AN ESSAY ON CULTURE, AUTHORITY, AND STEWARDSHIP

MODERN TRIBALISM IN THE CHURCH

Affiliation Without Integration and the Loss of Zion

> *"Covenant tribe says: I have been gathered into Israel so I may help gather others."*

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Introduction

The restored gospel does not deny difference. It does not pretend that language, family history, culture, nation, ancestry, temperament, gifts, wounds, or personal experience are meaningless. God knows His children individually. He does not love mankind as an abstraction. He loves sons and daughters, one by one, according to the fullness of His perfect knowledge.

But there is a profound difference between individual divine knowing and modern tribalism. The first is godly. The second is counterfeit.

Modern tribalism takes secondary mortal characteristics - race, ethnicity, culture, language, class, politics, grievance, or social identity - and elevates them into primary identity. It teaches people to understand themselves first as members of a group rather than as children of God, disciples of Christ, and covenant members of the house of Israel.

That distinction matters deeply inside The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, because the entire project of the restored gospel is not merely to produce religious affiliation. It is to gather Israel, bind souls to Christ, and create Zion. The Church can fill buildings and still fail to form a people. Members can attend, accept callings, and remain institutionally connected while their deeper identity remains governed by tribe, culture, race, class, or political faction.

> *Affiliation is not Zion.*

A person may attend meetings, accept callings, participate in programs, and remain connected to the institution while still being primarily governed by tribal identity. A ward may be active, culturally vibrant, and numerically successful while still failing to form one covenant people. A program may increase participation while quietly preserving separation.

That is the danger of affiliation without integration. It produces a gathered crowd, but not necessarily a gathered people.

Covenant Tribe Versus Modern Tribalism

There is a legitimate gospel use of the word tribe. The house of Israel is organized through covenant lineage. Patriarchal blessings declare lineage. The twelve tribes of Israel are real. Ephraim, Manasseh, Judah, and the other tribes are not meaningless labels.

But covenant tribe is very different from modern tribalism. A patriarchal declaration of lineage is not principally a claim of racial or cultural superiority. It is a statement of covenant inheritance, covenant responsibility, and covenant stewardship. The Church teaches that declared lineage in the house of Israel is not determined simply by race or nationality, and that members of the same genetic family may

be declared through different tribes of Israel. That fact alone separates covenant lineage from the racial and ethnic categories that dominate modern identity politics.

The tribes of Israel are not meant to become competing identity groups inside the kingdom of God. They are covenantal designations tied to inheritance, responsibility, gathering, priesthood, temple work, and blessing all the families of the earth. Israelite tribal identity is not an excuse to separate from the body of Christ. It is a stewardship within that body.

> *Covenant tribe says: I have been gathered into Israel so I may help gather others.*
>
> *Modern tribalism says: These are my people, and I belong most naturally with them.*

Covenant tribe expands responsibility. Modern tribalism narrows belonging. Covenant tribe is subordinate to Christ. Modern tribalism competes with Christ. That is the decisive difference. Any identity that refuses to be swallowed up in Christ eventually becomes a rival covenant.

The Doctrine of Equal Divine Worth

The Book of Mormon gives the governing principle with remarkable clarity: "all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33). That sentence does not mean all people are identical. It does not mean God ignores individual experience. It does not mean language, culture, suffering, history, or family background never matter pastorally.

It means that no race, ethnicity, culture, nation, tribe, sex, class, or identity group possesses superior worth before God. It also means no such group has a special claim to moral deference merely because of group identity. God may know each person uniquely, but He does not define the worth, covenant standing, or spiritual meaning of a soul by skin color or ethnicity.

That is why racialized compassion can become spiritually dangerous. Old racism said, "This group is lesser." Modern racialized compassion may say, "This group is uniquely wounded, uniquely authoritative, uniquely entitled to preference, or uniquely deserving of institutional deference." Those sentences sound different, but both keep race at the center. Both define people by group identity before divine identity. Both distort the doctrine that all are alike unto God.

> *The restored gospel does not call us to racial erasure. It calls us to racial dethronement.*

Race, ethnicity, culture, and language may describe mortal circumstance. They must not define eternal identity. The Church rightly rejects racial and cultural prejudice. But the antidote to prejudice is not a new prejudice, a new hierarchy, or a new system of moral preference. The antidote is Christ-centered brotherhood, repentance, charity, covenant belonging, and unity in the household of God.

When Compassion Becomes a Disguise for Tribalism

Modern tribalism is not always crude. It rarely announces itself as pride. It does not always sound like hatred. Often it speaks the language of compassion, inclusion, representation, safety, respect, cultural sensitivity, and belonging. That is precisely why it can be so difficult to detect.

Compassion becomes distorted when it treats group identity as morally determinative. If a person is defined primarily by skin color, ethnicity, ancestry, or cultural affiliation, then the soul is no longer being encountered first as a child of God. The person is being encountered first as a category. Even if the category is treated positively, the act of categorizing remains spiritually dangerous.

There is a significant difference between seeing a person fully and racializing a person. Seeing fully means recognizing wounds, experience, language, family history, and circumstance while still grounding identity in divine parentage and covenant possibility. Racializing means making race or ethnicity the controlling interpretive fact. The first is pastoral. The second is tribal.

In that sense, some modern forms of racial compassion may become racism disguised as charity. They no longer say one group is inferior, but they still assign moral meaning by group. They may reverse the old hierarchy, but they do not destroy the hierarchy. They may call the reversal justice, but the gospel calls all such partiality into question.

Language Accommodation and Cultural Sorting

One of the more subtle forms of modern tribalism in the Church appears when cultural comfort is treated as though it were a gospel necessity. This concern is not aimed at legitimate language accommodation. If a member cannot fully worship, learn, confess, counsel with leaders, receive instruction, teach, serve, or participate in English, then a language unit can be an act of mercy. The purpose is not separation. The purpose is access.

The Church Handbook recognizes language wards and branches as specialized units. It states that the boundaries of language units generally follow geographic boundaries and that members within the boundaries may choose either the language unit or their geographic unit. That formal category is language, not ethnicity.

The problem arises when the operational reality departs from the formal rationale. If the actual reason for attending a language or culture-adjacent unit is no longer language necessity but cultural comfort, ethnic familiarity, or affinity preference, the unit has functionally changed character. It may still be called a language ward, but it may operate as an ethnic or cultural ward.

The phrases are familiar: "I feel more comfortable with my culture." "My children fit in better there." "Our people understand us." "The regular ward does not feel like home." Those feelings may be humanly understandable. But they are not automatically gospel principles.

The ordinary geographic ward is one of the most powerful anti-tribal institutions in the Church. We do not choose our ward because the people are culturally comfortable. We are assigned a people and then asked to love them. We are asked to serve people we may not naturally prefer, forgive people who may not understand us, sit beside people whose politics, class, background, temperament, and habits may differ from ours, and become one with them in Christ.

> *That is not a flaw in the ward system. That is part of its sanctifying genius.*

A regular member who says, "I do not fit in culturally," is generally not given a parallel ward option. He is expected to consecrate, adapt, forgive, serve, and help build Zion with the Saints around him. But when similar discomfort is framed through race or ethnicity, it can gain a moral force that ordinary discomfort does not receive. "I do not feel comfortable" can become "I am being marginalized." "My kids do not fit in" can become "this ward is culturally unsafe." "I prefer my own culture" can become "the Church needs to respect my identity."

Actual racism must be corrected. Real mistreatment must be named. Mockery, exclusion, stereotyping, condescension, and racial pride are contrary to the doctrine of Christ. But not every experience of cultural discomfort is racism. If claims of racism are used to correct actual sin, they can serve repentance. But if they are used to baptize cultural preference, justify separation, or strengthen ethnic self-selection, they become contrary to the very gospel principles they claim to defend.

Affiliation Without Integration

The deeper institutional temptation is to prioritize retention and participation through affiliation rather than integration. That temptation is understandable. Leaders may see that members are attending. Youth are participating. Callings are being filled. Families feel more comfortable. People seem happier. Activity metrics improve.

But comfort is not the same thing as conversion. Participation is not the same thing as Zion. Affiliation says, "They are still connected." Integration says, "They are becoming one with the body of Christ." The difference is enormous.

A Church culture that preserves subgroup comfort may succeed in keeping people near the institution while failing to gather them fully into covenant unity. It may produce parallel communities under one ecclesiastical roof. It may appear merciful in the short term while weakening Zion in the long term.

> *Affiliation without integration leads to no nation. Affiliation without covenant integration leads to no Zion.*

In civic life, a nation cannot endure if people are merely affiliated with the same government but not integrated into a shared moral identity. They become factions, tribes, identity blocs, and grievance groups. The center cannot hold because the people no longer understand themselves as one people.

The same is true spiritually. A Church cannot become Zion if it blesses the categories that keep its members apart. It cannot gather Israel fully while simultaneously preserving lesser identities as the primary basis of belonging. It cannot preach that all are alike unto God while operationally allowing race, ethnicity, or culture to function as a parallel organizing principle.

The Return of the -Ites

The Book of Mormon gives a vision of what happens when conversion fully triumphs over tribalism. After the resurrected Christ ministers among the people, the old divisions disappear. There are no Nephites, Lamanites, or other "-ites." The people become one, "the children of Christ" (4 Nephi 1:17).

That does not mean they lost all memory, ancestry, family, or history. It means those categories no longer governed their identity. Christ had become more determinative than tribe. That is Zion.

But later, as pride returns, the old divisions return. Labels reappear. Group identity reasserts itself. People divide again according to wealth, class, belief, status, and heritage. The collapse of Zion begins with the resurrection of lesser identities.

That should sober us. The danger is not only hatred between groups. The danger is building Church life around group distinction at all.

Modern tribalism does not always look angry. Sometimes it looks compassionate. Sometimes it sounds inclusive. Sometimes it says, "We just want people to feel seen." Sometimes it says, "We are honoring culture." Sometimes it says, "This helps retention." Sometimes it says, "This group needs its own space." But the question is not whether the language sounds kind. The question is whether the practice gathers people into one body in Christ or preserves them as separate identity groups beneath a Church umbrella.

The Proper Place of Culture

Culture is not evil. Language is not evil. Heritage is not evil. Family traditions are not evil. Food, music, stories, memory, and ancestry can enrich mortal life. But culture must be converted.

Every culture contains beauty. Every culture also contains natural-man corruption. No culture deserves exemption from the judgment of the gospel. No culture should be allowed to function as a substitute covenant. No culture should become more formative than discipleship.

The gospel does not ask every person to become culturally identical. But it does ask every person to become spiritually one. That means my culture must yield to Christ. Your culture must yield to Christ. Majority culture must yield to Christ. Minority culture must yield to Christ.

No group gets to protect its preferences by calling them sacred. No group gets to demand deference by wrapping culture in the language of harm. No group gets to claim that comfort is the same as covenant belonging. The Lord does not gather His people so they can remain permanently organized around "my people" and "your people." He gathers them so they can become His people.

A Doctrinally Clean Standard

A gospel-consistent approach would be simple, though not easy: language accommodation should exist where language is a real barrier to full gospel participation. Cultural comfort should not be treated as a sufficient reason for separate ecclesiastical belonging.

That standard preserves mercy without blessing tribalism. If a member cannot fully participate because of language, the Church should accommodate. If a member can fully participate in the common language of the geographic ward, then ordinary ward integration should be the norm. If bilingual members are needed in language units, they can be called to serve, not granted ethnicity-adjacent optionality.

The purpose of accommodation should always be integration into Christ, not preservation of subgroup identity. The question should not be, "Where do I feel most culturally comfortable?" The better question is, "Where am I being asked to build Zion?"

This standard would not require harshness. It would not require shaming individuals who have acted within existing structures. It would require clarity. It would require periodic review of whether language units remain language-necessary or have drifted into ethnic or cultural affinity groups. It would require leaders to distinguish pastoral accommodation from tribal preservation. It would require equal divine worth to be taught explicitly enough that no culture, race, ethnicity, or language group is permitted to become spiritually privileged.

Conclusion

Modern tribalism is dangerous in the Church precisely because it often disguises itself as compassion. It does not always announce itself as pride. It does not always sound like prejudice. Sometimes it sounds like inclusion, representation, cultural sensitivity, safety, or respect. But if its practical effect is to make race, ethnicity, culture, grievance, or group identity more determinative than covenant identity, it is not Zion. It is counterfeit belonging.

The restored gospel offers something far higher than tribal affirmation. It offers rebirth. It offers a new name, a new heart, a new family, a new covenant, and a new people. It teaches that every person is a child of God, every soul is invited to Christ, every culture must be purified, every prejudice must be abandoned, and every lesser identity must eventually bow before the name of the Savior.

The Church must be careful not to confuse activity with unity, participation with consecration, or affiliation with integration. A people can be present and still not be one.

> *Zion is not merely a place where everyone is allowed to affiliate. Zion is a people in whom Christ has finally become more important than tribe.*

Selected References

2 Nephi 26:33, The Book of Mormon. Source 4 Nephi 1:15-17, The Book of Mormon. Source General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 37.1.1, "Membership in a Language Ward or Branch." Source General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 38.6.14, "Prejudice." Source Gospel Topics, "Racial and Cultural Prejudice." Source Gospel Topics, "Patriarchal Blessings." Source Gospel Topics, "Abrahamic Covenant." Source