

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Department of Agriculture
University Farm, St. Paul 1

October 8, 1947

The First Presidency
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
47 East South Temple
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear Brethren:

Your letter of July 17th sent to me at Logan was forwarded here, but I had already left for Europe and so did not get it until I returned to my office September 8. I want to thank you for it, and the attention you gave me. The letter is, however, a disappointment to me, as you may surmise it would be from what I said in my letter to President Meeks.

It seems strange to me in retrospect--as it must have seemed to you--that I should have never before had to face up to this doctrine of the Church relative to the Negro. I remember that it was discussed from time to time during my boyhood and youth, in Priesthood meetings or elsewhere in Church classes; and always someone would say something about the Negroes "sitting on the fence" during the Council in Heaven. They did not take a stand, it was said. Somehow there was never any very strong conviction manifest regarding the doctrine, perhaps because the question was rather an academic one to us in Ferron, where there were very few people who had ever seen a Negro, let alone having lived in the same community with them. So the doctrine was always passed over rather lightly I should say, with no Scripture ever being quoted or referred to regarding the matter, except perhaps to refer to the curse of Cain, or of Ham and Canaan. (I went back and re-read the latter the other evening. It was difficult to find any element of justice in Noah's behavior toward Ham, since the latter merely reported to his brothers that his father was lying there in a drunken state and in a nude condition, and the other boys put a cover over him. Because Ham reported his father's condition, he was cursed.)

But anyway, I really had never come face to face with the issue until this summer. In the meantime, since my youth, I have chosen to spend my professional career in the field of the social sciences, the general purpose of which is to describe and understand human behavior. I probably should have had less difficulty with some of these problems--such as the race problem--had I remained in agronomy and chemistry, my undergraduate fields of specialization. Be that as it may, my experience has been what it has been. As a sociologist, I have sincerely tried, and am still trying, to understand human social relations; the varied forms of organization, the processes of conflict, cooperation, competition, assimilation, why peoples and cultures differ one from another, etc.

As one studies the history and characteristics of human societies, one soon comes to recognize certain basic principles. One of these is social change. Any given society over the years undergoes changes. It is forever in a state of flux. Some scholars have regarded such change as progress, and have even considered that progress is inevitable. Others chart the rise and fall of civilizations and think in terms of cyclical change. Others express still different hypotheses, but none of them consider society as a static entity.

Another principle which stands out as one studies the development of cultures is the tendency of institutions to resist change. Although they are established, or grow up, originally as means to the end of satisfying the needs of man, they (the institutions) tend to become ends in themselves. It seems to me that Jesus was trying to get this point over to the society of his day, when he spoke of putting new wine in old bottles, and that the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath. This was an affront to the legalism of the Pharisees, and others of similar outlook, and of course, the institutions had to be protected even at the cost of His crucifixion.

Another principle that has come to occupy a central position in the analysis of human behavior is that of ethnocentrism. As defined by William Graham Sumner, who first developed the concept, it refers to the "view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything and all others are sealed and rated with reference to it." (The Folkways, p. 13.) Insofar as the "out-group" differs from the "in-group" it is regarded as inferior by the latter. A people with a different skin color would be automatically assigned to an inferior status. A language different from that of the in-group, is of course, an "inferior" one; and so on. This tendency is common to all groups.

Now, what does this add up to in my thinking? It means that (1) if one accepts the principle of cultural or social change and applies it to the Hebrews, the Old Testament history of the group is interpreted accordingly. In their early stages of development they had beliefs and practices, many of which, were subsequently supplanted by other ideas. Jehovah to the Hebrews of the Pentateuch was essentially a tribal deity. It was not until Amos that the idea of a universal God was proclaimed. And the concept of God as Love was an essential contribution of the mission of the Savior. (2) This, to me, represents "progressive revelation". It seems to me that we still have much to learn about God, and some of our earlier notions of Him may yet undergo modification. (3) The early Hebrew notion of the colored people with whom they had contact in the Mediterranean basin, was quite naturally, that those people were inferior to themselves, a consequence of their extreme ethnocentrism.

Why did they not have something to say about the Japanese or Chinese or the American Indian? To me the answer is that they did not know these groups existed. But one can be pretty certain that if they had known about them, they would have developed some similar explanation regarding their origin to that concerning the Negro, and would have assigned them also to a position less exalted than their own.

(4) And once these things got written down—~~institutionalized~~—they assume an aura of the sacred. I refer in this respect not only to the Scripture, but to more secular documents as well—the Constitution of the United States, for instance, which many people do not want to change regardless of the apparent needs. So we are in the position, it seems to me, of accepting a doctrine regarding the Negro which was enunciated by the Hebrews during a very early stage in their development. Moreover, and this is the important matter to me, it does not square with what seems an acceptable standard of justice today; nor with the letter or spirit of the teachings of Jesus Christ. I cannot find any support for such a doctrine of inequality in His recorded sayings.

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I am deeply troubled. Having decided through earnest study that one of the chief causes of war is the existence of ethnocentrism among the peoples of the world; that war is our major social evil which threatens to send all of us to destruction; and that we can ameliorate these feelings of ethnocentrism by promoting understanding of one people by others; I am now confronted with this doctrine of my own church which says in effect that white supremacy is part of God's plan for His children; that the Negro has been assigned by Him to be a hewer of wood and drawer of water for his white-skinned brethren. This makes us nominal allies of the Rankins and the Bilbos of Mississippi, a quite unhappy alliance for me, I assure you.

This doctrine pressed to its logical conclusion would say that Dr. George Washington Carver, the late eminent and saintly Negro scientist, is by virtue of the color of his skin, inferior even to the least admirable white person, not because of the virtues he may or may not possess, but because—through no fault of his—there is a dark pigment in his skin. All of the people of India—who are not Negroes according to ethnological authority, but are Aryan—would presumably come under the Negro classification. I think of the intelligent, high-minded, clean-living Hindu who was a member of the International Committee over which I had the honor to preside at Geneva from August 4 to 10, this year. He drank not, smoked not, his ethical standards were such that you and I could applaud him. Where should he rank vis-a-vis the least reliable and least admirable white person in Ferron? Or I could name you a real Negro with equal qualifications.

Now, you say that the "social side of the Restored Gospel is only an incident of it; it is not the end thereof." I may not have the same concept of "social" as you had in mind, but it seems to me the only virtue we can recognize in men is that expressed in their relations with others; that is their "social" relations. Are the virtues of honesty, chastity, humility, forgiveness, tolerance, love, kindness, justice, secondary? If so, what is primary? Love of God? Very well. But the second (law) is like unto it.

I must beg your forgiveness for this intrusion upon your time. I realize that I am only one among hundreds of thousands with whom you have to be concerned. My little troubles I must try to work out myself. But I desire to be understood. That's why I have gone to such length to set down here the steps in my thinking. I am trying to be honest with myself and with others. I am trying to find my way in what is a very confused world. After seeing the devastation of Europe this summer, I am appalled by the sight of it, and the contemplation of what mankind can collectively do to himself, unless somehow we, collectively—the human family—can put love of each other above hatred and somehow come to a mutual respect based upon understanding, and recognize that others, although they may be different from us, are not by that fact alone inferior. Are we becoming so legalistic (after the fashion of the Pharisees) that we cannot adjust our institutions to the changing needs of mankind? Are we, as some have charged, more Hebraic than Christian?

Sincerely,
your brother

Lowry Nelson
Professor of Sociology