

Have We Overcome? Uncovering RLDS Ambivalence toward African-Americans: A Documentary Study

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), primarily a white American church, has long had an ambivalent attitude toward African-American members in its midst. In this case, it has been far from “the forefront of those who would mediate this needless destruction....”¹ As William D. Russell wrote in 1979, the church leadership has always aligned itself with the mainstream Northern U.S. societal beliefs – a conservative “priestly role” rather than the RLDS self-designated progressive “prophetic” role.²

This essay will demonstrate this thesis by analyzing several documents written by the church leadership (or by those who represent them) illuminating their ambivalent attitude toward African Americans in the church and uncovering signs of progress and regress throughout RLDS history. This essay will focus on three different time periods for sake of comparison: the late 19th Century, the 1960s and then the last 20 years.

The Reconstruction: “Be not hasty in ordaining men of the Negro race...” 1865

The American Civil War, fought at least in part over the issue of slave ownership in the south, ended in the spring of 1865. About 620,000 soldiers³ had perished and as the country tried to rebuild itself, the Northern victors tried salvage constructive meaning from the blood drenched battlefields. The aftermath of the war saw much of the northern mainstream happy to take the moral high ground and support egalitarian legal reforms.

¹ RLDS, "Section 150," Doctrine and Covenants (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1990), 197. Hereafter the Doctrine and Covenants will be referred to as D & C.

² William D. Russell, “A Priestly Role for a Prophetic Church: The RLDS Church and Black Americans,” Dialogue (Summer 1979), 37

³ James McPherson, "Civil War: Causes and Results," 1991, <<http://www.historychannel.com>> (May 9, 2001).

Congress passed the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution guaranteeing full citizenship rights to the newly freed slaves.

This societal attitude also found itself in the RLDS church. At a council of the two leading quorums of the church, the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve in Kendall County, Illinois, May 1-5, 1865 the men discussed the issue of “the ordination of the men of the Negro race.” They asked Joseph Smith III to “seek divine guidance.” Smith responded with a document which the Quorum of Twelve unanimously approved and in 1878 became Section 116 of the Doctrine and Covenants.⁴ Reflecting current egalitarian attitudes the document declared that the gospel message was for all people and so thus it was “expedient” to “ordain priests...of every race.”⁵

Even so, the Civil War had not purged the deep-seated white suspicion and naivete of African Americans. This attitude was also reflected in the document, which instructs church leaders, “Be not hasty in ordaining men of the Negro race to offices in my church....”⁶ Some argue this was intended as a temporary measure to avoid ordaining many newly freed slaves who were unprepared to accept the responsibility. However, the fact that blacks had to be singled out (there are many people, of all races, who are unprepared for the responsibilities of priesthood) demonstrates a prejudicial attitude.

Moreover, the document states, “there are some who are chosen instruments to minister to their own race.”⁷ Though this does not explicitly say that African-Americans should only be assigned to minister exclusively to African-Americans, that was how the passage was often interpreted. Even today there are few African-American appointees in areas that are predominately white.

⁴ RLDS, Notes for "Section 116," D & C, 154.

⁵ RLDS, D & C 116: 1 c., 155.

Section 116, is the first public document penned by an RLDS church leader that deals explicitly with African-American issues. Its ambivalence to African-American laid the foundation for further middle of the road policies and statements that marginalized African-Americans in the name of respectability.

The Nadir: “The gospel does not demand such a mixing of the Caucasian and the Malay and the Negro...” 1893

Though the immediate aftermath of the Civil War saw an initial improvement in white American attitudes toward African-Americans, white moral enthusiasm soon wore off. The latter part of the 19th Century saw the rise of segregation laws, legal and para-legal harassment of blacks (especially in the south) and a reduction in commitment to the concept of Reconstruction.

In 1875, Joseph Smith III had declared in a Saints Herald article, “It is unjust to the Church for one, two or more Elders to teach, preach or advise a distinction and exclusion from church fellowship and communion upon the ground of race and color....”⁸ However, in 1893 Smith followed society’s cue and began to reflect the white backlash against egalitarianism by publishing an article called “Undue Strife.”

While saying that “God loves all”⁹ he also claimed that “the varied races of the earth...are now unequal in the scale of civilization and are not equal socially or morally.”¹⁰ Reflecting white attitudes that African-Americans should be subservient and deferential he said:

Wisdom would suggest as a help that those who are of a different nationality, or color should not offensively push themselves, or be by others crowded into undue prominence

⁶ RLDS, D & C 116: 4 a., 155.

⁷ RLDS, D & C 116: 4 b., 155.

⁸ Joseph Smith III, “All One In Christ,” True L.D. Saints’ Herald, February 15, 1875, 112.

⁹ Joseph Smith III, “Undue Strife,” The Saint’s Herald, May 13, 1893, 289.

¹⁰ Ibid.

among those not of their own color, and so intermix that it excites suspicion, and proves a hindrance to those who have not been in the habit of so close association.¹¹

Smith also gave full support to segregation within congregations, instructing ushers to “endeavor to seat the audience so that those of color are not mixed prominently among others who may be strangers and are not accustomed to such unnecessary association.” He advised appointees to organize separate branches for “those of color,” “to make it possible that those who are ‘called as chosen instruments to be ministers to their own race,’ shall have the advantage of accruing to them without the national and natural caprice of race lines to contend with....”¹²

Moreover, Smith explicitly discouraged interracial marriage saying “the gospel does not demand such a mixing of the Caucasian and the Malay and the Negro, as to justify the encouraging of marriage between these race.”

Finally, displaying Smith’s “priestly” rather than “prophetic” role, sacrificing progressive morality for concerns of unity, Smith declared that those “who advise offensive scattering of one race among those not of their color in assemblies of the people are likely to be found disturbers of the peace, and makers of themselves, busybodies in others matter, they should be reprovved.”

Many of the ideas in this article effectively became church policy, especially in the South, for the following years and debate on racial issues did not reappear in the Saints Herald until the late 1940s as whites tried to turn a blind eye to racial problems.

Direct Action: “Civil Obedience Is Required of Saints” 1960

By 1960 the Civil Rights Movement was well underway and was catching the attention of people nation- and worldwide. As a result of the NAACP’s tireless legal

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

campaign, 1954 saw the U.S. Supreme Court declare segregation in schools unconstitutional. In the years that followed, African-American activists sought new methods of confronting the injustices to which they were subject.

Roger Yarrington, a white moderate editor at the *Saints Herald*, had in reaction to the 1958 school desegregation attempts in Little Rock, Arkansas praised the Civil Rights Movement for its moral high ground and asserted that Christians involved in the Movement were better Christians than segregationists. At that point the majority of those involved in the Civil Rights movement tended to use established channels such as politics and the courts to win their rights. These evolutionary tactics won the support of many northern white moderates, as they did not pose a serious threat to them.

However, by 1960 Civil Rights student activists had perfected “Sit-in” tactics and were beginning to form a philosophy of civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action. Some Christian denominations, moved by the prophetic nature of the struggle, supported the concept of civil disobedience. Yarrington, in an article titled “Civil Obedience Is required of Saints” cites a resolution passed “the general assembly of a major Protestant denomination” which declared civil disobedience justified when laws “violate the law of God.”¹³

Yarrington, alarmed by such ideas, declared, “Willful disobedience of civil law is a dangerous practice” and cited the Doctrine and Covenants Section 58: 5b which states, “Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land.” He argued that this same legalism applied even to unjust laws

¹³ Roger Yarrington, “Civil Obedience Is Required of Saints,” *Saints’ Herald* (August 29, 1960), 3.

and that church members should work through established channels to promote the enactment of just laws.¹⁴

Then applying his formula to the Civil Rights Movement he stated:

This...should be the course of action taken by Negroes in the South, or anywhere else, who feel they are the victims of discriminative laws. They should seek to obey the local laws which are now existing, just as they and all other people will expect the whites to obey laws enacted in the future.¹⁵

Yarrington in effect sided with the priestly concerns of the state governments rather than prophetic justice. Though this article does not expressly support racism it could be used by racists within the church to argue that Civil Rights activists were rabble-rousers that were using unjust means to gain their ends. In effect, the church was setting itself in opposition to the direction which the Civil Rights Movement was headed. Rather than trying to appeal to African-Americans and support them in their struggle, the church regarded their movement for justice with suspicion and caution.

Birmingham: "The internal racial problems in our church have been very minor" 1963.

In the July 1, 1963 issue of the Saints Herald, young, idealistic editor William D. Russell caused quite a stir within the church with his article "Martin Luther King: Satan or Saint?" The nation had its eyes fixed upon the unrest brewing in Birmingham, Alabama as the white segregationist police attacked civil rights activists. Russell defended King's quest for freedom and stated "Is Dr. King pushing too fast? America is fortunate that he has pushed as fast as he has."¹⁶

Though the majority of the Americans now see King as a universal American hero, in 1963 many whites still felt threatened by his ideas. Thus many Herald readers were

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ William D. Russell, "Martin Luther King: Satan or Saint?" Saints Herald (July 1, 1963), 2.

upset with Russell's article -- including the First Presidency. The First Presidency felt that they should have greater control over the Herald and that it should only print the official opinion of the church leaders. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that President W. Wallace Smith harbored racially insensitive feelings. For instance, Russell claims Smith believed King was a Communist.¹⁷ In addition, in a 1956 memo to Apostle Charles Neff about ordaining Korean members he stated the following racist opinion:

Generally speaking, we would prefer to project the same principle to the Koreans as we do to origination of any call to the priesthood. You will recall that we have been admonished to be cautious and slow to ordain men of the colored race, but it has been done. It should not be done as a matter of expediency, but if there is a genuine call it will then be processed.¹⁸

In response to Russell's article, the First Presidency published an article in the August 1, 1963 Saints Herald called "Our Position on Race and Color." The article stated that, "The gospel is for all mankind. It knows no distinction of race or color."¹⁹ It also condemned discrimination and affirmed the right of African-American members to join organizations such as the NAACP.

However, the article said that, "With Christ as the standard, we should not participate in extremist movements -- any mob action -- either for or against segregation."²⁰ Clearly this is a reference to the events unfolding in Birmingham. From the article on civil obedience it is clear that many several church leaders felt non-violent civil disobedience of law was extremist and unwarranted. Rather than siding with King and the Civil Rights Movement, the First Presidency labeled Birmingham's protest as a "mob action."

Moreover, the First Presidency denied the existence of any racial problems in the church, saying,

¹⁷ William D. Russell, Personal Conversation (February 2001).

¹⁸ President W. Wallace Smith, Inter-Office and Departmental Correspondence Memo to C.D. Neff, October 25, 1956, RG14-1 f5 RLDS Library/Archives. Note how this is based on Section 116 of the D & C.

¹⁹ The First Presidency, "Our Position on Race and Color," Saints Herald (August 1, 1963), 2.

The internal racial problems in our church have been very minor. Integration has been such a natural process that there would be no need to discuss it in these columns were it not for the national attention that has resulted from the tense integration question.

Clearly this was not true as has been shown earlier in this article. In addition, the church leaders would have been well aware of this. In 1961, William T. Blue, Sr. from Pensacola, Florida, showed up the church's racial problems in his article "A Negro pastor looks at brotherhood," saying:

We have "white" congregations, and we have "Negro" congregations. We even see what our nation's highest tribunal has termed "immoral" -- the spectacle of pews reserved (with labeling signs) for "colored" persons in our "white" churches!"²¹

The First Presidency's denial of the reality of RLDS segregation as a "very minor" issue was an insult to those who suffered its injustice within the church. This once again displayed the church leaders ambivalence to the pressing issues of the Civil Rights Movement.

A Marked Improvement: The Last Twenty Years

By the early nineties, most Americans shared the Civil Rights Movement's ideals of equality and integration -- or at least paid lip-service to them. The church membership also followed this trend.

During the 1968 RLDS World Conference, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Shocked by the news the conference passed a resolution in tribute of King expressing their "deepest regrets and sympathies to his widow and children" and recognizing King for his "accomplishments in civil rights, justice, and the dignity of all men...."²² Like many white Americans who felt threatened by the perceived extremism of the Black Power movement, white RLDS members probably grew to be more open to

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ William T. Blue, Sr., "A Negro pastor looks at brotherhood." *Stride*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (April 1961), 3.

²² RLDS, "Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr." World Conference Resolution 1064, adopted April 5, 1968, *Rules and Resolutions* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1980), 177.

King's ideas as an alternative to the philosophies of figures such as Malcolm X or Stokely Carmichael.

However, there was little discussion of racial issues in the Saints Herald after the 1960s and no resolutions were passed by World Conference on the issue until the 1980s. Once again the church leaders seemed to be defined by the predominate views of Northern white culture rather than pushing the envelope and dealing honestly with the racial problems the church had caused.

It was not until 1981, that the Saints Herald carried another major article on racial issues. Perhaps prompted by William D. Russell's critique of the church's "priestly" rather than "prophetic" role on racial issues in the journal Dialogue in 1979, the church held a "Racism Seminar" at the Auditorium in Independence June 1-3 1981. Many church leaders attended the seminar and were challenged to "deal honestly with the issues in order for justice to become a reality."²³ In an article about the seminar, Barbara Howard reported several church leaders offering honest critiques of the church's racism. For instance, Apostle Charles Neff shared "his experience with a young black woman who, as a member of the RLDS community, continually struggles with the feelings of alienation and "tokenism."²⁴ Apostle Phillip Caswell warned RLDS members to "watch rationalizations" of their racism.²⁵ Elaine Cunningham, an African-American member said in the evaluation session "this step -- just a small step -- but a step in the right direction."²⁶

In the mid-eighties, when the world turned its scrutiny on South African Apartheid, racial issues were brought to the floor of the World Conference for the first time since

²³ Barbara Howard, "Racism Seminar Held," Saints Herald (August 1981), 6.

²⁴ Ibid, 7.

²⁵ Ibid, 8.

²⁶ Ibid.

1968. In a resolution entitled "Apartheid," the conference declared "its opposition to the continuation of the policy of apartheid in South Africa."²⁷

This awareness of the problems in South Africa also seemed to spark a self-awareness of the racial problems within the RLDS church as the conference passed a resolution at the next conference called "Racism." This resolution called for a "task force...to study issues of prejudice and racism...[encouraging members] to take more effective action in addressing this problem individually and collectively...."²⁸ Rising out of this resolution, the church created The Black Ministries Task Force (now African-American Ministries Task Force) in 1987 to study African-American issues in the church.²⁹ This resolution had an activist tone and sought to address seriously the issues of racism but one must remember that by the late eighties this was socially acceptable.

In 1992, the World Conference reaffirmed their position on race in a resolution called "Affirmation of Human Diversity." It stated, "The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals the unqualified love of God and the inestimable worth of all persons." Moreover the resolution said, "As persons of faith, we confess our own imperfection in attitude and action."³⁰

This tone of confession seems to mark the current RLDS views toward African-Americans. Many of the current church leaders are 'baby-boomers' and grew up in the Civil Rights Movement era. They are more open and honest about the church's struggles with racism. Among the Transformation 2000 objectives outlined by President W. Grant

²⁷ RLDS, "Apartheid," World Conference Resolution 1198, adopted April 12, 1986, 1986 Supplement to Rule and Resolutions (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1988), 19.

²⁸ "Racism," World Conference Resolution 1200, adopted April 12, 1988, 1988 Supplement to Rules and Resolutions (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1988), 4-5.

²⁹ Mark Scherer, "From Reaction To Proaction?: African-American Ministries in the History of the Reorganized Church," paper presented at the Council of Twelve Seminar (Independence, MO: January 18, 2000), 16.

³⁰ RLDS, "Affirmation of Human Diversity" World Conference Resolution 1226, adopted April 10, 1992, World Conference Bulletin (Sunday April 12, 1992), 420.

McMurray in 1996 was the goal to show greater concern and focus more on ethnic ministries. Of the 92 new congregations established in North America as a result of Transformation 2000, "approximately eighteen percent have a strong ethnic focus in conformity with our need to form a more diverse church body."³¹

In January 2000, the Council of Twelve held a Seminar on African-American Ministries in the Church to analyze the church's current and past problems ministering to African-Americans. A very important part of the seminar was a presentation called "From Reaction to Proaction?: African-American Ministries in the History of the Reorganized Church" by Mark Scherer, church historian. This was based on an extensive study by Scherer of the RLDS attitudes about African-Americans and the stories of many African-American members. Scherer pointed out that Joseph Smith III had followed a "strategy of silence," that during the early twentieth century the "church swayed with the moods of American society" and that during the 1960s "the disparity between laudable church goals and actual practices of local congregations revealed a huge disconnect." He concluded that "through the generations, neither the church leadership nor membership stood above the prevailing socio-economic climate toward the issue of slavery and racial discrimination."³²

The confession of the RLDS ambivalence toward African-Americans is very important step. It means church leaders have stopped denying there is a problem and can start to formulate a serious apology to African-Americans for the suffering the church has caused. However, until the church gets on the "forefront" of those who advocate on the behalf of African-Americans, such as seriously focusing on urban problems, training

³¹ W. Grant McMurray, "Transformation 2000: We Have Become," address Sunday April 2, 2000 at the 2000 World Conference, on <http://cofchrist.org/docs/wc2000/en/we_have_become.asp> (May 9, 2001).

³² Mark Scherer, "From Reaction To Proaction?", 15.

ministers in cultural sensitivity and reaching out beyond its traditional strongholds, the church will continue to be just following society's lead.

Conclusion

The majority of the white American membership of the RLDS church have tended to surf the waves of social trends. When mainstream America has started to open up to African-Americans, the church has often followed. However, during those times when society has turned against or turned a blind eye to African-Americans, the majority of the American church has followed suit.

With a new generation of church leaders who were brought up to admire figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr, who have usually read some liberation theology in seminary or through the church's Masters of Arts in Religion program and have determined the church must become a peace and justice church, the RLDS, now Community of Christ, may well be on their way to assuming a prophetic stance.

However, the church still has very few African-American members and few major leadership positions are occupied by African-Americans. The RLDS have not overcome yet, but they are on the move now...and if they can sustain the momentum, they shall overcome someday.

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