

Thirty Years after the “Long-Promised Day”

Reflections and Expectations

Marcus H. Martins

The announcement of the revelation in 1978, which extended the priesthood to all worthy Latter-day Saint men regardless of race, was celebrated as the arrival of a “long-promised day” (Official Declaration 2). Reflecting on the thirtieth anniversary of that revelation, I feel deep gratitude to the Lord for sending me to earth in an age in which I would be allowed to hold the priesthood and work in his vineyard. The blessings and privileges my family and I have enjoyed in the Church in those three decades far exceeded any dreams we might have had prior to June 1978.

The scriptures reveal that one thousand of our years are like one day to the Lord (see Abr. 3:4; 2 Pet. 3:8), so I don’t suppose he would care that much about our calendar and changes of years, centuries, and so on. But for us, these things are important because they provide us with check-points for reflection and expression of gratitude for blessings received.

Over the years, I have been asked many times to speak publicly about my thoughts on being a black member of the Church. The first time I spoke publicly about my feelings was fourteen years ago in a forum at the Brigham Young University campus. Since then I have spoken from coast to coast—from Boston to San Francisco.

Interestingly, it is mostly American Latter-day Saints who still show some interest in this subject. As I have traveled in Asia and even in my own country, Brazil, I have never been asked to speak on this topic. The one exception happened in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, when during a break in a professional conference three Muslim women approached me and boldly asked, “You are black and Brazilian. How come you are a Mormon?”

While I have always been grateful to my hosts for the opportunities to speak about my experiences as a member of the Church, I always stress



Marcus H. Martins and his wife, Mirian Abelin Barbosa. Courtesy Marcus H. Martins.

to my audiences that I am not an activist in race relations. Instead, I see myself as just an ordinary member of the Church who in the last thirty-six years has had a number of extraordinary experiences.

I reflect on the consequences of the 1978 revelation “wearing two hats,” so to speak—that of a social scientist and of a person of faith. But let me clarify that in my mind I resolved years ago that my faith would always temper my intellectual curiosity and keep it in check. In that spirit, I believe that the 1978 revelation brought about major contributions to the Church. In this essay, I will focus on two of those contributions: (1) an enhanced

emphasis on doctrinal accuracy, and (2) an additional modern standard of faith. And then I will offer my opinion on one of the popular expectations for the future of the Church.

Enhanced Emphasis on Doctrinal Accuracy

Members of the Church are also “ordinary” members of the societies in which they live, and, having a lay clergy, the Church does not coach its members about their social, cultural, or political views. The Church teaches the gospel of Jesus Christ as contained in the scriptures and in the words of living prophets and then allows its members to apply the doctrines of the gospel in their daily lives according to their own choices. Therefore, it is inevitable that at times personal opinions and a few misconceptions or misinterpretations might occur. For me, this is what happened regarding issues of race and ethnicity in the Church.

As a sociologist I would argue that, as systems of belief, religions are not necessarily racist. People bring to their religious congregations cultural traits and shared beliefs from their societies. So, if anyone ever met a Latter-day Saint who was admittedly a racist, that person would have been so not because of the official beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but because of that person’s adherence to traditions from his or her larger society. This would have been so whether that person was

living in the United States or Brazil or South Africa or anywhere else in the world. In fact, racism is not a phenomenon restricted to black and white relations, but it also occurs between whites and other whites, such as in the Balkans, and between blacks and other blacks, such as in many troubled tribal relations throughout Africa.

I see the influence of cultural traits and social norms on religious life as almost unavoidable. Even the Prophet Joseph Smith seemed to acknowledge that possibility in 1835 by stating that “many, having a zeal not according to knowledge, and not understanding the pure principles of the doctrine of the Church, have, no doubt, in the heat of enthusiasm, taught and said many things which are derogatory to the genuine character and principles of the Church; and for these things we are heartily sorry, and would apologize, if apology would do any good.”¹

From the mid-1800s until early June 1978, no male member of the Church with black African ancestry could be ordained to the priesthood. We could never explain the reason for that “priesthood ban,” as it is commonly known. Because of its belief in modern-day revelation, it seems that the Church chose to deal with the priesthood ban by waiting for divine direction, which finally came in 1978. In the meantime, members and leaders attempted on their own to find possible reasons for the existence of the ban. Those attempts led to the unofficial popularization and adoption of preexisting ideas about the black race well known in other religious traditions for centuries. However, those who chose to adopt these ideas did so in opposition to the scriptural stance on race relations found in the Book of Mormon, where Nephi proclaims that the Lord “inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God” (2 Ne. 26:33).

Some argued that those of black African descent were not prepared to receive the priesthood, but they said so based on their own opinions, without any evidence, and not in harmony with the revelations of this dispensation, which clearly state that the restored gospel is for all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people. The revelations given to Joseph Smith and recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants establishing the orders of the priesthood in the modern era are broad and all-inclusive in scope, meaning that they established no restrictions regarding which tribes or lineages could hold the priesthood in this last dispensation. Often the language in those revelations clearly states their scope—including those that established the organization of the priesthood—by using terms such as “every man,” or “all men,” or “all the world” (see, for instance, D&C 1:2, 4, 6–7, 20–23, 34–36; 84:45–48).

Therefore, one of the consequences of the 1978 revelation has been an enhanced emphasis on doctrinal consistency. This is one of the challenges for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the early twenty-first century. Neither the Church nor anyone else has control over the flow of information in cyberspace. Anyone can become an “informal public affairs officer” by creating web pages and blogs without any supervision from Church officials.

We now understand more than ever the responsibility each member has to carefully study the scriptures and the words of the currently living prophets, so we can make accurate statements about our beliefs. And notice my emphasis on the words of the currently living prophets. It is easy to use computer databases to find quotations from the past. But we must check those words against the teachings of the present. It doesn't matter what Brigham Young, John Taylor, or any other nineteenth-century prophet thought or said about this or that racial group or nationality. For those alive today, all that matters is what the currently living prophets and apostles teach about their status and worth as children of God.

An Additional Modern Standard of Faith

The vitality of Mormonism stems from its extraordinary doctrines, ordinances, and the blessings, privileges, and promises contained in the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Underestimating any of these could compromise the life of the Church. Figuratively speaking, it is the Sacred Grove that attracts lifelong converts, not necessarily the pioneer handcart. While the handcart is the symbol of an exodus based on faith, that faith started as a result of the heavenly visitation that took place in the Sacred Grove. The Church is true not because its early members sacrificed so much to cross the plains. The Church is true because God spoke from heaven, called a modern-day prophet, and through this prophet restored his gospel and priesthood to the world.

The power of the message and doctrines of the restored gospel can be ascertained in the fact that before June 1978 people with black African ancestry who joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were willing to do so even though they could not enjoy its full benefits. Reminiscent of the faithful Canaanite woman mentioned in the New Testament (Matt. 15:22–28), they would rather enjoy “chunks,” if you will, of the true gospel in the Church of Jesus Christ than whole banquets of man-made religious beliefs elsewhere in the world.

When my parents and I joined the Church in Brazil in 1972, we did so as an act of faith. Some people think that faith and reason do not agree

one with another, but looking in retrospect, I would say that in our case our faith led us to see racial concerns as secondary and temporary. We sincerely believed that if we were faithful, God would somehow have us in a good place in heaven regardless of whether my father and I could hold the priesthood in this life.

The trials of faith faced by black members prior to 1978 speak volumes about their commitment to the restored gospel, and just as the nineteenth-century LDS pioneers provided a standard of faithful living for future generations by their obedience and sacrifice in crossing the plains and building communities in a then inhospitable environment, black converts prior to 1978 added yet another modern standard of faith by joining the true Church even without the enjoyment of its full privileges and benefits.

After thirty years, this additional standard poses a significant question for all Latter-day Saints: Would we remain faithful if some of the privileges and blessings of our religion were withheld from us for a while? Have we ever doubted the Lord and his promises just because a certain anxiously desired blessing was delayed or temporarily denied?

Some of us desire a temple marriage but are temporarily unsuccessful in our search for an eternal companion. Others of us desire children but are unable to conceive them in this life. Or we desire the fulfillment of a specific promise contained in a patriarchal blessing but cannot see signs of the day in which that promise will be realized. Or we have been anxiously waiting for an answer to a heartfelt prayer but receive only heavenly silence for what feels like a long while. For all these and many other similar circumstances, the question remains: Can we remain faithful and obedient even without the realization of all our expected blessings?

For individuals in these or similar conditions, we remember the word of the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail: "Peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes" (D&C 121:7–8). With faith in the Lord, we can triumph over the foes of our souls, such as frustration, sadness, embarrassment, impatience, and hopelessness, and remain faithful until the Lord manifests his power in our behalf and grants us either the righteous desire of our hearts or another even greater blessing.

A Popular Expectation for the Future

Every time there is a vacancy in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, people ask the question, "Will the next Mormon Apostle be someone with Hispanic or black African ancestry?" Whenever I am asked this question,

I remind my interlocutors that Apostles are called to represent the Lord before the people, and not the other way around. No single member of the Quorum of the Twelve controls that body's agenda or perspectives. They form a council that by revelation received the charge, "Every decision made by . . . these quorums must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member in each quorum must be agreed to its decisions" (D&C 107:27). The role of those men is to testify of Jesus Christ and teach his gospel to the nations of the world. They are not called to represent the demographic makeup of the Church.

For example, the calling of President Dieter F. Uchtdorf to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 2004 did not make the Church's policies or perspectives more European. Changes in the Church happen because of wisdom and inspiration received in response to the needs of the collective membership worldwide. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed."²

As a sociologist, I see the question as possible evidence that Latter-day Saints are ready and willing to accept a non-Caucasian as a religious leader in the Church. As a Latter-day Saint, I also consider that this is a matter of divine intervention, that God himself chooses whom he wants to serve him in positions of responsibility. So, we can say that, yes, one day there will be Hispanics, blacks, and Asians serving as Apostles in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But at this time we cannot tell when this will happen. And I wouldn't expect any significant changes in Church policy or administration as the result solely of the nationality or race of a new Apostle. Changes have occurred and will continue to occur in the Church, but they will come not because of political or cultural pressures. They will come in order to allow our members to better live the gospel principles in their homes and families, and in order to refine the Church and make it more efficient in fulfilling its mission of proclaiming the gospel, perfecting individuals, and uniting families as eternal entities.

Conclusion

I love my religion, and I have never found in our official doctrine (3 Ne. 11:31–39; D&C 1:17–26) any evidence of racism. I was a member of the Church during the last six years of the priesthood ban, and I was the first member of my race to serve a full-time mission after the ban was lifted. Now, almost thirty years later, I am a high priest and an ordained bishop, and my two sons are also priesthood holders—one is also a bishop and

the other is an elder. My late father, Helvécio Martins, served as a General Authority between 1990 and 1996. He was a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy, and Latter-day Saints throughout the world from that time still remember him speaking in two general conferences of the Church.

As an educator, I meet with fellow administrators who prior to 1978 might have espoused speculative ideas supportive of the priesthood ban. Like those Muslim women in Malaysia, others might also ask me: “How come you are a Mormon? How can you associate with these people?” For me it is a matter of forgiveness, faith in God, and hope of a peaceful future for my children and grandchildren. Nothing good would come to my life in the present if I were to keep reliving events of the past.

That is why I have maintained my opinion that this is a time for activity, not for activism in the Church. Daily faithful living of gospel principles is what is going to improve our lives and the quality of our associations with others, regardless of the conditions of the society around us.

This is not a “pie in the sky” religion. Many of the extraordinary blessings, privileges, and promises contained in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ can be enjoyed right here, right now. It is interesting that in the Book of Mormon we find that both the Nephites and Lamanites were concerned with maintaining the “rights and privileges of [their] church . . . of their religion . . . and of their worship” (Alma 2:4; 51:6; 3 Ne. 2:12). In a world full of ambiguities, doubts, fears, and dangers, it is a great blessing to be able to enjoy in our lives and homes “the rights of the priesthood [which] are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven” (D&C 121:36). These rights enable every member of the Church to approach the Lord with bold faith and through reverent obedience receive “peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come” (D&C 59:23).

Marcus Helvécio T. A. Martins is the Chair of the Department of Religious Education at Brigham Young University–Hawaii. A native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, he holds a PhD in Sociology of Religion, Race, and Ethnic Relations. He has taught at BYU (Provo) and Ricks College (now BYU–Idaho) and has also lectured throughout the United States, Brazil, and Japan. He was elected Teacher of the Year by BYU–Hawaii’s President’s Council in 2002. This essay is adapted from remarks originally presented at the Orem Utah Institute of Religion, February 29, 2008.

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 80.
2. Smith, *Teachings*, 256.