

I should say at the start that I have a strong testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that Joseph Smith is his prophet. I'm grateful for the peace and perspective the gospel has given me, and the blessings I've received as I have tried to live it. For the most part, the history of the church strengthens my testimony - there have been many miracles that show the hand of God in it, and the church has been a positive influence in the world.

It's also fair to say that some parts of church history aren't great. Some people react to this by just rejecting everything about the church. Others make excuses and may even perpetuate some of the unfortunate cultural issues from the past. I have been thinking lately about how to address the negative aspects of the history, so I figured I'd better write it down. Fair warning - this post is long.

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The church has never claimed its leaders were infallible. It's actually very important to be able to see a prophet's role as distinct from their identity as a person, because prophets make mistakes. Sometimes really big ones. We need to be able to see and acknowledge this without it shaking our faith in God, or in the core doctrines of the gospel.

When I was young, I imagined the prophets and apostles as being in direct personal contact with Jesus Christ all the time. He told them what to do, and they just did it. I imagined something similar with local church leaders, except through the Holy Ghost instead of visions. As a missionary and in interactions with church leadership, I have since learned that most of the time God leaves decisions up to us and guides us in subtle ways, many times through other people. Most of the time he is fine with the direction we choose, and will only "warn us off" if we're headed for something immoral. We can get extra direction when we seek it (study, ponder, pray). But very seldom does God give us course-altering direction when we haven't asked for it. This is true even for prophets. God reveals truth "line upon line, here a little and there a little". (See [2 Nephi 28:30](#), [Isaiah 28:30](#).)

This is important to understand with regard to church history, both ancient and modern. The clear modern example is the racial distinction on the priesthood, which was started a few decades after the church was created and wasn't lifted until 1978. I'll say more about this later, but for now I'll just point out that the church has [disavowed](#) all of the attempts at explaining the reasons for it using scripture. In other words, it was a mistake. A big, harmful one. Why didn't God correct it sooner? We don't have a direct answer, but I think a part of the answer has to be that not enough people were prepared to follow the direction to stop being racist. It was only when enough people were willing to follow that direction that the change came. (And yes, that

means that racism was a huge problem in the development of the church.) Some might hear this and think "How could Brigham Young have been a prophet if he believed such racist ideas?" One answer could simply be a matter of existential priorities: God needed a church with a strong community. There had to be enough members in Utah and worldwide to hold the church together. If too many people left too early, no amount of truth would have preserved the church long-term. But having a lot of people in strong communities was something God could work with, and fine-tune their moral failings bit by bit, as they were ready. In any case, I think separating Brigham Young's character as a man from his role as a prophet is actually liberating from a faith perspective. You can criticize one without throwing away the other.

Here's another example: Moses and Joshua wiped out a lot of people on their way from Egypt to the promised land. The Book of Exodus suggests that God told them to exterminate entire communities - men, women, and children. Really? Or is it possible that Moses received revelation about moving people, and commandments about how they should behave, and misinterpreted some of the "how"? I think it is. One might ask again, "Why wouldn't God stop him from committing genocide?" Well, he needed a group of people that wouldn't sink into idolatry. He needed people who would believe in him and pass on the covenant he had made. He knew he could work on the "love your neighbor" stuff later, so he gave them just enough to establish the basics. They weren't ready for any more than that. This is speculation, but it makes sense to me.

One more quick example before I get back to Brigham Young. A lot of people instrumental in forming the United States were guilty of atrocities. George Washington owned slaves. And without him, we would not have this country in the first place. He was a hypocritical white supremacist. And he did great things, for which we are indebted to him. We can believe both. Thomas Jefferson: same thing. Christopher Columbus: he did even *worse* things. And he was instrumental in the hands of God in forming a free country, and by extension, in the restoration of the gospel. I'm not saying I would vote for any of these men if they were running for office today, but we can acknowledge the good they did even while condemning their immoral behavior.

In a lot of ways, Brigham Young was the George Washington of the early church. God needed someone with leadership skills, and a vision of how to build a community. Brigham Young drove the creation of industry all over Utah and other places the church created settlements. He negotiated a peaceful situation with the United States and the Native American communities in the area. Without him, that church of refugees probably would not have survived its first fifty years.

He was also profoundly racist. He wasn't as bad as a lot of people in the South - he didn't advocate for all of the atrocities committed against slaves. He didn't even own slaves. But he did believe in slavery. He strongly believed that black people were inherently inferior. And, while some might say that it's not fair to judge him against modern morality, his actions don't even stand up to the morality of the church at the time. The Book of Mormon [condemns slavery](#), as does [the Doctrine and Covenants](#). Joseph Smith wanted to abolish slavery. But Brigham Young upheld it.

And then there is polygamy. In some ways this is even weirder than the racism thing - not just because polygamy is messed up, but because the early church had a much easier time backing up the doctrine of polygamy with scripture. But women suffered a lot under the practice. And I'm not going from rumors or anything here - most of what I know about the subject comes from [the Church's own publications](#). It was pretty bad. Did God set it up? Well maybe - the whole thing was wrapped in secrecy at the start, so it's not super clear what Joseph Smith said, or which parts of it were direct revelation from God, versus something that another imperfect man might have misinterpreted. (The section in D&C that mentions it didn't come out until a long time after Joseph Smith was murdered.) But even if we accept the *institution* as created by revelation, the *implementation* was not great. Women's rights and wellbeing were not respected as much as they should have been. Again, there were a lot of mortal people running this thing, and we shouldn't be surprised when we learn that they messed it up.

So how should we react? I think there are three important things.

First, I think it's very appropriate to be offended. *I* am offended. Racism is awful. Slavery is a betrayal of the gospel of Jesus Christ on every level. And hypocrisy makes bad things even worse, maybe because it is so effective at convincing people that they are good. We don't need to make excuses for others' wrong choices. It's okay to be outraged.

Second, we need to have a clear idea of core doctrine versus what I'm going to call "interpreted doctrine", versus practices and policies. (See [this talk](#) from General Conference, and [this one](#).) There's a broad spectrum of how directly-from-God the things we believe and do fall into. That's just the nature of living in a mortal world. If we're clear on which things came directly from God, we can hold onto those things without getting thrown off when we realize that a human leader has made a mistake. Or even an atrocity.

And third, once we have that clear distinction about church history, we need to apply it to ourselves. We need to ask ourselves, "What part of my beliefs and practices are susceptible to

human weakness? Are there perspectives I have that God would like me to change, if only I'd open myself up to changing?" (See [Matthew 19:20](#))

Sometimes it will be policies that will change. But sometimes the doctrine of the church will be added to or clarified in a way that contradicts what members of the church had come to believe. When black people received the priesthood, a lot of members rejoiced - not just for the blessings of their black brothers and sisters, but because they no longer had to make excuses for a racist policy. They were *beyond* ready. But other members of the church had a hard time with this. They had been immersed in all of the theological rationalization for the policy. The idea of having a black bishop went against their religious beliefs. Of course, this means these people were racist. But the point is that they sincerely believed that God *wanted* them to be. At least up until that day. After that day, those who had embraced the racism of the time had a choice to make. Some left the church, or stayed but harbored racism. And others opened their minds and hearts and received a witness from God that white people aren't actually superior. Those people changed, and they're better people now.

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I want to point out one more concept that I think is in flux in the church today - in culture, if not in doctrine. This bit will involve a lot of speculation - this comes from me, not the church, and I could be wrong in either direction. But it's something that I think about.

It has to do with how we approach homosexuality. Now, the church is pretty clear on the law of chastity - no sexual intimacy except between married people, and marriage is between a man and a woman (because the essence of marriage is creating an eternal family). Most people and cultures in the world today don't believe in or support that standard. We can live with that. We don't walk around glaring at our heterosexual neighbors and thinking of them as unclean. And we should not do that with homosexual people either. The church certainly does *not* advocate looking down on other people based on who they're attracted to. But in the *culture* among church *members*, there is a stigma attached to being gay.

Growing up, I feel like I was raised with a relatively open-minded view of people. Racism always seemed and felt evil. But gay people? I have to admit that I felt an "ick" factor attached to that idea. Like, the idea of two dudes kissing still feels wrong to me - although I think this has more to do with bias than it does with morality. Not all of this bias comes from church - this is in the whole world. But let's examine the church bit.

Let's say you have two teenagers, a boy and a girl. The boy asks the girl on a date. They see a movie and eat food, and the boy pays. They hold hands. At the end of the night he kisses her on the cheek, and then they part ways. Nobody would call that a violation of chastity. Why? Because it's not sexual. It's just feelings, and social interaction. But if you change that story and replace the girl with a boy, all of a sudden you've got a problem. If these are BYU students instead of teenagers, you have an Honor Code violation. Why? If the law of chastity is about sexuality, and sexuality is only okay between a married couple, and romantic behavior is okay outside of marriage, then why are we concerned with non-sexual behavior between two men or two women? Why do we even care?

Of course, the perceived problem is that romantic behavior between people of the same gender "gives expression" to feelings that could lead people to break the law of chastity or to make other decisions that will stop eternal progression. That feels super weak to me. For one thing, two dudes on a date are no more likely to break the law of chastity than a heterosexual couple. The hormones are the same; it's just who they're targeting that's different. And if you're not attracted to the opposite gender, then you're not going to get married to them, so a same-gender relationship isn't competing with a potential opposite-gender one. (I mean if you're bisexual, then maybe it is, but that feels like a technicality that doesn't really sway the argument here.)

So the conclusion that I draw is that we should chill out and stop treating gay people like a problem. We should try really hard to stop feeling that "ick" factor, and acknowledge that it comes from the societal messaging we were raised with, not from God.

"But, But..." that biased voice in my head says, "how does being gay fit into the Plan of Salvation? What happens in the Celestial Kingdom?" To be honest, I do not know the answer to this. Growing up, my impression was that being gay was a birth defect, so it would be "cured" in the resurrection. That is an awfully insulting position to take. That doesn't make it untrue, but then there isn't any scriptural evidence to back it up, either. Perhaps Brigham Young might have said that gay people are the way they are because of some spiritual deficiency, like he felt about black people. Of course that is even more insulting, and it feels deeply wrong on a spiritual level. I'd have a hard time even respecting someone who claimed that. The only other answer I can think of is that there's a celestial path for gay people, but it hasn't been revealed yet. Why not? Well maybe it's because the church isn't ready for that revelation. Because we have too much bigotry in the membership. Again. *Still.*

And if that's the case, then we are just like the members back in 1978 before President Kimball removed the restriction on the priesthood. We have a choice. We can hold onto the traditions of the past and be *total jerks* to our neighbors, damaging the image of the church and causing our descendants to be ashamed of us. Or we can be ready. We can move past the biases we've been fed and do a better job of thinking of everybody as equals. Neighbors. You know, the way Jesus Christ commands us to treat everybody.