

All Are (Really) Alike Unto God: Personal Reflections on the 1978 Revelation¹ by Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D.

I am very glad to be with you at this occasion. It is a great honor for me to bring to you some personal insights. I should begin by saying that what I am going to tell you, or most of what I am going to tell you are personal impressions, personal reflections. I will be referring to the scriptures and to the words of latter-day prophets. But I will be bringing you my understanding and my personal interpretation of these scriptures and these prophetic insights.

I titled this presentation “All Are (Really) Alike Unto God: Personal Reflections on the 1978 Revelation.” My wife and I have been honored many times in trips around the country with opportunities to address a number of audiences, from coast to coast, and in most of those occasions I was invited to speak on the ban that existed in the Church until about 1978, whereby men of the Black race could not be ordained to the priesthood.

I feel that I should begin by bearing my testimony to you. I know that God lives and Jesus is the Christ, our Savior and Redeemer. I know that they appeared to Joseph Smith Jr in the spring of 1820. I know that Joseph was a true prophet of God as well as all of his successors, all the way to our current living prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley. I honor the memory of those men and I express to you my loyalty to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and my support to them and all the other General Authorities of the Church.

Having said that, as I was telling you before, every year I receive a lot of questions about the priesthood ban and about the relationship that exists among us as Latter-day Saints and the world in general. These questions come every year by way of letters, e-mail, and phone calls. I get somewhere around a one hundred contacts every year asking me questions on the subject.

So I decided to bring to you what I have been saying to people in all these presentations in all these letters in all my replies to e-mail messages and so I am going to first of all tell a little about the priesthood ban. Specifically, what we do officially know about the priesthood ban, and then I am going to address what we do not know about the priesthood ban or at least what we do not know for sure or what we don't know at all about the priesthood ban. I think it is as important to know what we don't know as it is what we do know.

Then I will present a few personal insights on the subject, and follow them with statements made by some of the public witnesses of the revelation in 1978 that extended the priesthood and all the blessings of the gospel including temple blessings to all worthy men of the Church. Finally, we will review a few prophetic insights on race relations and then address how to deal with past statements about the ban.

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The Priesthood Ban: What We Do Know

Let us begin with what we do know, based on the documented history of the Church.

The Prophet Joseph Smith advocated the ban, but did not prevent brother Elijah Abel from being ordained an elder and a seventy in Kirtland, in 1836. I should add that Brother Abel served three full-time missions for the Church. Something more that we do know for sure is that on June 4, 1879, President John Taylor ratified the priesthood ban based largely on the testimony of brothers Zebedee Coltrin and Abraham Smoot.

On August 18, 1900, President Lorenzo Snow stated that he wasn't sure whether the existing explanations for the ban had been personal opinions or actual revelations. This is very significant. Here we have one president of the Church saying that he didn't know whether the ban had simply been the consequence of personal opinions.

We also know that in 1954 Pres. David O. McKay asked a committee composed of members of the Quorum of the Twelve to study the issue, and the committee concluded that there was no doctrinal basis for the ban. President McKay was in fact one of the presidents of the Church in the 20th century who was very much in tune with the idea of an international Church or the Church going all over the world. In fact I remember reading an issue of the Ensign in which there was a statement of President McKay about the Church being a universal Church and that statement was published in several languages. So what did President McKay do? As a living prophet would do, President McKay consulted with the Lord and what we do know is that President David O. McKay expressed the desire to lift the priesthood ban, but to his disappointment, the answer to his prayers said otherwise

We also know that in 1973 another Church president, President Harold B. Lee spent 3 days and nights fasting and praying about the issue, but the answer was: "Not yet." Now, brothers and sisters, this is pretty much all the reliable information that we have about the priesthood ban. This is all backed up by documentary evidence found in the Church archives and reliable witnesses.

The Priesthood Ban: What We Don't Know for Sure--Or Not At All

Now let's then take a look at the things about the priesthood ban that we don't know for sure or that we don't know at all. Those would be: the precise origin of the ban; the pre-existence (also known as the "fence-sitting") hypothesis; the preparedness hypothesis; the criteria for pre-ordination; and the heredity of curses.

So, let's begin with the precise historical origin of the ban. We do not know for sure when the priesthood ban originated, or when it was first imposed. There are a few pieces of literature by LDS authors from the late 19th century and the early 20th century that suggest that the origin of the ban can be traced to events mentioned in the Pearl of Great Price.

There we read that Pharaoh, a descendant of Noah, had been cursed with regards to the priesthood. He was a descendant of Canaan, Noah's grandson. And Canaan had been cursed regarding the priesthood and then, Pharaoh being a member of that lineage could not hold the

priesthood. It so happens that here is why we don't know the precise origin of the ban. We learn in Genesis that Ham, son of Noah, had four sons, and we know that Canaan, one of those sons, was cursed regarding the priesthood, which then leaves us with a simple question: What about the other three sons? And we have a simple answer: we don't know.

We also learn in the Pearl of Great Price, Moses chapter 7, that there was a people called the people of Canaan² who committed genocide and completely wiped out another nation or another group of people and for that they were cursed with—the text says—a skin of blackness, and later the text, in the Pearl of Great Price says that the seed of Cain was black and had no place among the people of God, which at that point were the people of Enoch in the city of Enoch, which is Zion.

But notice (1) the text says nothing about the priesthood, and (2) we are dealing with a situation in which an entire group of people was cursed because they committed genocide; not because of any other apparent reason. Simply because they committed genocide, possibly in a cowardly manner.

And also the text also doesn't specify if all of them had been cursed or if there were any members of that particular people, the people of Canaan, who were believers. And as far as the seed of Cain not having a place among the people of Enoch, we have to remember that the text states that Cain's descendants lived in a society that was ruled by a murderous secret combination. And in a situation like that it is not a place where you would go teach the gospel—a people who commit murder for a living.

So we do not know the precise historical origin of the ban, and all our scriptures don't say anything about it. And what they say still leave margin for many other questions. And in the scriptures we cannot point out exactly where the ban started.

“What about statements made by the Prophet Joseph Smith?” somebody might ask. Well, the fact that he did not prevent brother Elijah Abel from being ordained—and he knew brother Abel—opens all sorts of questions. The Prophet Joseph never elaborated on that. We don't know for example at that time, if his statement had anything to do with slavery, which was still legal in most of the United States. And so it was possible, or at least it is conceivable, that he was just trying to live the law of the land, or also trying to avoid further trouble.

I once heard a very compelling argument on an alternative hypothesis for the existence of the ban. Instead of looking to a 6,000-year-old murder or a 5,000-year-old family quarrel, consider this scenario: What if a black man, a black slave, would be ordained to the priesthood? And the slaveholder, the slaveholder would come to him and say, “I have a sick child here, I want you to heal my child, otherwise I will kill you.” Under the conditions of slavery, that's not a very far-fetched scenario at all. Slaveholders had power of life and death over their slaves. So what if the

² Earlier versions of this transcript, including the original text used in the videotaping of the lecture, incorrectly used the name “Cainan” instead of “Canaan.” My apologies for the typing error. I should clarify that according to Biblical chronology these “people of Canaan” mentioned in Moses chapter 7 lived several centuries (about 700 years) before the days of Noah's grandson—whose existence is only mentioned in the years after the Flood.

Prophet Joseph had slavery in his mind, and not some other consideration? Once again, a three-word answer: we don't know. But because we don't know, that once again opens the door for questions about it.

Things We Don't Know: The Pre-Existence Hypothesis

Now, moving forward in our overview of the old arguments used to explain the existence of the priesthood ban, and let's review the pre-existence hypothesis. Remember all of these things that I'm listing here, are things that we don't know for sure or don't know at all. And all I'm trying to demonstrate is why these arguments could never explain the existence of the ban.

The pre-existence hypothesis is the following: in the early 1900's some people argued that the priesthood ban might have been imposed because people of the black race were less valiant, or less faithful in the pre-mortal existence. Once again, we have no prophetic declarations setting forth such statement as a new doctrine, and you can't find it in the scriptures. However, in the minds of Church members in the early 20th century, this hypothesis made sense and a good number of people accepted this as an explanation, and some even wrote about it in its defense.

Now people have a right to their opinion. The people of the United States of America have a constitutional right to free speech and conscience. But having a right, doesn't mean that personal opinions may automatically become doctrine, even though they may have seemed quite logical at one point in time.

We know very little about the pre-existence. We know that we lived as spirits with our Heavenly Father. We also know that as spirits we had a number of experiences, that we could exercise our agency to a certain extent, and that we wanted to be like our Heavenly Father. And because of that he organized this earth where we stand right now, and organized the plan of salvation for us. That's about what we know. A few more things, but they don't particularly relate to this subject.

I call your attention to the argument that people made for the ban based on Abraham's vision contained in the Pearl of Great Price. The Lord showed Abraham the pre-existing spirits, and explained that there was some kind of hierarchy among the pre-existing spirits. And the He said some of the spirits were "noble and great." And the Lord said that he would make some of those spirits rulers on the earth (*The Pearl of Great Price*, Abraham 3:22-23). That led me to think and ponder for a long time about it. And I came to the realization that yes, this is true. It was the word of the Lord and I believe and have a testimony that the Pearl of Great Price is an inspired text. However, we have to be careful with the use of language.

Based on my experience many years ago of translating the Book of Mormon, or working on a new translation of the Book of Mormon into my native language, which is Portuguese, I learned that words are imperfect tools. And also that we use these words with, very often, imperfect mortal definitions. And there is an inherent problem when we use mortal words to define immortal concepts. Mortal, and therefore imperfect definitions, to describe immortal, perfect concepts. And that led me to write the following:

“... concepts like progress, intelligence, and valiancy, must be used with great care when referring to the corresponding perfect virtues found in eternal worlds. Without proper care, mortal definitions for such concepts may end up being heavily influenced by imperfect (and at times abhorrent) societal biases. ...

“... The careless use of imperfect mortal definitions for progress, intelligence, and valiancy to explain their perfect immortal counterparts may end up being a futile attempt to imagine prejudicial and damaging systems in spheres where there are no such things.”
(Considerations on Race, Pre-Existence, and Mortality, 1999)

Things We Don't Know: The Preparedness Hypothesis

Continuing with our overview of old arguments used to try to justify or to explain the priesthood ban, we come to what I call “the preparedness hypothesis.” Some people have argued that the reason why there was a priesthood ban before 1978 was because prior to 1978, Blacks weren't ready for the priesthood. Another group of people came with a similar, but alternative, explanation. They say no, no, no, it was because Whites weren't ready to see Blacks receive the priesthood.

Well, here's what I have to say about it: I never conducted a survey on the subject; therefore I know nothing about the preparedness of this or that group. I cannot say anything about it. And besides, if you'd say, (and I've heard this before) “There was a man in my neighborhood who everybody could see wasn't ready for the priesthood.” Fine. But I would ask: How representative is this man of the larger population? So if you have somebody in your neighborhood, how does that somebody stack up against the rest of the population in the country—or in the world?

Today we have access to historical research done by a number of scholars, like Dr. Dale LeBaron, Jessie Embry, Mark Grover, and a number of others. Great stories of faith, stories that will be source of inspirations for generations from now on. Experiences coming from Africa, the United States, Brazil, and I had of course, very close to me, my parents, great people of great faith. People who became members of the Church, even knowing that they would possibly never be allowed to have the full benefits of their membership. We have the stories of those in Ghana, Nigeria, who begged for the Church to be among them. And when the Church could not be among them, they, some of them, started a Church of their own. They got literature, and they held meetings, and they did it themselves. How could anybody say that those individuals were not ready? We can say nothing about who was ready and who was not.

If I may share a personal story with you, I remember when I turned sixteen years old. My parents and I were baptized, and at that point I had only one sister who was six years old. Years later our family grew, and now I have two sisters and a brother. But I was thirteen years old when I joined the Church. When I was sixteen my father instructed me to learn how to perform the ordinances that a priest in the Aaronic priesthood would have the right and the authority to do. Learn how to baptize people, learn how to administer the sacrament, to learn how to ordain other priests. And of course, I being sixteen years old, told my father, “But why? I'm not going to be ordained a priest. Why should I do that?” And he said, “Well, just because you are sixteen years old, and that's what's expected of sixteen-year-olds in the Church. If you were ordained to

the priesthood, you would be a priest now. But because you're not, doesn't mean you're going to do as much as you can without the priesthood.”

So, I undertook the task of learning those ordinances. When I turned eighteen, my father told me the same thing. Learn how to confirm people members of the Church, learn how to administer the ordinances of the Melchizedek priesthood, learn how to administer to the sick. And I did that, and about a year later, when the revelation extending the priesthood came, I was ready. Because of the faith of my father, I was ready.

So we can say nothing about the preparedness of people we never knew. Believing in lack of preparation for the priesthood may be sufficient for some individuals. It may bring them some peace of mind or satisfaction. Fine with me. But just because it brings peace and satisfaction to a few individuals, that does not make the statement a doctrine.

Things We Don't Know: The Criteria for Pre-Ordination

Another thing that we don't know at all is the criteria that our Heavenly Father used in pre-ordination. Now, we know that the house of the Lord is a house of order. We know that there must have been some kind of organization in the pre-mortal world that assigned us to lineages, to nations, to times in history; there must have been some kind of organization. I don't believe that we were walking around in the pre-existence, and then we stumbled and we fell in Germany. I don't believe that this was the case. There must have been some kind of organization according to the foreknowledge of our Heavenly Father. But, we know nothing about how this organization operated.

And for those who argue that circumstances on earth are a direct consequence of pre-mortal behavior—or misbehavior, I suggest a careful reading of what the Lord stated in the Doctrine and Covenants:

“And again I say unto you, let every man esteem his brother as himself. For what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: ... “... Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there--and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just? Behold, this I have given unto you as a parable, and it is even as I am. I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine.” (Doctrine & Covenants 38:25-27)

And based on scriptures like this, I was led to write the following, as far as pre-ordination or pre-mortal assignments to earth, and our potential for exaltation:

“... our potential and likelihood for exaltation and eternal life are not dependent upon events and circumstances of the pre-mortal existence. ... [Exaltation] and eternal life are entirely dependent upon the Lord's grace following our individual faith and obedience, and ... salvation is offered to all, regardless of material circumstances. ...

“In the past some have suggested that being born under ... 'favorable' circumstances could be seen as a reward for righteous pre-mortal deeds. But if such idea were true, how could we account for Abraham's birth in the home of an idolatrous and abusive father? ...

“Associating materialistic circumstances with pre-mortal rewards would deny the possibility of the Lord's pre-ordained rulers being born in all nations and under a variety of social and economic circumstances.” (Considerations on Race, Pre-Existence, and Mortality, 1999)

Things We Don't Know: The Heredity of Curses

Now I'd like to move on and discuss another old argument used in the attempt to explain the ban: The heredity of curses. In the past some people argued: “Canaan was cursed, and Blacks are descendants of Canaan;” (which we don't know for sure) “therefore they were denied certain blessings.”

I call your attention to the fact that in the scriptures, probably since the days of the Old Testament, we find the decree that children will not receive the punishment of the fathers. We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for the transgression of Adam, or Cain, or Canaan, or whoever. So, I wrote the following:

“... curses are as hereditary as blessings. And just as the blessings of the parents are bestowed upon their children only on conditions of individual righteousness, likewise, curses can only be transferred from one generation to the next on conditions of wickedness. ...

“... We read that such-and-such people were cursed, but often we do not ask for what reason they were cursed, nor under what conditions the curse was imposed, and more importantly, under what conditions the curse might be lifted.” (Considerations on Race, Pre-Existence, and Mortality, 1999)

Why Was There a Priesthood Ban?

These have been the main arguments that were used in the distant past as attempts to explain the ban. Since, as we have seen here, none of them is sufficient to explain the ban, the next question then is: Why then, was there a priesthood ban? And for that my friends, I will take you to the official statement of the Church, which has always been the official statement of the Church. In 1969 the First Presidency headed by President David O. McKay clarified that the ban existed:

“... [For] reasons which we believe are known to God, but which he has not made fully known to man.” (Church News, 15 December 1969)

Why was there a priesthood ban? We don't know. The Lord never explained. I understand that this may be insufficient to some people. However, let me share a testimony on that. There was a time—years ago—when I used to think: “One day, I will be in the presence of the Lord and I will ask him why.” But now, time and experience in the kingdom of God have taught me otherwise. Through the power of the Holy Ghost I have felt many times his love for me. And when I

consider that Heavenly Father gave his Only Begotten Son to suffer infinite agony and pain for me ... I don't dare to ask anything other than "Thy will be done, my Lord, my God." That's how I honestly feel about this.

Dealing With Statements from the Past

The next question might be: What should I do when somebody tells me this-or-that about what the Church supposedly believes in regards to races, etc.? Let me preface my response by stressing that because of our belief in continuous revelation, certain statements are time sensitive. Besides, one has to be careful with the problem of misquotations and misinterpretations disguised as official pronouncements by Church leaders.

Very often we hear quotations that begin like this: "A Church leader once said ..." When you hear people saying something like this, or asking you a question based on a supposed statement by a Church leader, ask them: "Who said that? Who was this Church leader? What exactly did the Church leader say? I would like an exact quotation. Where did he say it, and in what context?" Very often you will find that a lot of people say things using this appeal to authority, or the "Church-leader approach," and they don't know exactly what was said. They sometimes say something to the effect of "Oh, my cousin has a friend whose brother was attending a ward barbeque, and I think there was a General Authority there who said such-and-such thing." I have to say, "Excuse me ...!"

That not only does not meet the standard for what we consider official Church doctrine, but this is hearsay at its worst! And anyone who makes important decisions based on such type of information is running the risk of making errors that will lead to disappointments, frustration, and loss of spiritual strength. Often we find this kind of information roaming around on the Internet, accounts of supposed miracles and whatnot, most of which is not true—just misquotations or even silly fabrications. And people are gullible; they keep forwarding these messages around. Instead, try to say "Let me see, let me check this." Not every thing that sounds great, that sounds sweet and poetic, is necessarily true, much less doctrine. You have to be careful with that. So, how do we deal with the statements made in the distant past about the priesthood ban? Here's what Elder Bruce R. McConkie suggested in 1978, a few weeks after the revelation was received:

"... Forget everything that I have said, or that President Brigham Young or ... whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world. ...

"It doesn't make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about [this] matter before the first day of June of this year, 1978. ... As to any slivers of light or any particles of darkness of the past, we forget about them." ("All Are Alike Unto God," in Charge to Religious Educators (1982), pp.152-155)

I think this was a tremendously courageous statement. I admired that great man and apostle of the Lord. After I read this statement that he made to an audience of Church educators I admired him even more. The man was great in my eyes and he became even greater to me when he said

this. And if that was not enough we have a second witness to this approach to deal with incorrect ideas of old.

In 1988 Elder Dallin H. Oaks, also of the Quorum of the Twelve, gave an interview to the Associated Press. And this is what he said in the interview:

“... It’s not the pattern of the Lord to give reasons. We can put reasons to commandments. When we do we’re on our own. Some people put reasons to [the ban] and they turned out to be spectacularly wrong. There is a lesson in that. ... “The lesson I’ve drawn from that, I decided a long time ago that I had faith in the command and I had no faith in the reasons that had been suggested for it. ...

“... I’m referring to reasons given by general authorities and reasons elaborated upon [those reasons] by others. The whole set of reasons seemed to me to be unnecessary risk taking. ...

“Let’s [not] make the mistake that’s been made in the past, here and in other areas, trying to put reasons to revelation. The reasons turn out to be man-made to a great extent. The revelations are what we sustain as the will of the Lord and that’s where safety lies.”
(Interview to the Associated Press, in Daily Herald, Provo, Utah, June 5, 1988)

Let’s not try to develop reasons. Yes, there was a priesthood ban, but that’s all there was. Let’s not try to perpetuate the man-made explanations of the past or attempt at explanations, because those cannot explain anything.

Based on the alternative arguments that I presented to you today, you can see that they didn’t explain anything. Let’s not try to perpetuate that. I would invite those who are even passing around this information to stop doing that. I would invite authors, at least those who are still living, to revise their works. I would ask publishers to refuse to publish any work that contains this kind of statements. I know this may be quite difficult, given the number of books that we have around. But isn’t it worth it to have the truth instead of speculation? We have a worldwide Church; this is the kingdom of God on the earth. Isn’t the salvation and the spiritual welfare of millions of current Church members worth the effort? And think of the generations yet unborn.

Public Witnesses of the Revelation

Now let’s talk about some “good stuff.” Let’s talk more about this great revelation that was received in 1978. We have two remarkable public statements made by witnesses to the revelation. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said the following:

“... [When] President Kimball finished his prayer, the Lord gave a revelation by the power of the Holy Ghost. ... On this occasion ... the Lord ... poured out the Holy Ghost in a miraculous and marvelous manner, beyond anything any then present had ever experienced. ...

“The revelation came to the President of the Church; it also came to each individual present. There were ten members of the Council of the Twelve and three of the First

Presidency there assembled.” (“All Are Alike Unto God,” in Charge to Religious Educators (1982), pp.152-155)

Very interesting that this revelation that extended the priesthood to all worthy males was received by 13 prophets, seers, and revelators. It was not just President Spencer W. Kimball receiving the revelation and asking his councilors and the Twelve Apostles to concur. Not so. All of them, with the exception of two—one who was out of town and another who was at the hospital. So all 13 then-living prophets, seers, and revelators received the same revelation at the same time. Elder David B. Haight in a General Conference address in 1996 said the following:

“... I was in the temple when President Spencer W. Kimball received the revelation regarding the priesthood. I was the junior member of the Quorum of the Twelve. I was there. ...

“I was there with the outpouring of the Spirit in that room so strong that none of us could speak afterward. We just left quietly to go back to the office. No one could say anything because of the powerful outpouring of the heavenly spiritual experience.” (Conference Report, April 1996; Ensign, May 1996, p.23)

So while we don't know why there was a priesthood ban, we do know that the ban ended when the Lord himself gave a powerful revelation to his living prophets. And notice I told you before that Presidents McKay and Lee leaned towards lifting the ban, but the Lord told them not yet. This was not a decision to be made by mortals. And I believe in the testimony of those men. They were prophets of God; I have no reason to question or doubt them. I do not question their experiences. So whatever the reason for the ban, it remains with the Lord himself. And I have a testimony that this is the Lord's Church. So this was not just a policy that could have been dealt with administratively. No. If it had been such, it would have ended in 1954 with Pres. David O. McKay, but for whatever reasons, it continued on until 1978.

A Few Personal Insights

A few individuals have asked me: “Was it hard to not hold the priesthood?” or “How could you be a member of this Church without the priesthood?” I make mine the answer given by Peter, found in the New Testament, at the end of John chapter 6. After some of the disciples left the Savior because they were offended by the “Bread of Life” sermon, the Savior turned to the Twelve and asked: “... Will ye also go away?” And Peter answered: “... Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.” (The New Testament; John 6:67-69)

Therefore, for those who ask me “How could you be a member of this Church?” I answer that in my heart and in my mind I had found the words of eternal life taught by true living prophets and apostles. My parents and I had nowhere else to go.

I began my presentation with the title “All are (Really) Alike unto God.” So far we have dealt with the matter of the alleged reasons for the priesthood ban.

What then can we say about ourselves as a people, as a very diverse people, coming from all corners of the earth? Let's go to the Book of Mormon again and read two passages out of the book of Second Nephi. In the first one, Nephi said the following:

“... Wherefore, he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation. ... and he 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 all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.” (The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ; 2 Nephi 26:24,33)

When we find ourselves striving to keep the commandments, striving to do the Lord's will, we will receive blessing from him, we will not receive blessings from one another. We are just instruments in the hands of the Lord.

From time to time I have had students come into my offices—and this when I taught at BYU Provo, at Ricks College, and now at BYU-Hawaii—I always have students come to me and ask me the question, “Is it true that people of the Black race will not go to the celestial kingdom?” The first time I heard that I was aghast, I said, “Where in the world did you get that idea?” The idea behind this question is simply preposterous, because it denies the blessings of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Once again, remember the words of Nephi: “... He denieth none that come unto him black and white, bond and free, male and female.” (The Book of Mormon; 2 Nephi 26:33) When it comes to our salvation, it is not a neighbor down the street who is going to admit us into the celestial his kingdom. Consider these words spoken by Nephi's younger brother, Jacob:

“... the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there ...” (The Book of Mormon; 2 Nephi 9:41)

I'm giving you another personal insight here, just another personal reflection of my own, and I'm entirely responsible for it. If someone, anyone out there does not feel comfortable with the idea of seeing me in the celestial kingdom, if I ever make it to that place—and I am striving the best that I can to make it there—but if somebody doesn't feel comfortable with the idea of being with me in the celestial kingdom, this person may look for another kingdom of glory for him or herself. Because “the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel and he employeth no servant there.” Imperfect mortal hands cannot try to close the heavenly gates without keeping themselves on the outside.

Prophetic Insights

Before we conclude, let's consider two additional prophetic insights on the subject, first from Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, quoting a joint-statement issued a couple of years earlier by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve:

“It is morally wrong for any person or group to deny anyone his or her inalienable dignity on the tragic and abhorrent theory of racial or cultural superiority.” (Quoted in Conference Report, April 1994, p.93; Originally published in The Church News, 24 October 1992, p.4)

And these words from President Gordon B. Hinckley:

“We must not be partisans of any doctrine of ethnic superiority. We live in a world of diversity. We can and must be respectful toward those with whose teachings we may not agree. We must be willing to defend the rights of others who may become the victims of bigotry.” (Conference Report, April 1995, p.94)

Brothers and sisters, we have a wonderful gospel, we have living prophets, seers and revelators, we have more light and knowledge today than we did in 1900 or in 1920 or in 1950. We have become a little bit wiser as a people, and we are now striving to become a little gentler, a little bit more Christ-like and in order to be Christ-like we have to be willing to acknowledge that the atonement of Jesus Christ was infinite and eternal. That the gate of Heaven is open to all who want to come under the requirements or the conditions that have been set by the Lord himself. And other than living prophets we are not authorized to add conditions of our own to those in the scriptures.

There is no reason to put anybody down, there's no reason to reject anyone. We can come together as one people, as one Zion. Because we live in the world in this pre-millennial stage, we have to grapple with complex issues that others may raise, but let's use our influence for good. Let's use the influence we have to teach others that it is wrong to put down our brothers and sisters, that no matter what one looks like, what nationality, what language we speak, no matter how much money we make, no matter what walk of life we belong to, we are all children of the same God, that the difference that exist among us here in income and in material comfort, those are man-made differences, those are not from the Lord.

I remember very clearly reading in the Pearl of Great Price, the experience that Enoch had when he saw the Lord crying—shedding tears of divine sorrow over the condition of the world (The Pearl of Great Price; Moses 7:28-29,33-40). Beautiful passage. I am sure that the Lord is still weeping when he sees the disparities that exist in the world and the lack of love that exist in the world. This is not a black-and-white issue. We see all over the world conflicts and clashes, among whites, among blacks, and all those issues can be resolved if we all acknowledged that we are children of the same God, that we are all heirs of divine potential, of divine qualities, of divine attributes. That we can choose good and reject evil, that we can look beyond, or look past our differences and work towards common good. We have the power to do this. And I believe that as we embrace this idea of really looking at each other and seeing in each other, no matter what we look like, but seeing in each other the likeness and image of God, as we do that we will grow, we will really come unto Christ, which I understand as coming to a state of Christ-likeness, or a state of being like Christ, that's my personal understanding of the expression “coming unto Christ.”

I testify to you that this gospel is true. As I said at the beginning, I know that we have living prophets, and as far as the prophets of the past as well as the prophets of the present I testify to you that I would gladly entrust my life in the hands of any of them. I know that they were prophets of God and they would want nothing to me other than that which would be good and just and heaven-sent. And I testify to you of this and I leave these thoughts with you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.