

10-16-2002

Pure Religion

Stephen A. West

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/life_law_vol1



Part of the [Legal Profession Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

West, Stephen A., "Pure Religion" (2002). *Vol. 1: Answering God's Interrogatories*. 17.
https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/life_law_vol1/17

This What Is Property Unto Me? is brought to you for free and open access by the Life in the Law at BYU Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vol. 1: Answering God's Interrogatories by an authorized administrator of BYU Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact hunterlawlibrary@byu.edu.

Pure Religion

Stephen A. West

We are brought together tonight by virtue of two shared faiths—faith in the Church and faith in the law. When I was asked to speak to you, I thought it would be relatively easy to talk to Church members about the Church or to lawyers about the law but not as easy to find common threads that tie the two together. To try to fulfill that responsibility, I would like to share with you some gospel-related experiences and then connect them with the law.

These experiences all came as a result of an exceptional opportunity for service that my wife Martha and I completed last November. We were called to work with our brothers and sisters in the Mt. Pleasant Branch of the Church, where I worked as a counselor in the branch presidency and Martha helped with the Relief Society. Martha's and my roles were to be shadow leaders and to help implement the programs of the Church in the branch. For both of us this was a great learning experience. We learned wonderful things about attitudes, approaches, and people during the 18 months of our service. The entire branch membership is 20 to 35 individuals: one Spanish American, four whites (which included the two of us), and the remainder black members of the Church. Approximately half of the black members were born or grew up in the United States and the other half were born or grew up in Africa.

Let me set the scene for you. The branch is located in a rented row house in the District of Columbia at 14th and Newton Street. A Vietnamese branch, a Hispanic branch, and our central city branch all meet in this facility. This is a difficult neighborhood. Recently the members of a gang called the "Newton Street Crew" were arrested. The gang was composed of residents of Newton Street who lived between 14th and 16th Streets who allegedly had been selling drugs and committing other related crimes in

that area. Many of you who are from the Washington area may remember the Shotgun Stalker who, within the past year, shot at eleven people in this small Mt. Pleasant neighborhood. Four people were hit, and three others were killed; one of them was murdered in the alley that runs behind the branch, and the other shootings took place within a few blocks of our building. A number of businesses, both large and small, were once located in this neighborhood; but many of them have remained boarded up ever since the 1968 riots that accompanied Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

On the other hand, there are positive things about the neighborhood. It is a place where many of the current residents have always lived. As a result, they know grandmothers, parents, and children of families that also have remained in this area for years. They can easily distinguish between the "good guys" and the "bad guys." There is a small Spanish church on the corner near our building. In front, during the warmer months a vendor sells papayas, mangos, watermelon, and other fruits from a pushcart to the many people who congregate there.

The branch president has been a member of the Church for about five or six years. He is a man of my age, a father and a grandfather. He is a college graduate, has taken a number of post-graduate courses, and works as a teacher and consultant. He was a civil rights activist during the 1960s. His father was a minister. When he joined the Church, he was the only one of his family to do so.

The other counselor in the branch presidency is a younger man about three or four years out of college. He grew up in Africa. One of his grandfathers was a minister, and the other was a radical leader. He was offered admission to several American universities, including the University of Idaho, which he attended. While in college, he met Mormon missionaries, but he did not "connect" with them at that time. Subsequently, he decided to go to law school and attended Howard; but he was expelled from the law school for being "too radical." As he explains, "It is quite an accomplishment to be too radical at Howard Law School." In his bitterness, he decided to file a *pro se* lawsuit against Howard. He was on a bus on his way to the courthouse when he noticed two Mormon missionaries who soon started talking to him. When he reached his destination, the missionaries got off with him. As they sat and talked for a while in the park, he said he felt the hatred and animosity drain out of him. As a result, he continued to talk to the missionaries; they began to teach him some of the discussions. He later joined the Church and abandoned his efforts to fight with Howard Law School. He is now a consultant for an international organization.

As we worked with the good members of the branch, our old thought patterns were continually being challenged and reshaped. From these humble people, we learned lessons of faith and courage. For instance, one day in Sunday School we were discussing when we should pray and when

we should act. During the course of that discussion, one of the members told us that soon after he and his wife had come to the United States from Africa his wife came to him and said, “We must kill our baby because there is not enough to feed three of us, and we must stay alive.” We subsequently found out that when his wife had said “kill” she meant that she must have an abortion. He told us that his response to her was, “No, we will pray about this and place it in the hands of the Lord.” He said they prayed fervently for help with this decision. He continued, “Within three days of our prayers, I received a job. Subsequently I was promoted on that job, and we were able to complete the pregnancy and have the baby.” He concluded, “We named her Victoria, because we had prayed and we were victorious.” Today she is an outstanding grade school student. Moreover, she is teaching her parents how to live in the United States, giving them knowledge that they never would have known if she had not been born.

In another discussion in Sunday School, we learned about charity. We were talking about when it is appropriate to give to the poor and needy. One brother told us that as he was walking home one evening he was approached by a man who put a pistol to his chest and demanded all his money. The branch member took his money from his pockets and handed it over to the assailant, adding, “If you need the money that badly, I have more.” He then proceeded to open his briefcase, remove additional funds and hand them to the robber. As he did so, he said, “You are not taking this from me; I am giving it to you in the spirit of the Lord because you need it.” The robber looked at him in amazement, put the pistol in his belt and said, “Where do you live? I’m going to walk you home because you’re too good a man to be on the streets—you are not safe here.” As they started to walk to his apartment, suddenly they were surrounded by police cars because a woman had seen the stickup from her window and reported it. The police arrested the robber and took him away. This member, who was the victim, was asked to be a witness at the trial. In his testimony, he stated that although the defendant had demanded his money, he had told him that he gave it to him in the spirit of the Lord and that if he needed it that badly he wanted him to have it. As a result, the judge found the robber guilty but put him on probation, and he did not have to serve time.

In another Sunday lesson I observed what living by the spirit can mean as we teach in the Church. We had a man in his mid-thirties attend the class for the first time. At the end of the lesson the Sunday School teacher, who was a woman about 20 years his senior, asked him to say the closing prayer. I probably would never have had the temerity to ask someone who I had never seen before to say a closing prayer. Nevertheless, she encouraged him with a smile, and he replied, “No, I haven’t prayed for years and years, and I could not do it.” She answered, “Sure you can. Go ahead, and I will hold your hand.” She came over and took his hand and then said, “And if you

don't do a good job, that's fine. We will ask somebody else to say a prayer after you if your prayer isn't adequate." Given that reassurance, he bowed his head and gave a wonderful prayer. When he had finished, she put her arm around him and said, "See, that was a great prayer. We don't have any need for anyone else to say something after that." What an effective thing to simply take his hand to support him while he prayed and to tell him that someone else could pray if needed to take the pressure out of the situation.

I learned a great deal about sacrifice from a humble sister in the branch. One day this sister came to sacrament meeting, clutching a baggie containing a piece of bread that was hard and stale and partially moldy. She said to me, "If you are going to belong to a church you ought to contribute, and I can't contribute much, but one thing I can do is bring the sacrament bread." There was no way we were not going to use that bread for the sacrament that day. I sensed that her "contribution" was like the widow's mite. In Mark 12:41–44 we read:

And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much.

And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing.

And he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury:

For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.

I continually learned from the courage and commitment of our branch president, the missionaries, and the members. Typically, we would hold the traditional sacrament, Sunday School, priesthood, and Relief Society meetings on Sundays. Then one evening during the week, we would have a scripture study class, which included playing some games and having refreshments, somewhat like a family home evening meeting. At the time the Shotgun Stalker was at large in the neighborhood, I wondered if we should cancel many of our meetings; but our wise branch president stood before the congregation and announced:

To cut back or curtail our meetings is exactly what the person or persons who are perpetrating these crimes wants to accomplish. They want to take the good people off of the streets and have them hiding and not coming out. Now is the time when it is most important that we as members of the Church be visible, that we be on the streets, and that we be seen. They must know that they can't intimidate us. This is the time that we should hold our meetings and that we should be out in the neighborhood standing up for what we believe.

So we continued with our full calendar of meetings. Our missionaries remained very visible on the street, meeting and talking to people as always.

And these brave missionaries also became my new heroes. I watched young men from small towns in Arizona, Utah, Idaho, and Nevada come into the neighborhood, into a totally new environment. I saw them walk down the street “high-fiving” the people and visiting with them. I watched the neighborhood people respond by slapping the missionaries’ hands and saying, “How are you doing, elders?” The missionaries were not alarmed when people would warn them, “You are not safe here.” They would respond with a smile, offer the reassurance that they were happy to be there, and go on about their work.

I learned who the branch members’ heroes were as I heard their talks in our meetings. For example, when John Wilson, the D.C. city councilman, died it was obviously very important for many people to speak of what a great man he had been. They explained how he had influenced their lives, how he had helped their neighborhood, how he had helped their schools, how he had helped increase their job opportunities, and how he had been an example to them. As they spoke of John Wilson, they remembered him and worked through the grief that they felt at his death.

People were quoted in our meetings who are not normally quoted in other LDS congregations. The members often quoted Martin Luther King Jr. I recall one of those quotes in particular: “Death is not a period which ends this great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to a more lofty significance.”¹ What an interesting and comforting description of death!

I also learned new ways of listening. One day a woman who had suffered a stroke that had confined her to her apartment for a long period of time was brought to our fast and testimony meeting. She was being cared for full-time by another branch member. Her caretaker brought the sister to this meeting in a wheelchair and placed her in the front of the room. She listened intently to the proceedings. She was not able to speak because of her stroke, but suddenly, at an appropriate time, she started to make a gurgling sound in her throat. We couldn’t understand what she was saying, but as we looked at her face and saw the tears running down her cheeks, we knew that she was bearing a strong testimony. I learned that day that when words are not discernible, the heart can interpret.

I repeatedly learned new ways of seeing people during my time in the branch. The door to our little row house opens right onto the city sidewalk. One Sunday, in the middle of the high councilor’s talk, a homeless woman who was wearing dirty, ragged clothes, coughing up phlegm, choking and carrying a filthy handkerchief appeared at the door. She announced, “I want to sing. I want to pray.” She then walked on into the room and proceeded to the front row. She selected a seat next to a sister in the branch who was wearing a white blouse and placed her head on the woman’s shoulder. The sister immediately put her arms around this new arrival and held her throughout the remainder of the meeting. The high councilor had been

relating the parable of the Good Samaritan as the homeless woman joined us. As this woman coughed and used her dirty handkerchief, the speaker continued with the parable. When he came to the end, he quoted part of the relevant scripture and suddenly our visitor completed the verse the high councilor had begun quoting. Later as we sang, the woman sounded off-key every word of the hymn. I found myself wondering how she knew that scriptural passage, how she knew that hymn. After the meeting had ended, I commented to the high councilor, “What better visual aid could you have of the parable of the Good Samaritan than the woman who put her arms around our visitor?” We both reflected upon the fact that it was probably the first time in a long time that someone had put their arms around our visitor in affection.

My “vision” was tested on other occasions. One evening at Christmas time we were going to take all our members up to the Washington Temple Visitors Center to see the lights and to enjoy the various church choirs that performed there. As I walked into the branch chapel, I saw a man that I had never met before sitting in one of our folding chairs. He had on high top boots, a long overcoat, and a leather aviator’s hat with flaps sticking out on either side of his ears. As he looked up at me, he said, “Hi, chief—what’s up?” I went over to talk with him, and he asked, “What are we doing, chief?” I told him of our plans, and he said, “I dig it; let’s go.”

When we arrived at the visitors center, we sat down and listened to a Presbyterian bell choir perform. At intermission he said, “Chief, can we go up and talk to the head man?” I replied that I thought that would be fine, so we went up and talked to the conductor. Right away, my companion started discussing the tonic fifths that the bell choir had been playing. I thought, “How in the world does he know what a ‘tonic fifth’ is?” He proceeded to have a detailed discussion of baroque music theory with the conductor, a music teacher. As we returned to the branch, I asked the young man how he knew about tonic fifths and baroque music. He told me that he was a music major at the University of the District of Columbia. He explained that he had sold most of his belongings to buy more drums and that he hoped to graduate with a degree in music and do some composing. I was struck by how completely I had misjudged this individual based on my first impression of him.

On another occasion, in the middle of our sacrament meeting, the door of our building opened and in came a man wearing black Nikes with the shoes unlaced, long baggy levis and an underwear top. As he sat down, I noticed the very tough, very grim expression on his face. I watched him throughout the meeting, thinking, “here comes trouble.” When we finished sacrament meeting and moved directly into Sunday School, he remained in place, still frowning. At about the mid-point of Sunday School, he got up and walked out.

The following week he joined us again in the middle of a meeting. This time I thought, “Well, he has cased us out and now he’s back to cause us trouble.” After the meeting he came up and said to me, “Isn’t today testimony meeting? I have come to bear my testimony.” When I inquired, he said, “I’m a member of the Church and belong to the Capitol Hill Branch.” Once more, my vision had needed correction.

As I reflect upon what I have learned about people through this experience, my thoughts turn to a 40-year-old Book of Mormon my grandmother gave me when I graduated from high school. It accompanied me on my mission, and I keep it close with me today. The leather cover has come off, it is tattered, it just has the cardboard backing left, and sections of the book are separating from other sections. Many of the people I encountered during my service in the branch are like my Book of Mormon—tattered, worn, damaged on the outside; but they have great and important things on the inside. They may have been classified by some as “low-income types,” but I came to know that they all were first class.

After hearing of the lessons I have learned through this church service, you may be asking yourselves, “What does all this have to do with the law?” Let me try and weave my themes together now. Earlier, I told you that our branch president’s father had been a minister—he preached in a church in Topeka, Kansas. He also was the head of the local chapter of the NAACP. In this role, he initiated a lawsuit to integrate the junior high schools of Topeka. The resistance came quickly. The sisters of our branch president’s father and his attorney, both teachers in the Topeka school system, were asked to persuade their brothers to drop the suit. When their fathers did not give in to the pressure, the two women teachers were fired. However, the suit progressed and succeeded in integrating the junior high schools.

A subsequent action was initiated to broaden the effects of this first suit, to try to integrate the entire school system of Topeka. Unfortunately, the health of our branch president’s father was failing, and he was not able to participate actively in the second suit. When he passed away, the suit was picked up by Ollie Brown, the assistant pastor of the congregation presided over by our branch president’s father.

That case, which was the result of collaboration by individuals who were trained in religion and individuals who were trained in the law, continued up through the appellate system until it was finally decided in May 1954 by the court you will be admitted to practice before tomorrow, the Supreme Court of the United States. Its name was *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the landmark case that held that separate by equal schools cannot be equal while separate.² It was the case that resulted in the nationwide integration of the public schools, the Supreme Court opinion that we mark

the 40th anniversary of this week. “And now you know the rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey might say.

Early last year at a memorable event, I was reminded of our obligation to the next generation to pass on this combining of faith in religion and faith in the law. I served as vice chair of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington that sponsored this citywide service to commemorate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. This Conference is made up of representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, and Sikh religions. The service was held in a large Baptist church in a center-city neighborhood. During the course of the program, about 60 sixth-grade students walked across the front of the sanctuary, holding a large butcher paper banner that spanned the entire front section of this big church. Across the top of the banner the legend, “I Have a Dream” was printed. Underneath that the children had dipped their hands in paint and then pressed them onto the banner. Under each palm print, the owner had written his or her own dream. The words read: “I want to be a pharmacist. *I want to be a lawyer.* I want to be a beautician. I want to be a professional basketball player. *I want to be a lawyer.* I want to be a truck driver. *I want to be a lawyer because of the good I can do for my people.* I want to be a teacher. I want to be a dairy owner,” et cetera.

As far as I could see across the Church, fully one-third of these young black children had expressed their desire to be a lawyer. No other occupation was mentioned as often. At a time when we as lawyers are part of a profession under siege and when lawyer jokes and lawyer bashing are prevalent, these sixth graders saw something that so many of our contemporaries have missed—the importance of the role of the lawyer, the ability it provides to make a difference, and the vehicle it offers to help all people.

In conclusion let me leave you with two quotations that capture the complementary joining of the religious and the legal. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of religion and service:

A religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man’s social conditions. Religion deals with both earth and heaven, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself.³

John W. Davis, one of the named partners in the New York City law firm of Davis, Polk, spoke about the blending of law and service:

True, we build no bridges. We raise no towers. We construct no engines. We paint no pictures—unless as amateurs for our own principal amusement. There is little of all that we do which the eye of man can see. But we smooth out difficulties; we relieve stress; we correct mistakes; we take up other men’s

burdens and by our efforts we make possible the peaceful life of men in a peaceful state.⁴

As I began, I spoke of our two shared faiths, faith in the Church and faith in the law. In both of these important areas, may our faith continue to be strong; may we magnify our callings as representatives of the Church and as officers of the court is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

This address was given on May 24, 1994 to graduates of the BYU Law School who had come to Washington, D.C. to be admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court on the following day. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, Fall 1994, 14–21.

Stephen A. West received his J.D. from the University of Utah in 1961 and was senior vice president and general counsel for Marriott International. He is currently a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy.

Notes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Eulogy for the Martyred Children,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 222. “The Reverend Dr. King delivered this sermon at the funeral of the little girls who were killed on 15 September 1963 by a bomb as they attended the Sunday school of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.” *Id.* at 221.

2. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 337 U.S. 483 (1954).

3. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Selections by Coretta Scott King* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1987), 66.

4. John W. Davis, Address, New York, 16 March 1946, in 1 *Record of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York* 101, 102 (1946), as quoted in Fred R. Shapiro, *The Oxford Dictionary of American Legal Quotations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 273.