

Insights on Church Leadership

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Chapter 9

Prejudice

The Prophet Lehi taught that coincidence has no place in the plan of salvation. He said: "... all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things."¹ In the book of Psalms we find the following statement: "O Lord, how manifold [i.e. marked by diversity or variety] are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches."²

With the advances in instant communication of the late twentieth century we have engaged in more frequent association with people of nationalities and cultures other than our own than probably any other civilization in the known history. Even in the Church of Christ we see congregations with varying degrees of cultural (i.e. national, ethnic, racial, or linguistic) diversity. This has been a common characteristic of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since the early days in this dispensation, although today the diversity is more along racial and ethnic lines than ever before.

With this diversity comes the need to understand, respect, and accommodate individuals of many cultures in order to build a truly worldwide Zion. But going beyond recent "politically correct" trends, we can use cultural diversity as a significant advantage in the kingdom of God on earth. I suppose that the Lord instituted different languages and cultures to bring not only variety, but also additional light and truth to the world.

Let us use as an analogy the light passing through a prism. Our eyes can see but a small range of the spectrum of the light, and with a naked eye, we see normal light as white. A prism breaks the light into its several component colors, thus enabling us to see red, green, blue, yellow, violet, orange, and indigo.

Because of our different cultural backgrounds we can see several aspects of life somewhat differently from each other, as if each cultural background could see only a few colors, but not all of them. In the scriptures, the Lord compared his word to light: "For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ."³ President Brigham Young taught that as mortals we can't receive a revelation from God with all its perfections. He said: "The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle ... but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low,

¹ 2 Nephi 2:24

² Psalms 104:24; brackets added for dictionary definition.

³ D&C 84:45

grovelling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities ...⁴"

In combination, these two quotations imply that the exchange of experiences by individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds may enable them to more fully comprehend the diverse aspects (or perfections) of the Lord's "light". And a revelation given to Nephi⁵ suggests that this exchange of experiences will happen in our age.

In this sense, instead of a hindrance, diversity might become a necessity and wherever we find diversity we will find greater knowledge, and greater knowledge brings us greater power, as the Prophet Joseph Smith taught⁶; power that we may use to better live the commandments, thus achieving greater blessings for those under our responsibility, as well as for ourselves and our families.

The influence of cultural diversity in music, dance, drama, painting, sculpture, poetry and prose made the world richer in ideas (or in knowledge, if you will). What we call "styles" are the manifestations of different cultural backgrounds. Let's take a look at music, for example. Here is a small list of instruments from around the world: piano, guitar, mbira, tambouritza, violin, shamisen, bagpipe, violin, balalaika, koto, bonang, sitar, zampoña, kora, cuica, saxophone. Now, here is another small list with rhythms or ensembles from around the world: jazz, gamelan, samba, waltz, lakalaka, tango, doina, blues, ceili, bolero, rap, polka, bluegrass, etc. Pres. Brigham Young said the following about music: "There is no music in hell, for all good music belongs to heaven ... Every sweet musical sound that can be made belongs to the Saints and is for the Saints ... who receive them from the Most High."⁷

Greater Knowledge as Result of Diversity

Applying this analogy to the kingdom of God, if as leaders we respond positively to diversity by getting acquainted with saints from different cultures and by striving to carefully understand their backgrounds and experiences in the gospel, we will eventually be blessed with a greater understanding of the world and of the plan of salvation, in a way we may have never experienced before.

A small example of this type of blessing came with the translation of the Book of Mormon into Thai, the official language of Thailand. In that language there is no word for "brother"; one must say either "elder brother" or "younger brother." Thus, when the Book of Mormon was translated into Thai, the Church learned that the Brother of Jared was Jared's younger brother⁸.

In every language we will find words that are unique; they have no parallel or translation in other languages. Those words can act on the minds of the people of that particular environment in a unique way, triggering many different thoughts and feelings. Then, the Spirit of the Lord will operate on those thoughts

4 Discourses of Brigham Young, p.40. July 8, 1855.

5 2 Nephi 29:12-14

6 TPJS, p.217. April 10, 1842.

7 Discourses of Brigham Young, p.242-243. March 6, 1862. President Young never heard ... uh, forget it.

8 In 1983, at a stake conference in the city of Petrópolis, Brazil, Elder Jacob de Jäger then a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, told the congregation that President Spencer W. Kimball had received that information through revelation. I was Elder Jäger's interpreter that day.

and feelings⁹ guiding us to the truth, and the revelations will come with details that may vary from one culture to another.

The church as a whole will benefit if Latter-day Saints from different cultures exchange their experiences.¹⁰ And who knows whether or not in the future many great revelations will be given by the Lord in several different languages? This way we might be taught principles that are up to now beyond our comprehension, and by practicing these principles we will receive blessings so far unknown to us¹¹.

Let's take, for example, two distinct cultures whose words we already have: the Nephite-Lamanite culture and the Jewish culture. If we compare the way that some doctrines were recorded in the Bible with the way they were recorded in the Book of Mormon, we will see examples of beams of light being described under different points of view¹². Jacob explained that the manner by which the Israelite prophets spoke was adapted to the cultural heritage of the people they served, a heritage that took pride in scholarship and complexity, thus making the people look for "... things they could not understand."¹³ In the case of the Nephites, their prophets, following the counsel of Nephi, did not prophesy in the manner of the Israelites¹⁴, but delighted in "... plainness unto [the] people, that they may learn."¹⁵ On the other hand, the Nephites did not have a language as powerful in writing as it was in speech¹⁶, thus indicating that there is still a lot yet to be revealed about the Nephites and Lamanites' knowledge of and experience in the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁷

With these thoughts in mind, consider how the words of the Apostle Paul concerning our need for each other gain a broader meaning and contemporary significance:

"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles ... For the body is not one member, but many. If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him ...

And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary ...

⁹ D&C 8:2; 9:8

¹⁰ 2 Nephi 29:10,12-13. This passage has been commonly used to justify the existence of the Book of Mormon. I am just expanding this interpretation to include a larger number of future sacred texts.

¹¹ D&C 58:3; 76:7-10; 121:26-33

¹² To see how much additional light the Book of Mormon has brought to our understanding, check the references in the Topical Guide--or in any good Index to the Scriptures--for, for example, the first principles of the gospel, or doctrines like the atonement, repentance, etc.

¹³ Jacob 4:14. See also 2 Nephi 25:5

¹⁴ 2 Nephi 25:6

¹⁵ 2 Nephi 25:4

¹⁶ Ether 12:23-25

¹⁷ Let us wait for the Plates of Brass (1 Nephi 5:18) and the Plates of the Jaredites (Ether 3:17-20,25,27-28), just to start. Then, let us see what the Lost Tribes of Israel will offer us when their gathering is completed (2 Nephi 29:12); and then ... see D&C 63:21; 107:57; Moses 6:5; etc.

God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. ... therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.¹⁸

Paul compared the Church with a body, having several different members performing different tasks; no member of the body was to be considered unimportant, no matter its size, composition, or function. The heart is a muscle, but it cannot carry weights; however it can pump blood, without which the muscles in the arms and legs would not work. The hands have more bones and sinews than muscles, but they multiply the number of tasks that the arms can accomplish. The kidneys are small and look fragile, but without them our blood would not be purified and we would die.

A similar process happens with us as a worldwide Church¹⁹. As Germans, Nigerians, Irish, Americans, Koreans, Italians, Australians, Brazilians, Russians, Samoans, Bolivians, Hungarians, British, Japanese, New Zealanders, or whatever other nationality, we all have many things to learn from each other. Our traditions, our level of income, our education, our flora--all these things and many other variables make us understand the gospel with overtones that taken into consideration add to a more comprehensive view of the Lord and his kingdom²⁰.

Some may argue that a few of these cultures will lack enough experience in the gospel to make a significant contribution--because the church have entered in some of these countries late in the 20th century. We may agree with the fact that compared with those who have had the gospel in their countries for over fifty or one hundred years, recent converts in Nigeria, Russia, India, and other countries can be considered as "infants" in the gospel. However, great are the promises of the Lord concerning these "infants." Consider the following words from the Prophet Joseph Smith:

"... it is necessary in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times, ... that a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories should take place, and be revealed from the days of Adam even to the present time. And not only this, but those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times.²¹"

"... We are called to hold the keys of the mysteries of those things that have been kept hid from the foundation of the world until now. Some have tasted a little of these things, many of which

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:13-14,17-18,21-22,24-27; Ephesians 2:19-22

¹⁹ The previous passages of scripture are often quoted relating to other subjects; at this time I am applying them to demonstrate that by not being prejudiced against others we may be blessed with greater knowledge and blessings.

²⁰ D&C 88:77-80

²¹ D&C 128:18

are to be poured down from heaven upon the heads of babes; yea, upon the weak, obscure and despised ones of the earth.²²"

One final thought: if we consider the eternities of the Gods, can we say in good reason that whatever culture we belong to is "the right one"? Who knows how our descendants will describe us 500 years from now? Who knows if at this very moment a person in a more advanced culture somewhere in the eternities is not saying that our technologically enhanced cultures are "primitive"?

Dealing with Different Cultures

A few individuals have acquired the bad habit of considering themselves as members of "superior" societies, and when these individuals think of other cultures they do so with disdain or pity. The words of President Spencer W. Kimball concerning the Lamanites may give us an idea of the right way to deal with other cultures, especially those deemed by a few as "poor, illiterate and undependable":

"This people ask not for your distant, far-away sympathy, your haughty disdain, your despicable contempt, your supercilious scorn, your turned-up nose, your scathing snobbery, your arrogant scoffing, nor your cold, calculating charity. It is a people who, unable to raise themselves by their own boot straps, call for assistance from those who can push and lift and open doors. ... It is a good folk who ask for fraternity, a handclasp of friendship, a word of encouragement; it is a group of nations who cry for warm acceptance and sincere brotherhood.

I give you a chosen race, an affectionate and warm-hearted people ... a people who have intelligence and capacity to climb to former heights but who need the vision and the opportunity and the assistance of the nursing parents. ... If we fully help them, they can eventually soar to greatness. The ungerminated seeds are waiting for the rains of kindness and opportunity, the sunshine of gospel's truth, the cultivation through the Church program of training and activity, and the seeds will come to life and the harvest will be fabulous. For the Lord has promised it!²³"

Exposure to different cultures in and out of the Church of Christ challenges us to abandon our prejudices. In the process of abandonment we will develop the attributes of temperance, patience, kindness and unfeigned love for our brothers and sisters throughout the world, leading us towards charity and an even greater knowledge of God.

"The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal (co-eternal) with God himself.²⁴" Based on this statement from the Prophet Joseph Smith, we may conclude that much of the diversity we find in the world could be derived from our Heavenly Father's infinite mind. Being an all-powerful, perfect, exalted being, he is able to see all things, understand all things, and harmonize all the ideas that to us, imperfect mortals, appear to be divergent. Again, the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith: "... we are looked upon by God as though we were in eternity. God dwells in eternity, and does not view things as we do."²⁵

²² TPJS, p.137. March 25, 1839. In the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) the Lord implied that the "latecomers" would receive the same rewards as those who started working early.

²³ Faith Precedes the Miracle, p.303-304. This was an excerpt from chapter 28, entitled "Tolerance," a highly recommendable reading.

²⁴ TPJS, p.353. April 7, 1844. Parenthesis added based on a comment placed on the footnote of the same page.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.356

The Lord will use the weak things of the world (not the learned nor the famous) in his work²⁶; thus there is no need to discriminate against anyone. We need all--no matter their income level, educational background, or race. Because of our pre-mortal divine filiation and the atonement all souls are precious unto God²⁷; and to despise one another is to despise the image of God²⁸. The Apostle James wrote the following:

"My brethren, ye cannot have the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, and yet have respect to persons. Now if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect for him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then in yourselves partial judges, and become evil in your thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? ... But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.²⁹"

Another Insight on Diversity: The Analogy of the Building

We are engaged in a glorious task: the building up of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ. This is an enterprise without similar in the whole history of this earth. Perhaps not even the building of Enoch's city of Zion could be compared to this latter-day work, because of the worldwide scope of the work at this time. While Enoch and his people built one city, we are involved in building a new world.

The Apostle Paul compared the members of the Church with a building, or a temple: "In [Christ] all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In [Christ] ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.³⁰" We may say that the design of this building is so elaborated, so intricate, so beautiful, so perfect, so temporarily incomprehensible to us, imperfect mortals with finite capabilities, that in order to accomplish this work we will need to use a combination of all knowledge, all skills, all gifts, all powers and all authorities bestowed either in ancient or in modern times. Like the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, a "... welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories ..."³¹

Where are we going to find this knowledge, these skills, powers and authorities? The powers and authorities are being restored through living prophets since the days of the prophet Joseph Smith. However, the knowledge and skills have not been completely restored yet. We have the fulness of the gospel³², but not the fulness of gospel knowledge. We have the key to unlock the meaning of mysteries, which interpretations will progressively increase our understanding.

²⁶ D&C 1:19-21

²⁷ D&C 18:10-11

²⁸ Psalms 8:4-6; 82:6

²⁹ JST James 2:1-5,9

³⁰ Ephesians 2:21-22; brackets added.

³¹ D&C 128:18

³² D&C 42:12

The Lord also revealed that He would have his word written all over the world³³. That suggests that additional knowledge and skills are scattered all over the world. I suppose no single nation in the world today has the complete combination of knowledge and skills necessary to build the millennial kingdom of Christ. If that is true, it would be another reason why we have been commanded to organize stakes³⁴ of Zion all over the world, instead of gathering the Saints in only half a dozen places.

Human wisdom alone cannot erect this building, or the millennial kingdom of Christ. But the combination of the wisdom given to all peoples and cultures--after they are purged, refined, and sanctified by the Spirit of Lord under the direction of his living prophets--will do it.

Alma, the younger, taught that the Lord has "... [granted] unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have ..." ³⁵ By this we may assume that all nations had at some point in time at least some parts of the gospel, if not its fulness in a number of still unknown cases. That being true, we could then assume that when the universal apostasy came, those elements of the gospel were misinterpreted and mixed with other traditions not based on the gospel--perhaps in an effort to make those principles more appealing to the people--and that the true principles continued to exist imbedded in several forms of cultural expressions like myths, legends, fables, stories, etc.

The process of purging means that the false elements present in these cultural expressions will have to be set aside. Refinement implies that some fine-tuning of that wisdom with the basic principles of the gospel will have to take place, just like in the process of distillation, where unseen impurities are separated from the main element. In the final stage, sanctification, the Spirit of the Lord will give life to that purified wisdom, and that will become part of the will of the Lord, thus enabling us to be blessed by obedience to it.

³³ 2 Nephi 29:8,12,14

³⁴ D&C 115:6; 101:20-21. In the last chapter of this study I will propose some insights about the establishment of Zion.

³⁵ Alma 29:8; brackets added.

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor's in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.