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CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS

Office of the

Heber Meeks  
Mission President

Southern States Mission  
485 North Avenue, N. E.  
Atlanta 5, Ga.

June 20, 1947

Doctor Lowry Nelson  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Dear Lowry:

A short time ago at the request of the First Presidency I visited Cuba in view of doing missionary work on that island. While there I met Mr. Chester W. Young who was in Havana representing the Nation Office of Vital Statistics Pan-American Sanitary Bureau. He was very helpful to us and in the course of our conversation I learned that he was very well acquainted with you and wished to be remembered to you. We found both his wife and him to be very delightful and charming people.

He advised me that you spent some two years in Cuba making a study of rural communities. Your study there would be very helpful to us. I would appreciate your opinion as to the advisability of doing missionary work particularly in the rural sections of Cuba, knowing, of course, our concept of the Negro and his position as to the Priesthood.

Are there groups of pure white blood in the rural sections, particularly in the small communities? If so, are they maintaining segregation from the Negroes? The best information we received was that in the rural communities there was no segregation of the races and it would probably be difficult to find, with any degree of certainty, groups of pure white people.

I would also like your reaction as to what progress you think the Church might be able to make in doing missionary work in Cuba in view of, particularly in the rural section, the ignorance and superstition of the people and their being so steeped in Catholicism. Do you think our message would have any appeal to them?

My observation, and we made some very fine contacts with outstanding leaders in many of the fields of activity, was that in the urban communities there are groups to which we could make an appeal, particularly with the youth program of the Church. Many of the leaders expressed themselves that there was a great need for such a program as our Church has, in their communities.

I assure you I will deeply appreciate any information you can give me along the lines as indicated. With kindest personal regards and best wishes, I am

Sincerely your brother,

(signed) Heber Meeks  
Mission President

U A C Logan, VT  
~~UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA~~  
~~Department of Agriculture~~  
~~University Farm, St. Paul~~

June 26, 1947

President Heber Weeks  
485 North Avenue, N.E.  
Atlanta 5, Georgia

Dear Heber:

It is nice to have word of you after so many years. I am writing this, as you see, from our alma mater where I am teaching the first term of the summer session. A thousand memories of student days flood in upon me every day. It is pleasant to see old friends and to make new ones among those who have joined the staff since I left.

Yes, I spent a year in the Caribbean from September 1945 to September 1946. Most of my time was spent in Cuba, but I managed to get to some of the other islands as well. I have nearly completed a book about Cuba, but it will be some time before it is published. I was pleased to have word of my friend Chester Young, whom I saw in Havana and also in Santo Domingo during my year down there.

The attitude of the Church in regard to the Negro makes me very sad. Your letter is the first intimation I have had that there was a fixed doctrine on this point. I had always known that certain statements had been made by authorities regarding the status of the Negro, but I had never assumed that they constituted an irrevocable doctrine. I hope no final word has been said on this matter. I must say that I have never been able to accept the idea, and never shall. I do not believe that God is a racist. But if the Church has taken an irrevocable stand, I would dislike to see it enter Cuba or any other island where different races live and establish missionary work. The white and colored people get along much better in the Caribbean and most of Latin-American than they do in the United States. Prejudice exists, there is no doubt, and the whites in many ways manifest their feelings of superiority, but there is much less of it than one finds in USA, especially in our South. For us to go into a situation like that and preach a doctrine of "white supremacy" would, it seems to me, be a tragic disservice. I am speaking frankly, because I feel very keenly on this question. If world brotherhood and the universal God idea mean anything, it seems to me they mean equality of races. I fail to see how Mormonism or any other religion claiming to be more than a provincial church can take any other point of view; and there cannot be world peace until the pernicious doctrine of the superiority of one race and the inferiority of others is rooted out. This is my belief.

In reference to Catholicism, while the Cubans are nominally Roman Catholic, they take the religion rather lightly. Wherever I went, I asked rural people about the church and invariably they told me that they saw the priest only once a year, when he came around to baptize the babies at \$3.00 per head; like branding the calves at the annual roundup. Some families have crucifixes and other paraphernalia in their homes and carry on something of the ancient ritual, but my impression is that it means little to most of them.

The Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists have, as you know, done a great deal of missionary work in the Island, and have rendered Cuba a great service in maintaining schools, hospitals, etc.; however, they have limited their work largely to the urban centers. There is a great service to be rendered rural Cubans if the right approach were made. Mormonism is well adapted to render such service with its system of lay leadership and many activity programs. Many rural Cubans have nothing in the way of organized social life. To them, the family is the basic institution and beyond it, the neighborhood. Our Church would provide them with something very sorely needed. It would develop leadership among them, provide them with hope and aspiration, give them a feeling of importance as individuals which they have never had. They have been exploited by priest and politician; they have been led to believe that the government is not any of their responsibility and that the Church is the business of the priest and the bishop. While there is a great deal of individualism among them, they have definite and discernible feelings of inferiority when it comes to matters of leadership.

I am talking about the white people now; the rural people are predominantly white. That is, they are as white as Mediterranean peoples are - Spanish, Italians, etc., who have been in contact with "color" for centuries. The Moors occupied Spain, you know, for seven centuries. There are no pure races; on this anthropologists are in general agreement. Of course, this does not mean that Negro blood exists throughout the white race or vice versa. There is grave doubt, however, as to the purity of the Nordic, Mediterranean, or even the Negro. Because I think our system of religious organization could serve the rural Cuban people as no other system could, I am sad to have to write you and say, for what my opinion is worth, that it would be better for the Cubans if we did not enter their island - unless we are willing to revise our racial theory. To teach them the pernicious doctrine of segregation and inequalities among races where it does not exist, or to lend religious sanction to it where it has raised its ugly head would, it seems to me, be tragic. It seems to me we just fought a war over such ideas.

I repeat, my frankness or bluntness, as you will, is born of a fervent desire to see the causes of war rooted out of the hearts of men. What limited study I have been able to give the subject leads me to the conclusion that ethnocentrism, and the smugness and intolerance which accompany it, is one of the first evils to be attacked if we are to achieve the goal of peace.

I trust you will understand my writing you as I have.

Sincerely,

(signed) Lowry Nelson

LN:gj

cc: Pres. George Albert Smith

C O P Y

U A C  
Logan

C O P Y

~~UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA~~  
~~Department of Agriculture~~  
~~University Farm, St. Paul 1~~

June 26, 1947

President George Albert Smith  
47 East South Temple  
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear President Smith:

I am in receipt today of a letter from President Heber Meeks, an old school friend, copy of which I am enclosing together with a copy of my reply. It is self-explanatory.

Perhaps I am out of order, so to speak, in expressing myself as I have. I have done so out of strong conviction on the subject, and with the added impression that there is no irrevocable church doctrine on this subject. I am not unaware of statements and impressions which have been passed down, but I had never been brought face to face with the possibility that the doctrine was finally crystallized. I devoutly hope that such crystallization has not taken place. The many good friends of mixed blood - through no fault of theirs incidentally - which I have in the Caribbean and who know me to be a Mormon would be shocked indeed if I were to tell them my Church relegated them to an inferior status.

As I told Heber, there is no doubt in my mind that our Church could perform a great service in Cuba, particularly in the rural areas, but it would be far better that we not go in at all, than to go in and promote racial distinction.

I wanted you to know my feelings on this question and trust you will understand the spirit in which I say these things. I want to see us promote love and harmony among peoples of the earth.

Sincerely,

Lowry Nelson  
(signed)

LN:gj

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CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS  
Office of the First Presidency  
Salt Lake City 1, Utah

July 1, 1947

Dr. Lowry Nelson  
Utah State Agricultural College  
Logan, Utah

Dear Dr. Nelson:

Your letter of June 26, addressed to President Smith, has been received. However, it did not contain a copy of your letter to President Meeks. If you will send me a copy of that letter, I shall then be in a position to bring your communication to the attention of the President. The matter is incomplete without this letter.

Faithfully yours,

(signed) Joseph Anderson  
Secretary to the First Presidency

July 17, 1947

Dr. Lowry Nelson  
Utah State Agricultural College  
Logan, Utah

Dear Brother Nelson:

As you have been advised, your letter of June 26 was received in due course, and likewise we now have a copy of your letter to President Meeks. We have carefully considered their contents, and are glad to advise you as follows:

We make this initial remark: the social side of the Restored Gospel is only an incident of it; it is not the end thereof.

The basic element of your ideas and concepts seems to be that all God's children stand in equal positions before Him in all things.

Your knowledge of the Gospel will indicate to you that this is contrary to the very fundamentals of God's dealings with Israel dating from the time of His promise to Abraham regarding Abraham's seed and their position vis-a-vis God Himself. Indeed, some of God's children were assigned to superior positions before the world was formed. We are aware that some Higher Critics do not accept this, but the Church does.

Dr. Lowry Nelson

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Dec. 17, 1947

Your position seems to lose sight of the revelations of the Lord touching the preexistence of our spirits, the rebellion in heaven, and the doctrines that our birth into this life and the advantages under which we may be born, have a relationship in the life heretofore.

From the days of the Prophet Joseph even until now, it has been the doctrine of the Church, never questioned by any of the Church leaders, that the Negroes are not entitled to the full blessings of the Gospel.

Furthermore, your ideas, as we understand them, appear to contemplate the intermarriage of the Negro and White races, a concept which has heretofore been most repugnant to most normal-minded people from the ancient patriarchs till now. God's rule for Israel, His Chosen People, has been endogamous. Modern Israel has been similarly directed.

We are not unmindful of the fact that there is a growing tendency, particularly among some educators, as it manifests itself in this area, toward the breaking down of race barriers in the matter of intermarriage between whites and blacks, but it does not have the sanction of the Church and is contrary to Church doctrine.

Faithfully yours,

(signed) Geo. Albert Smith  
J. Reuben Clark, Jr.  
David O. McKay  

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The First Presidency

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
Department of Agriculture  
University Farm, St. Paul 1

October 8, 1947

The First Presidency  
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  
47 East South Temple  
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear Brethren:

Your letter of July 17th sent to me at Logan was forwarded here, but I had already left for Europe and so did not get it until I returned to my office September 8. I want to thank you for it, and the attention you gave me. The letter is, however, a disappointment to me, as you may surmise it would be from what I said in my letter to President Meeks.

It seems strange to me in retrospect--as it must have seemed to you--that I should have never before had to face up to this doctrine of the Church relative to the Negro. I remember that it was discussed from time to time during my boyhood and youth, in Priesthood meetings or elsewhere in Church classes; and always someone would say something about the Negroes "sitting on the fence" during the Council in Heaven. They did not take a stand, it was said. Somehow there was never any very strong conviction manifest regarding the doctrine, perhaps because the question was rather an academic one to us in Ferron, where there were very few people who had ever seen a Negro, let alone having lived in the same community with them. So the doctrine was always passed over rather lightly I should say, with no Scripture ever being quoted or referred to regarding the matter, except perhaps to refer to the curse of Cain, or of Ham and Canaan. (I went back and re-read the latter the other evening. It was difficult to find any element of justice in Noah's behavior toward Ham, since the latter merely reported to his brothers that his father was lying there in a drunken state and in a nude condition, and the other boys put a cover over him. Because Ham reported his father's condition, he was cursed.)

But anyway, I really had never come face to face with the issue until this summer. In the meantime, since my youth, I have chosen to spend my professional career in the field of the social sciences, the general purpose of which is to describe and understand human behavior. I probably should have had less difficulty with some of these problems--such as the race problem--had I remained in agronomy and chemistry, my undergraduate fields of specialization. Be that as it may, my experience has been what it has been. As a sociologist, I have sincerely tried, and am still trying, to understand human social relations; the varied forms of organization, the processes of conflict, cooperation, competition, assimilation, why peoples and cultures differ one from another, etc.

As one studies the history and characteristics of human societies, one soon comes to recognize certain basic principles. One of these is social change. Any given society over the years undergoes changes. It is forever in a state of flux. Some scholars have regarded such change as progress, and have even considered that progress is inevitable. Others chart the rise and fall of civilizations and think in terms of cyclical change. Others express still different hypotheses, but none of them consider society as a static entity.



Another principle which stands out as one studies the development of cultures is the tendency of institutions to resist change. Although they are established, or grow up, originally as means to the end of satisfying the needs of man, they (the institutions) tend to become ends in themselves. It seems to me that Jesus was trying to get this point over to the society of his day, when he spoke of putting new wine in old bottles, and that the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath. This was an affront to the legalism of the Pharisees, and others of similar outlook, and of course, the institutions had to be protected even at the cost of His crucifixion.

Another principle that has come to occupy a central position in the analysis of human behavior is that of ethnocentrism. As defined by William Graham Sumner, who first developed the concept, it refers to the "view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything and all others are sealed and rated with reference to it." (The Folkways, p. 13.) Insofar as the "out-group" differs from the "in-group" it is regarded as inferior by the latter. A people with a different skin color would be automatically assigned to an inferior status. A language different from that of the in-group, is of course, an "inferior" one; and so on. This tendency is common to all groups.

Now, what does this add up to in my thinking? It means that (1) if one accepts the principle of cultural or social change and applies it to the Hebrews, the Old Testament history of the group is interpreted accordingly. In their early stages of development they had beliefs and practices, many of which, were subsequently supplanted by other ideas. Jehovah to the Hebrews of the Pentateuch was essentially a tribal deity. It was not until Amos that the idea of a universal God was proclaimed. And the concept of God as Love was an essential contribution of the mission of the Savior. (2) This, to me, represents "progressive revelation". It seems to me that we still have much to learn about God, and some of our earlier notions of Him may yet undergo modification. (3) The early Hebrew notion of the colored people with whom they had contact in the Mediterranean basin, was quite naturally, that those people were inferior to themselves, a consequence of their extreme ethnocentrism.

Why did they not have something to say about the Japanese or Chinese or the American Indian? To me the answer is that they did not know these groups existed. But one can be pretty certain that if they had known about them, they would have developed some similar explanation regarding their origin to that concerning the Negro, and would have assigned them also to a position less exalted than their own.

(4) And once these things got written down—~~institutionalized~~—they assume an aura of the sacred. I refer in this respect not only to the Scripture, but to more secular documents as well—the Constitution of the United States, for instance, which many people do not want to change regardless of the apparent needs. So we are in the position, it seems to me, of accepting a doctrine regarding the Negro which was enunciated by the Hebrews during a very early stage in their development. Moreover, and this is the important matter to me, it does not square with what seems an acceptable standard of justice today; nor with the letter or spirit of the teachings of Jesus Christ. I cannot find any support for such a doctrine of inequality in His recorded sayings.

October 8, 1947

I am deeply troubled. Having decided through earnest study that one of the chief causes of war is the existence of ethnocentrism among the peoples of the world; that war is our major social evil which threatens to send all of us to destruction; and that we can ameliorate these feelings of ethnocentrism by promoting understanding of one people by others; I am now confronted with this doctrine of my own church which says in effect that white supremacy is part of God's plan for His children; that the Negro has been assigned by Him to be a hewer of wood and drawer of water for his white-skinned brethren. This makes us nominal allies of the Rankins and the Bilbos of Mississippi, a quite unhappy alliance for me, I assure you.

This doctrine pressed to its logical conclusion would say that Dr. George Washington Carver, the late eminent and saintly Negro scientist, is by virtue of the color of his skin, inferior even to the least admirable white person, not because of the virtues he may or may not possess, but because—through no fault of his—there is a dark pigment in his skin. All of the people of India—who are not Negroes according to ethnological authority, but are Aryan—would presumably come under the Negro classification. I think of the intelligent, high-minded, clean-living Hindu who was a member of the International Committee over which I had the honor to preside at Geneva from August 4 to 10, this year. He drank not, smoked not, his ethical standards were such that you and I could applaud him. Where should he rank vis-à-vis the least reliable and least admirable white person in Ferron? Or I could name you a real Negro with equal qualifications.

Now, you say that the "social side of the Restored Gospel is only an incident of it; it is not the end thereof." I may not have the same concept of "social" as you had in mind, but it seems to me the only virtue we can recognize in men is that expressed in their relations with others; that is their "social" relations. Are the virtues of honesty, chastity, humility, forgiveness, tolerance, love, kindness, justice, secondary? If so, what is primary? Love of God? Very well. But the second (law) is like unto it.

I must beg your forgiveness for this intrusion upon your time. I realize that I am only one among hundreds of thousands with whom you have to be concerned. My little troubles I must try to work out myself. But I desire to be understood. That's why I have gone to such length to set down here the steps in my thinking. I am trying to be honest with myself and with others. I am trying to find my way in what is a very confused world. After seeing the devastation of Europe this summer, I am appalled by the sight of it, and the contemplation of what mankind can collectively do to himself, unless somehow we, collectively—the human family—can put love of each other above hatred and somehow come to a mutual respect based upon understanding, and recognize that others, although they may be different from us, are not by that fact alone inferior. Are we becoming so legalistic (after the fashion of the Pharisees) that we cannot adjust our institutions to the changing needs of mankind? Are we, as some have charged, more Hebraic than Christian?

Sincerely,  
your brother

Lowry Nelson  
Professor of Sociology

November 12, 1947

Dr. Lowry Nelson  
University of Minnesota  
Department of Agriculture  
University Farm  
St. Paul 1, Minnesota

Dear Brother Nelson:

We have your letter of October 8 in further development of the matter discussed in your earlier letter.

We feel very sure that you understand well the doctrines of the Church. They are either true or not true. Our testimony is that they are true. Under these circumstances we may not permit ourselves to be too much impressed by the reasonings of men however well-founded they may seem to be. We should like to say this to you in all kindness and in all sincerity that you are too fine a man to permit yourself to be led off from the principles of the Gospel by worldly learning. You have too much of a potentiality for doing good and we therefore prayerfully hope that you can reorient your thinking and bring it in line with the revealed word of God.

Faithfully yours,

THE FIRST PRESIDENCY (signed) G. Albert Smith

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
Office of the First Presidency  
Salt Lake City 1, Utah

May 23, 1952

Mr. Lowry Nelson  
1075 - 14th Avenue S.E.  
Minneapolis 14, Minn.

Dear Brother Nelson:

Your letter without date, addressed to President McKay, was duly received, with which you transmitted an article which you say you intend to publish.

President McKay wishes me to say that obviously you are entirely within your rights to publish any article you wish.

I should like to add on my own account, however, that when a member of the Church sets himself up against doctrines preached by the Prophet Joseph Smith and by those who have succeeded him in the high office which he held, he is moving into a very dangerous position for himself personally.

Sincerely yours,

Joseph Anderson /signed/  
Secretary to the First Presidency