

Racism and Other Challenges

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The responsibility of an apostle of the Lord to try to be helpful to the followers of Christ is a very heavy one. I share an experience that helped develop my feelings about that subject.

Thirty-six years ago, on the day after I was called to the Quorum of the Twelve and sustained in general conference, I was alone in my home in Provo, contemplating the significance of that calling. Our youngest daughter, Jenny, then only eight years old, entered the room. As I looked at her with all the love I felt for her, I realized that she was only one of hundreds of thousands of little girls throughout the world, also children of our Heavenly Father, whom I was now responsible to try to help as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Contemplating that reality, I could not contain my feelings and did something I have rarely done in my adult years. I wept.

I. Love Is Fundamental

My brothers and sisters of the rising generation of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, I love you. I want to help you. Since I cannot meet with you individually as I would love to do, I must try to help you through teaching correct principles and trying to help you follow them.

Love is fundamental. When President Kevin J. Worthen spoke to this student body seven weeks ago, he expressed an important hope, which I share:

*I hope that in the coming year each of you can feel in greater measure God's love for you individually. At those times when you wonder if there is any reason to hope, when you wonder if anyone cares—or if anyone should care—I invite you to ask God what **He** thinks of you—what He **really** thinks of you.¹*

Dallin H. Oaks, first counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on October 27, 2020.

I remind you that the love of God for His children and the love of His Son—the Savior who atoned for our sins—are incomprehensible. Joseph Smith helped us understand and apply this love in our own lives. He taught:

While one portion of the human race [is] judging and condemning the other without mercy, the great parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; he views them as his offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men.²

That teaching, together with the Lord’s commandment to “love your enemies . . . and pray for them which despitefully use you,”³ has application in all political campaigns. I will say no more of elections, except to reaffirm the political neutrality described in our recent letter. I urge you to treat others with civility and respect—and to vote!

II. Dealing with Anxiety and Racism

These are times when we all need love and its accompanying concern for others. How are you BYU students and your peers elsewhere handling the many challenges you face?

How are you handling the COVID-19 pandemic, including the legal restrictions and the counsel of your leaders? I know from personal reports and what I read in the press that some of you have been confined to your living quarters. Many of you have been profoundly affected in your programs, classes, and social activities. You have even been limited in your home evening groups and the circumstances of your worship. Some of you have experienced delays in graduation, have had job offers withdrawn, and have altered plans for graduate school and other future endeavors. Please do your part in what is required in these unusual circumstances. And remember that some of the burdensome restrictions, including even the wearing of masks, are not only for your immediate protection but also for the well-being of those around you.

The personal threats and educational and economic effects of COVID-19 surely heighten everyone’s anxiety, and, as you know, anxiety on other

subjects is also comparatively high among young people. This is another challenge with which I would like to be helpful.

Just a year ago I gave a talk on that subject at BYU–Hawaii, reviewing national and our own experiences with anxiety among college-age students.⁴ For example, here at BYU and elsewhere in our Church Educational System higher-education institutions, there are large increases in the numbers seeking counseling or mental health services.

Our professional counselors observe that anxiety often leads to doubt and despair. One anxious BYU student in a rigorous, limited-enrollment major constantly questioned his ability to handle the demands of homework and tests and worried he would not perform well in his profession upon graduation. His anxiety caused him to doubt his ability, though he had excellent preparation. His anxiety also caused him to question if he was “good enough” in his relationships and church assignments. Reassurance from a supportive family and bishop did little to keep him from doubting his doubts. When he sought professional help, he was despairing that he could ever feel confident or rid himself of anxiety.

Overcoming his anxious self-doubt did not come easily. He worked very hard to see his anxiety in context. Through a combination of hard work, counseling, competent medical help, prayer, and continued support of family and church leaders, this student was able to begin “doubting his anxiety.” He graduated in his major and started a job with a well-known company.

Whatever the causes of large increases in anxiety and associated mental health diagnoses, our first line of defense is always our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We trust in His promises of peace and in the cleansing that His Atonement makes possible. Instead of being swept along in the anxiety and fear that is characteristic of your generation, rely on the assurances of a loving Heavenly Father. Rely on the counsel of His loving Son, a Savior who has assured us that “if ye are prepared ye shall not fear.”⁵ The Lord promised that in the midst of prophesied destructions and tragedies, He will protect the righteous.⁶

And now I move to another concern of your rising generation and of others as well. I speak of

the problem of racism. You will recall President Russell M. Nelson's great teachings in general conference on this subject and perhaps my own plea that Latter-day Saints unite to "root out racism."⁷ To do that, we must have clear thinking about how current events should be analyzed and acted upon in view of this nation's shameful history of Black slavery. We need to understand how the founders postponed resolving that moral issue to obtain the ratification of the Constitution for the creation of this nation.

As the protests of last summer gained momentum and support across the country, various groups, particularly in the South, began tearing down or replacing statues of prominent figures associated with slavery. Some institutions changed names to refrain from honoring persons who had had any connection with slavery. A small number of persons even took up that cry on this campus, calling for changing the name of some buildings or even the name of Brigham Young University.

Many were distressed at these attempts to erase prominent figures from our history—even history that we would be pleased to change if we could. I wondered, Are the advocates and actors in these efforts aware of what they are attempting to erase? For reasons that every serious student of American history understands, even the Constitution of the United States is stained with concessions to slavery that were made in order to get the whole document ratified. Those textual stains were, of course, removed by the amendments following the Civil War, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives throughout the North and the South. I cannot condone our now erasing all mention and honor of prominent leaders such as George Washington and others who established our nation and gave us our constitution because they lived at a time with legal approvals and traditions that condoned slavery.

As I struggled with that question, I chanced to be reading some speeches of Winston Churchill. For many years Churchill warned against the evils of the Nazi government in Germany. His was a minority voice, resisted or resented by many, and his speaking out blocked his political career. Then, when many of his predictions had come true and

England and France were being defeated in the first year of World War II, Churchill was made prime minister. England stood fast for more than two years until the United States was compelled to enter the war. In that critical period, many of Churchill's associates and newly converted supporters advocated his taking punitive measures against those who had contributed to the unprepared, precarious position in which the British found themselves. In that setting, Churchill spoke these words in the House of Commons in June 1940:

There are many who would hold an inquest in the House of Commons on the conduct of the Governments—and of Parliaments . . . —during the years which led up to this catastrophe. They seek to indict those who were responsible for the guidance of our affairs. This also would be a foolish and pernicious process. . . .

Of this I am quite sure, that if we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future.⁸

I find great wisdom in that counsel. Let us not "open a quarrel between the past and the present" lest we jeopardize our attempts to improve our future.

This is our current state. We share our history and enjoy the advantages of our constitutional government and the prosperity of this nation. The predecessors of many Americans of different backgrounds made great sacrifices to establish this nation. Whatever those sacrifices—of freedom, property, or even life—let us now honor them for what they have done for us and forgo quarreling over the past. Ours is the duty to unite and improve the future we will share.

On this same subject, I was impressed with the insights of one of your fellow BYU students, Luke Lyman, published in a *Deseret News* opinion piece a month ago. Lyman wrote that his—your—generation "have that genuine and burning . . . yearning to help those in need, to make the world a better place, to stand up for something. But we were not given the tools to discover the right way to do so."⁹ He noted his generation's "undying devotion to reason" but observed that "the

thoughtless desecration of multiple monuments and the broader defamation of the Founding Fathers . . . hardly demonstrates a . . . respect for reasoned discourse.”¹⁰ The rising generation’s increasing departure from organized religion is well known. “Thus,” your fellow student continued, “we have rejected the two pillars of Western Civilization, faith and reason.”¹¹ He concluded, persuasively, that your “rash but confident screams for ‘justice’ ought to be understood as cries for help more than anything else.”¹²

Cries for help should be heard, and, in this setting, there are three obvious helps: inspiration, education, and clear thinking. That combination is surely to be preferred over symbolic actions that accomplish nothing but a bow to the cause of political correctness.

Let us apply that combination to subjects that have occupied much of our news and dialogue for the last six months.

III. “We Are All Children of a Loving God”

The recent nationwide protests were fueled by powerful feelings that this country suffers from and must abolish racism. Let us consider what racism is, some of its history and evil effects, and its separate manifestations in civil law and policy. But first I refer briefly to the incident that precipitated the current discussion on racism.

The shocking police-produced death of George Floyd in Minnesota last May was surely the trigger for these nationwide protests whose momentum was carried forward under the message of “Black Lives Matter.” Of course Black lives matter! That is an eternal truth all reasonable people should support. Unfortunately, that persuasive banner was sometimes used or understood to stand for other things that do not command universal support. Examples include abolishing the police or seriously reducing their effectiveness or changing our constitutional government. All these are appropriate subjects for advocacy, but not under what we hope to be the universally accepted message: Black lives matter.

Now I speak of the subject that commands our attention—racism. Dictionaries typically define *racism* as “involving the idea that one’s own race is superior [to others] and has the right to rule [over

them].”¹³ This idea has led to many racist laws and administrative policies.

Some religious people have sought to justify practices of racism by references to the Bible, as I will discuss later. Nevertheless, the proper understanding of scriptures—ancient and modern—and recent prophetic statements help us to see that racism, as defined, is not consistent with the revealed word of God.¹⁴ We know that God created all mortals and we are all children of God. Moreover, God created us with the differences that identify races. Therefore, any *personal attitudes* or *official practices* of racism involve one group whom God created exercising authority or advantage over another group God created, both groups having God-given qualities they cannot change. So understood, neither group should think or behave as if God created them as first-class children and others as second-class children. Yet that is how racism affects thinking and practices toward others. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ must remember that all such attitudes and official practices were outlawed for us by the Lord’s 1833 revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith that “it is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another.”¹⁵

With this background, I was thrilled to hear President Nelson include a powerful doctrinal condemnation of racism and prejudice in his talk at general conference. He said, “I grieve that our Black brothers and sisters the world over are enduring the pains of racism and prejudice.”¹⁶ That was his focus, but he expanded its impact by teaching this principle: “God does not love one race more than another.”¹⁷ Thus we condemn racism by any group toward any other group worldwide. President Nelson emphasized that point by saying, “Favor or disfavor with God is dependent upon your devotion to God and His commandments and not the color of your skin.”¹⁸

Those authoritative statements from our prophet are very timely, but they simply clarify statements he has been making frequently in the past.

Thus, at a press conference following his historic invited address to the annual convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 2019, President Nelson

“explained that a fundamental doctrine and heartfelt conviction of our religion is that all people are God’s children. We truly believe that we are brothers and sisters—all part of the same divine family.”¹⁹

More recently, following the initial protests of the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, President Nelson declared:

We join with many throughout this nation and around the world who are deeply saddened at recent evidences of racism and a blatant disregard for human life. We abhor the reality that some would deny others respect and the most basic freedoms because of the color of his or her skin. . . .

*The Creator of us all calls on each of us to abandon attitudes of prejudice against any group of God’s children. Any of us who has prejudice toward another race needs to repent!*²⁰

These statements by our prophet are eloquently summed up by what he said in our “Be One” celebration on June 1, 2018. Our gospel understanding “of the true brotherhood of men and the true sisterhood of women . . . inspires us with passionate desire to build bridges of cooperation instead of walls of segregation.”²¹ That is what we need for our future—for our nation, for our world, and for our individual divine destinies.

So what do we do now? In general conference, President Nelson “call[ed] upon our members everywhere to lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice” and pleaded with us “to promote respect for all of God’s children.”²² In June of this year, President Nelson joined with three top leaders of the NAACP—Derrick Johnson, Leon Russell, and the Rev. Amos C. Brown—in a powerful joint statement that declared, “Solutions will come as we open our hearts . . . , as we work to build bonds of genuine friendship, and as we see each other as the brothers and sisters we are—for we are all children of a loving God.”²³

IV. Following the Prophet’s Call to Repent, Change, and Improve

As we go forward on that path, furthering our prophet’s plea for us to abandon “attitudes and

actions of prejudice,” we are helped by understanding what racism is and something of its history.

There are many examples of racism in recent American history. The examples most familiarly reported by the media today are those that victimize Black Americans. These include the police brutality and other systemic discrimination in employment and housing publicized recently. Racism is still recognizable in official and personal treatment of Latinos and Native Americans. Less familiar in our day is America’s history of racism against Asians, which began with Chinese immigrants who worked on the transcontinental railroad. It was not until a century ago that Native Americans were considered U.S. citizens and that Asians were allowed to apply for U.S. citizenship.²⁴

Less than a century ago, the world experienced terrible tragedies not usually described as racism, but they surely were extreme examples of this. The Holocaust, in which German Nazis sought to exterminate Jews, is the most obvious. Another example of racism was the Hutu tribal majority in Rwanda murdering about 800,000 of the Tutsi tribal minority. Other examples of ethnic cleansing or genocide based on ethnicity or tribal differences could be cited.

Current efforts to identify and eliminate personal and official racism are best accomplished if we understand their relationship to scriptural references in the Old Testament and even the New Testament. As believers relying on scriptural history, we can be troubled and misled by Bible-recorded scriptural directions or traditions that may be viewed as racist or discriminatory by modern definition. For example, within the tribes of Israel, only members of the tribe of Levi were acceptable for service in the temple.²⁵ The Israelites were forbidden to marry the Canaanites and some others of surrounding lands.²⁶ And the direction for Jews not to associate with Samaritans was because of their partial descent from non-Israelite peoples.²⁷

Most important, the gospel was not to be taught to Gentiles—non-Israelites. Jesus Himself affirmed that restriction in strong language—“not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to

dogs”²⁸—but then made an exception for a faith-filled mother.²⁹ During His mortal ministry, Jesus reversed the prohibition against associating with the Samaritans,³⁰ and by revelation after His mortal life He revoked the prohibition against taking the gospel to the Gentiles.³¹ But these and other restrictions remain in scriptural history.

Using current definitions, some might call such divine actions and prophet-taught principles *racist*, but God, who is the loving Father of all nations, tribes, and ethnicities,³² cannot be branded as racist for His dealings with His children. Often the reasons for His plan are not known or understandable to mortals. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts,” He said through the prophet Isaiah. “Neither are your ways my ways.”³³

Some have rejected some element of God’s plan as unreasonable according to cultural norms they could understand or accept.³⁴ Others who have accepted God’s plan have mistakenly relied on cultural norms to provide reasons God has not revealed.³⁵ Thus both nonbelievers and believers can reject or attempt to amend divine plans by relying on cultural norms instead of the directions of God. The safest course is not to reject or supplement the divine plan by human reasoning. Those who cannot accept the prophetic decisions and practices of the past should consider Winston Churchill’s wise counsel quoted earlier: “If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future.”

Now, with prophetic clarification, let us all heed our prophet’s call to repent, to change, and to improve. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can unite and bring peace to people of all races and nationalities. We who believe in that gospel—whatever our origins—must unite in love of each other and of our Savior Jesus Christ.

I love you, my brothers and sisters, and I want to help you. I invite each of you to accept the invitation repeated in our October conference to become more Christlike. That is not merely to speak of Christ or think of Him or try to copy His actions. We become Christlike when we have achieved what the apostle Paul called “the mind of Christ.”³⁶ Then we will look at others and love them and act toward them as Christ would do and as He desires us to do. With God’s help

we can do this, I know and testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Kevin J Worthen, “The Process and Power of Hope,” BYU devotional address, 8 September 2020; emphasis in original.

2. Joseph Smith, “Baptism for the Dead,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (15 April 1842): 759; see also HC 4:595.

3. Matthew 5:44; see Dallin H. Oaks, “Love Your Enemies,” *Ensign*, November 2020.

4. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Anxiety in Stressful Times,” BYU–Hawaii devotional address, 11 June 2019, speeches.byuh.edu/devotional/anxiety-in-stressful-times.

5. D&C 38:30.

6. See 1 Nephi 22:16–22; D&C 63:34, 97:22–25.

7. Oaks, “Love Your Enemies”; see also Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” *Ensign*, November 2020.

8. Winston Churchill, speech in the House of Commons, 18 June 1940; in *Into Battle: Speeches by the Right Hon. Winston S. Churchill*, comp. Randolph S. Churchill (London: Cassell and Company, 1941), 226.

9. Luke Lyman, “Guest Opinion: Gen Z Is Lost in a Desert of Shallow Activism. We Need a Way Out,” *Deseret News*, 18 September 2020.

10. Lyman, “Gen Z Is Lost.”

11. Lyman, “Gen Z Is Lost.”

12. Lyman, “Gen Z Is Lost.”

13. *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, unabridged edition, 1973, s.v. “racism,” 1184.

14. We read in the scriptures “that God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34), that God “made of one blood all nations” (Acts 17:26), and that “ye shall not esteem one flesh above another” (Mosiah 23:7).

15. D&C 101:79.

16. Nelson, “Let God Prevail.”

17. Nelson, “Let God Prevail.”

18. Nelson, “Let God Prevail.”

19. Russell M. Nelson, “NAACP Convention Remarks,” Additional Resource, Church of Jesus Christ Newsroom, address at the annual convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 21 July 2019, Detroit,

Michigan, newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-nelson-naacp-convention-remarks.

20. Russell M. Nelson, Facebook, 1 June 2020; reported in Tad Walch, “President Nelson: ‘Deeply Saddened at Recent Evidences of Racism and a Blatant Disregard for Human Life,’” Faith, *Deseret News*, 1 June 2020.

21. Russell M. Nelson, “President Nelson’s Full Remarks from the LDS Church’s ‘Be One’ Celebration,” Latest, *Church News*, 1 June 2018, thechurchnews.com/latest/2018-06-01/president-nelsons-full-remarks-from-the-lds-churchs-be-one-celebration-10970; also full remarks published in Nelson, “‘Be One’: Building Bridges,” *New Era*, August 2018.

22. Nelson, “Let God Prevail.”

23. Statement from the collaboration between the leaders of the NAACP and the Church of Jesus Christ, in “Prophet Joins NAACP Leaders in Call for Racial Harmony in America,” Church of Jesus Christ Newsroom, 8 June 2020, newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/prophet-naacp-leaders-racial-harmony-america-op-ed.

24. Congress granted citizenship to Native Americans in the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 (8 U.S.C. § 140 [b] [2020]). Federal law had placed restrictions on some Asians seeking to become

U.S. citizens (Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Stat. 58, 61). But in 1952, Congress repealed such laws and lifted all racial barriers to citizenship: the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, 8 U.S.C. § 1422 (2020).

25. See Numbers 1:47–50; 1 Kings 8:4.

26. See Deuteronomy 7:1–3; Ezra 9:1–2, 12.

27. See Matthew 10:5; see also Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Samaritans.”

28. Matthew 15:26; see also verses 24–25. See also Matthew 10:5.

29. See Matthew 15:27–28.

30. See John 4:5–30; Acts 1:8, 8:14–15.

31. See Acts 10:34–35, 47–48.

32. See John 3:16; Acts 17:26; 1 Nephi 11:22–23; 2 Nephi 26:33; D&C 138:3.

33. Isaiah 55:8.

34. See Helaman 16:18; Jacob 6:7; Alma 30:13–17.

35. This is discussed in Dallin H. Oaks, “President Oaks’ Full Remarks from the LDS Church’s ‘Be One’ Celebration,” Leaders and Ministry, *Church News*, 1 June 2018, thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2018-06-01/president-oaks-full-remarks-from-the-lds-churchs-be-one-celebration-47280; also full remarks published in Oaks, “‘Be One’: A Cause for Celebration,” *New Era*, August 2018.

36. 1 Corinthians 2:16.