

Cuppa Joe | Sec. 116 First Presidency Response to WCR G-2

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

church, World Conference resolution, First Presidency, scripture, Herald, racism, Ordination, history

SPEAKERS

Robin Linkhart, Lach Mackay

Robin Linkhart 00:27

welcome to Cuppa Joe, a Project Zion Podcast series where we explore the people, places and events of restoration history. I'm your host, Robin Linkhart. And today I'm here with Lachlan Mackay to get an update on 2023 World Conference resolution G-2, which addressed concerns about Doctrine and Covenants section 116. With recommendation to move it to historical records, G-2 was referred to the First Presidency by delegate vote in an official legislative session. Welcome, Lach. Great to have you today.

Lach Mackay 01:08

Always thrilled to be with you, Robin.

Robin Linkhart 01:11

Well, I think the best place to start this conversation is to get some background and understanding on World Conference resolution G-2 please tell us a little bit about the resolution, maybe the concerns it voiced and some of the discussion that came to the floor at World Conference 2023.

Lach Mackay 01:31

So the resolution itself was pretty short. And it was simply to talk about removing section 116 and placing it with historical records. So there is no appendix in the Doctrine and Covenants anymore, so it's a little unclear about what that referenced, I think it just meant it could live in the archives. And the primary reason for it seemed to be that there were words and phrases that can be seen as offensive and discriminatory today. And I understand that concern, uses the term Negro, which although that was the preferred language in the 19th, and first half of the 20th century, that's definitely not the preferred language today. Also, section 116, 4b, gets pretty uncomfortable. It talks about how all are not acceptable to me as servants, and it talks about how some are chosen instruments to be ministers to their own race, which could be interpreted as promoting segregation, but, although that's not what it says, that is how it was later interpreted, unfortunately, something which I think we need to apologize for, and try and figure out how to make right. There was fairly significant pushback, I was one of those that was not in favor. I think that to remove it would be an example of presentism. Judging something from the past or the lens of the present. I think that it kind of betrays our understanding of Scripture. We know that, that there is humanness in the creation of Scripture, and that includes human flaws that

make its way, their way into Scripture. So, there's all kinds of problematic passages in many of our scriptures, and I'm not sure where we would end if we started removing things because they are offensive today or don't reflect our current understandings. I am very sympathetic, though, to the concerns raised by the people who put this resolution together. And, even after this resolution was discussed at Conference, completely unrelated, but I had in my own field, an example where a black family had begun to participate in congregational life, but apparently stumbled across this section and were highly offended by it and left, and didn't want to talk to anybody. So, it wasn't an opportunity where we can help them understand the context. But in the, in the 1860s, right after the Civil War, this was relatively progressive, although it's hard to get a really good sense of what denominations were doing in 1865, but relatively progressive, it seems. But, because they didn't want to talk to anybody from the church, there was no way to discuss that with them, but it's heartbreaking that that happened. So, I certainly understand the motivation. I just don't think that the proposed solution was the way to go. So I'm, I'm relieved that the presidency has chosen not to de-canonize this section, but instead to rewrite the header which I think was surprisingly offensive. You know, when it was written, I think that it made sense. Actually, when it was written originally it was longer. But at some point, I think maybe to make it more concise, it was condensed, and got more offensive. So, I'm thrilled that we had a chance to revise the header, which will be coming out. And maybe most importantly, to me, the presidency is taking this opportunity to reformat the paragraphs, to return them to the original format, based on the earliest two copies of the manuscript revelation, one of which was a certified true copy. And so, that takes what I found to be the most troubling part, it talks about, I, the LORD have spoken, live with it, and return it to its original format, which was a separate one sentence paragraph that ends the section. And I believe it was intended to reinforce not the "all are not acceptable to me" part, but instead to reinforce the answer to the original question, "Should men of color be ordained?" Yes, it was the resounding answer, I the LORD have spoken it. So I'm, I'm relieved with the decision of the presidency on how to respond to this resolution.

Robin Linkhart 06:30

So as you know, Lach, and you're referencing this, the July Herald, which just came out features a section titled World Conference resolutions update, wherein the First Presidency response, which you're talking about here, to the referral of G-2, and the current disposition of section 116, is listed in brief, but it is their official response. They do make note of process of arriving at this decision. And I'm, I'm thinking that you may be well aware of some of the processes that they walked through, and folks they engaged. Can you walk us through the FP, the First Presidency process a little bit and what, what this update means for Section 116, beyond just getting an update in the Herald?

Lach Mackay 07:23

Yeah. So, in response to the resolution, and when it was referred to the presidency, they began to consult with black members of the church. They brought in the Diversity and Inclusion Team, and they brought in the Sacred Story Team. We had started, the Church History Team, working on this, of course, prior to conference, but continued that effort, and ended up submitting an 11 page report to the presidency with our recommendations. And I'm confident that the other teams were also just as engaged. And the presidency then took all of that feedback. And this is the result, the decision. Not to decolonize. And there was some concern that to do so would be a hiding the parts of our story that we should acknowledge, and when appropriate, repent of and try and do something about. And for me,

again, I was not supportive of this resolution. But a wonderful upside is that it is causing us to ask all kinds of questions about race and the role of black members in the church in the 19th and 20th centuries, and even today. So, it is going to have a lasting impact on the church, even though it was referred to the presidency.

Robin Linkhart 08:54

Do you know like if they plan to do a reprint on the Doctrine and Covenants fairly soon? Or how are they going to deal with, I mean, the digital copies can be adjusted quite easily. But I'm thinking of the hard copies of the Doctrine and Covenants. Has that decision been made at this point? Do you know?

Lach Mackay 09:16

if that decision has been made, I'm not aware of of it. But I certainly hope that not only digitally, but print copies can be updated in the near future is my hope.

Robin Linkhart 09:29

And it really sounds like this way of updating the preface and re-paragraphing would immediately address what the family you referred to experienced as they thumbed through the Doctrine and Covenants. If they come across, if another family comes across it with a new preface and re-paragraphing, it sounds to me like that would put it in context sufficiently to where it wouldn't be offensive. Do you have a sense of that?

Lach Mackay 10:04

That would certainly be my hope. It still might take some discussion. So if people are not comfortable discussing, that becomes pretty challenging. But I think that the header will make it clear that, today, all ethnicities are, our goal is to include all ethnicities in every aspect of church life, and will lift up our Enduring Principles of the Worth of All Persons, All are Called, and Unity in Diversity. So, it will go a long way, I think towards addressing that.

Robin Linkhart 10:41

Yeah, for sure. Now, my recollection is this was a fairly lively debate and discussion on the floor at World Conference. Is that your recollection as well?

Lach Mackay 10:55

It is my recollection as well, although, admittedly, I was pretty caught up in what I was going to say, and then helping Apostle Bundha Chibwe craft some of what they were going to say. So, but yeah, I think there was a lot of interest in this, an awful lot of interest in this at conference.

Robin Linkhart 11:20

So, the Church History Team is working on an article for the Herald, that's, hopefully it'll be in the September 2024 Herald and I think that that's a really good decision on behalf of the First Presidency, who are editors in chief of the Herald magazine, and Jen Killpack in communications to make sure we have some follow up conversation, education, information about this. Can you tell us a little bit about what that article will talk about?

Lach Mackay 11:54

Yeah, well, it will pretty heavily focus, even though it's the Church History Team, there's a lot of theologically minded folks. So, a fair amount of at least the report, which may or may not make it into the article, focuses on Scripture and our understanding of Scripture, and how important it is to recognize the humanity in it. And not to cleanse it of that, but to recognize that, and so that's a significant part of it. But then it goes into the background of the role of race and priesthood in the early church ordaining members early, black members early on, some of the challenges with the question following the Civil War. It does seem clear that, unfortunately, some of the prejudice that had popped up in the early church, I'm sure some of it was there, but particularly following Joseph Smith Jr's death, and a number of our members who went west were in some ways negatively impacted by theology from the Book of Abraham, which then caused them to believe that black men should not be ordained. As they, some of them, later found their way into the reorganization, they brought some of that with them. And so, we we had to deal with that. Because I think this is a case where Joseph III, had a pretty clear vision of where he thought we should go. But that vision was not so clear to a number of members and leaders. And so I think we experienced that in the church today as well. But, for example, the section talked about, Joseph III understood it was talking about priesthood, but uses the term priest in one particular spot. And some members jumped on that and even some leaders as an opportunity to say, oh, that means black men should only be ordained to Aaronic offices. That is not what Joseph III thought it meant. Again, he's the one who brought this to the church, but it was used to discriminate for decades. So that part of it, you know, we better understand that part of it. We need to be open and honest and transparent about that. But the article kind of goes through in detail some of those kinds of things. I'm not sure it's going to make it into the article, something that was particularly fascinating is, we seem to do a much better job in the mid to late 19th century at championing the rights of our black members. But, we slowly just kind of fell back into the norms of the culture, and eventually seem to get comfortable with elements of segregation creeping into the church. So by the early to mid-20th Century, we are not nearly as strong on the rights of black members as we had been earlier. Significantly disappointing to me.

Robin Linkhart 15:10

That is really interesting. And the article sounds fascinating actually. And I really appreciate your earlier comment about one of the pros, one of the positives that have come out of this whole consideration is the ongoing awareness that we need to invest ourselves in facing, and confessing to active racism, whether that be intentional or unintentional, and how that continues, that work, that inner work as a community, and as individuals will continue to bear very positive fruit. I think it's really fascinating, as you point out that we did a lot of work good, good work and do a better job of it, perhaps in the mid to late 19th century. And then it waned. And I know, one of my favorite things to do is read through the World Conference resolution since the very beginning, it's just fascinating. And I remember seeing probably mid 60s and on when the civil rights movement was going on in in the US that there were a number of resolutions coming out to address various aspects of racism. And that has kind of continued on and off since then, does that match what you're seeing as well?

Lach Mackay 16:35

So, I think we need to do much more work on the particularly the second half of the 20th century or, for that matter, the first half as well. I just don't think we fully grasp yet the role of the church and church

members in combating racism in, in this culture. So much more work to do. I think I want to reserve comment until [Yeah. Yeah] that's what I'm so excited about. This is inspiring all kinds of questions.

Robin Linkhart 17:06

Yeah. And it's, you know, it's often sometimes comforting to pass a World Conference resolution and say, well, we addressed that. But if we don't embody and live, what that means in our lives, we're missing the boat for sure. So we...

Lach Mackay 17:21

It's just got good enough just to pass the document and print it and move on.

Robin Linkhart 17:31

So I want to ask what else we may have learned through this experience. And one of them, as you have noted, is increasing our awareness of the work we have yet to do. Are there other things that we've learned as we've gone through this conversation?

Lach Mackay 17:48

I think that another important learning is that we have a tremendous amount of work to do with our members, when it comes to understanding the nature of Scripture. We are battling major cultural forces, in how we view scripture and how we encourage our members to understand Scripture. And and sometimes I think we're losing that battle, we just have a tremendous amount of work to do. We have pretty good resources available. But, we have to engage with those resources. And we sometimes find it simpler to head to the local Christian bookstore, than to dig out the materials that might be more helpful.

Robin Linkhart 18:43

So do you anticipate any more World Conference resolutions with similar concerns of, we have a sensitivity to racism and a presentism approach to Scripture at times? And it almost kind of sounds like cancel culture when presentism lens reads back into scripture, even history. Do you think there'll be any more World Conference resolutions coming to World Conference 2025 along any of these lines?

Lach Mackay 19:19

Not sure we'll see them in 2025 or not, but I think we will see them. I think that there will be more to come.

Robin Linkhart 19:28

So we have a lot of work to do. It sounds like to me.

Lach Mackay 19:31

Yeah, on many topics.

Robin Linkhart 19:35

Is there anything else you'd like to share today that I haven't asked you about Lach?

Lach Mackay 19:40

I just think that there's so much research to be done. You know, even basic questions that I have been struggling with, and others are struggling with as well, like, how did we treat black members in our church hospital or in our church senior citizen homes. You know, I just don't know the answer to those things, and they're surprisingly difficult to find out in some cases. But the questions that I had not thought of until the last few years, it was actually Kristin Mackay, my spouse, listening to a radio article or reading one, I can't remember which, that raised some questions about the hospitals and to how black members might have been treated at the Sanitarium. It was then called. But I just don't have the answers yet. It's frustrating to me, and I'm not giving up. But it's gonna be pretty labor intensive to dig out some of those answers if they're recoverable.

Robin Linkhart 20:48

Yeah, that's very intriguing. And it brings up you know, the intersectionality of racism and women's rights, because we know that black women have experienced gender bias in a different way than white women have. So man, it's complicated, and there's a lot there to dig out for sure.

Lach Mackay 21:09

Yep. Yep.

Robin Linkhart 21:12

Thanks for being with us today., Lach, it's always a joy to have you on Project Zion Podcast.

Lach Mackay 21:19

I always love a chance to talk church history. So, I appreciate the opportunity.

Robin Linkhart 21:24

And of course, a very special thanks to all our listeners. If you would like to hear more from Lachlan Mackay check out other episodes on Cuppa Joe. And you can also put his name in the search bar on our website. I would especially recommend the Theo-History series featuring Lach and Tony Chvala-Smith, with spicy host Karin Peter. You can find all of that on projectzionpodcast.org This is your host Robin Linkhart, and you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Take good care. Bye bye.