn't alone in my feelings, and this would become palpable in the coming years.

Fourth, in 2019, during the second annual Black LDS Legacy Conference, I felt prompted to create a space to keep conversations going similar to those at the conference. Black folk were able to talk about the gospel in a way that centered Blackness—a way that honored our pain while seeing our strength and, wherever possible, using the restored gospel as a tool to do as much. The conference was a liberating

experience. As a Black Latter-day Saint, I'm used to at least one of those identities constantly being scrutinized anywhere I go. But at that event, my body is able to release much of the tension it holds. I don't have to explain my existence to anyone in that space. I am not a guest. I am home. I wanted to create something close to that for myself and others who struggle to fit in because they look different, love differently, think differently, or otherwise have different needs. They too deserve to be in a space where they feel home.

This desire ultimately gave birth to what is now *Beyond the Block*, a podcast I've been running for a few years with the goal of centering the marginalized in Mormonism. The podcast discusses the *Come, Follow Me* lesson each week while prioritizing a reading for the marginalized. My co-host, Derek Knox, a queer theologian and friend, seemed the perfect conversation partner as pretty much every time we got together, our conversations would turn into a *Beyond the Block* episode. The show has a modest but loyal following. As of this writing, there hasn't been a congregation I've visited in the United States where there wasn't someone familiar with the show. The day after my records were transferred to my ward in New York, I was tapped to substitute teach seminary because of the work I had done on *Beyond the Block*. It is validating to know that something that heals my soul also helps others too, gives them voice, empowers them to affirm the least of these, and helps them be more enriched by our faith.

The show's popularity gave me opportunity to speak at several events and to several publications. People thought our ideas were equal parts life-giving and provocative, though we didn't feel we were saying anything particularly radical in terms of the scope of our sacred texts. That was the point, though. We already have the tools to affirm people on the margins and we don't have to read too closely or too much to find them. All we need is a different lens, and that can be difficult to find when our institution is overwhelmingly white and we're all taught the same scriptures the same ways by the same presumably straight cis white dudes born in the Jim Crow era.

Bear in mind: though I knew I was doing important work, it's work I was doing on the side. I had and still have no professional ambitions where theology and religion are concerned. But the Church and the United States' political climate demands more of the Church. People my age and younger were becoming increasingly disaffected with it, feeling it had nothing relevant to contribute to our lives or to the most urgent and important matters we faced. The Church was troublingly silent on issues of race, despite having a rich theology from which to create solutions, and it still refuses to engage any real interrogation of policies that alienate queer people or keep women, who represent close to three times the active membership of men, relegated to marginal positions of power and leadership. I believe all of this is a stumbling block to our retention and missionary efforts among the least of these, those with the most to teach us about Christ, and that frustrated me. Side hustle or not, I wanted to put myself in the best position I could to address these problems. With my new influence and opportunities, it quickly occurred to me that I'm still a relative amateur in the world of theology, yet when people want to talk race, theology, and Mormonism, I'm one of the folks consistently getting called and, frankly, I feel underqualified. I regularly studied and prepared as thoroughly as I could for every engagement I did, but I felt keenly that something was missing from my learning experiences.

As a final point, a week after the same 2019 Black LDS Legacy Conference that inspired the podcast, I was invited to give a talk on racism at church (now published in the Fall 2019 issue of *Dialogue*). Perhaps because I sourced the scriptures liberally, multiple members of the congregation suggested looking at divinity schools. I received the compliment but heartily laughed at the suggestion. I had a job. I hated school. I didn't think I was suited for the academy (and still don't). And what was a degree in theology going to do for me professionally? It was bad enough my undergrad degree was pretty useless; I didn't want an advanced degree that was also useless. As time went on, however, the need for better theological education, especially in our church, became

more apparent. With rising racial tensions in the United States, I was getting busier. At church and on my own, I didn't feel I was gaining the tools needed to study scriptures more intelligently and imaginatively, nor did I feel I was gaining the tools to more critically engage my faith in the public square. My education likely wouldn't progress if I didn't intentionally create more time for it and use the best tools available, including academic institutions.

By summer 2020, I was at least open enough to the idea of divinity school that I decided to apply to some just to see what would happen. Around that same time, my elders quorum president led me through a discernment process that helped clarify my goals and the role the divine had in them. The November night I sent off my first three applications, I knew I was getting in, and I felt good about that. Sure enough, I got my first acceptance letters a few months later and was not just relieved but energized. The news felt good, and it felt right. Whatever I was to do with my future, the Spirit seemed to confirm that divinity school was going to better prepare me for it.

I applied to another institution primarily for its prestige. I didn't feel anything pushing me toward the school, but it was a stone's throw from my home, somewhat familiar, I potentially had a connection there, and it is pretty popular for Latter-day Saints who do venture into theological studies. It also housed Cornel West, one of the most provocative and brilliant thinkers in philosophy, politics, and theology, and I didn't want to pass on the opportunity to work with such an influential Black figure. I even gave him a whole paragraph in one of my application essays. I was rejected. In a twist of fate, though, he had a very public falling-out with the university and was taking his talents to Union Theological Seminary, the school where he had begun his teaching career. At this point, I hadn't yet considered Union, but it actually made perfect sense. The most frequently referenced school in the biographies of the theologians I read was Union. My theological idol and the creator of Black liberation theology, James Cone, had spent most of his career there,

and one of his most notable students, The Very Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, one of the founders of womanist theology known for her trailblazing work addressing sexuality and homophobia in the Black church, is a professor and dean there. Further, social justice isn't just an elective subject there but baked into the school's culture and curriculum itself. In short, Union Theological Seminary seemed to be the institutional expression of my Black Christian prophetic identity. Gaining access to all the resources of Columbia's various schools as well as getting to live in New York wasn't a bad benefit either. I accepted their scholarship offer the following month. Serendipitously, Dr. West isn't just my teacher but my advisor as well.

Since being here, my faith hasn't come up much—at least not as something to be scrutinized. In my first meeting with Dr. West, he told me of one of his first encounters with Mormonism was being part of the first expanded crop of Black Harvard recruits in 1970. The relatively new dean of admissions who facilitated the influx was Chase N. Peterson, a Latter-day Saint. In that light, the idea that I wanted to create a more inclusive and liberating theology didn't seem all that foreign to him. The other Black seminarians have been curious about my membership as I'm the only Black Mormon most of them know, but they seem to care less about my religious affiliation and more about how that affiliation moves me to show up for others. How does our theology liberate Black people? What does it offer those without an address? What does it say to us about our responsibility to the poor and the exploited? How does it help us break generational curses? How committed is it to the resistance of oppression? These are all great questions that I hope to refine our answers to during my time here.

I'm the only Latter-day Saint at this school and, to my knowledge, the only one ever to pursue a degree from here. That's not an accident. Besides Latter-day Saint leaders not being required to obtain a theological education, places like Union that prioritize affirming theologies (Black liberation theology, queer theology, womanist theology, et al.)

don't attract members of a church that doesn't do the same. We're not really conditioned to, and that's tragic. The Church's decision to adopt American standards of respectability has moved us away from our radical, groundbreaking, and affirming roots. Specifically, the infections of white supremacy and patriarchy have compromised our movement and blurred the lens through which we view our text and our theology. It's not a coincidence that the majority of our significant revelations came in the early days of the Church and that we haven't had one since the lifting of the priesthood and temple restrictions in 1978. It's not an accident that we're consistently one of the later churches to condemn racism nor is it an accident that Black, queer, and other marginalized groups are consistently underrepresented in Latter-day Saint congregations, let alone Church leadership. I live in Harlem, a famously Black neighborhood, yet it's not an accident that the Harlem congregation is only about 20 percent Black on its best Sundays. Only hours ago, I returned home from a Sunday School lesson in my mother's ward on Official Declaration 2 with no Black people present but my mother and me. In my estimation, these realities are unacceptable for the restored Church of the same Christ who lived and operated in the margins.

If I am to help change these realities, I have to know what I'm talking about and what I'm doing. I have to know the scriptures and our history better than those who would use the same to discriminate or cause harm. I also have to venture outside of Sunday School, elders quorum, the Church Educational System, and other Mormon-centric spaces to learn other ways to read sacred text and perhaps, most importantly, to understand the role of theology in the world today and how to practically implement that in justice efforts in and out of the Church.

There will be and already has been resistance to these efforts. Ever since *Beyond the Block* gained steam, many have taken offense that I would suggest bigotry exists in the Church, that some of our policies are scripturally unjustifiable, or that the brethren don't know everything and can act in ways that do active harm. I was slated to be the creator



of the Church's first anti-racist online course via their publishing company. My public criticism of a living Church leader's prejudice, however, kept them from publishing it, even though my course, they said, was likely to be the most popular one they ran. The irony of being hired to teach others to fight prejudice and then being fired for calling out prejudice was not lost on me. I've made peace with the idea that operating strictly within the Church's institutional parameters—an institution where there is no real way for members to seek redress for policies that harm others and where there is punishment for simply being critical of leaders—is likely not going to be the way the necessary changes come about.

However, something I'm still making peace with is the fact that I even need to be here. This work is primarily a labor of love; I'm grateful to be in a position to do it, and I feel closer to the divine than I've ever been when I use God's words to affirm the least of these, even when there is a social and emotional cost to it. There is, however, a tinge of resentment at being in this position. Activism, let alone theologically informed activism, was not my Plan A. I don't believe it's anyone's. I had a whole career that brought me immense joy prior to entering grad school. This is exhausting work. I don't feel the academy suits me, and learning disability, processing disorders, inexperience, and neurodivergence aggravate this experience. I don't particularly enjoy the study of theology, though I recognize its importance and how life-giving it can be. What I resent is that I feel that my entire existence in this space—a space that I neither love nor feel equipped to be in—is a response to bigoted idolatry within my faith community, who should know better as disciples of Christ. I should not be here. No one should be. No one should spend any part of their existence defending it because of their race, gender, orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, or other identities. I'd like to believe, however, that that resentment is an appropriate tribute to and evidence of my love for and commitment to the marginalized. I'm still learning to navigate this tension with love.

At the end of the day, all I want to be is a sharper instrument of the Lord's peace, and I have come to the conclusion that I can't do that if all my education comes from the same people teaching the same things, none of which seem to be adequate to address many of the world's and my own most urgent and important issues. One of the reasons I started *Beyond the Block* was to create a space to facilitate the discussions I feel we need to have as a church but aren't having. With a graduate education in theological studies, I'm hoping to be better at that work so that others in and out of the Church may see what those like me see in our theology and, eventually, build and mobilize a culture that shifts us more in line with the New Testament church of Christ and away from the idols of patriarchy and white supremacy. Further, if I actually manage to create a new field of study, I'll be able to help ensure that this work, which stands on the shoulders of the great Black individuals like Cathy Stokes, Darius Gray, and many others, will be further legitimized, grow, and continue long after I'm gone. My decision to go to school, in short, is simply my best effort to help build Zion.

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JAMES C. JONES {jamcjon@gmail.com} is a theologian and activist currently studying Religion and the Black Experience and Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary. He is also a voice actor, co-host and co-producer of *Beyond the Block* (part of the Dialogue Podcast Network), and the creator of LDS Anti-Racism 101, an online course. He's a proud BYU grad and an entertainment industry veteran whose credits include singing at Carnegie Hall and backup dancing for Flavor Flav.