

On May 25, Mark E. Petersen called President Kimball's attention to an article that proposed the priesthood policy had begun with Brigham Young, not Joseph Smith, and he suggested that the president might wish to consider this factor.⁴¹

On May 30, Spencer read his counselors a tentative statement in longhand removing racial restrictions on priesthood and said he had a "good, warm feeling" about it.⁴² They reviewed past statements and decided to ask G. Homer Durham, a seventy supervising the Historical Department, to research the matter further.⁴³ They also concluded to alter the pattern of their next Thursday morning meeting with the Twelve by canceling the traditional luncheon in the temple and asking the council members to continue their fasting.⁴⁴

Confirmation of Revelation

On Thursday, June 1, Spencer left home early, as usual, so engrossed that he left his briefcase behind and had to send back for it. His journal for the day records, with striking blandness:

After meeting with my counselors for an hour this morning from eight until nine o'clock, we went over to the temple and met with all of the General Authorities in the monthly meeting we hold together [on the first Thursday].

Returned to the office for a few minutes and then went over to Temple Square for the dedication services of the new Visitors Center South, which was scheduled to commence at 3:00 P.M.

The services lasted for about an hour, after which we returned to the office where I worked at my desk until six o'clock.

The day proved rather more significant than this entry suggests. On this first Thursday of the month, the First Presidency, Twelve, and Seventies met in their regularly scheduled monthly temple meeting at 9:00 A.M., fasting. There they bore testimony, partook of the sacrament, and participated in a prayer circle.⁴⁵ The meeting lasted the usual three and a half hours and was not notably different from other such meetings until the conclusion, when President Kimball asked the Twelve to remain. Two had already left the room to change from their temple clothing in preparation for the regular business meeting of the First Presidency and the Twelve which normally followed. Someone called them back. Elder Delbert L. Stapley lay ill in the hospital and Elder Mark E. Petersen was in South America on assignment. Ten of the Twelve were present.

As was later recalled, President Kimball said,

followed: "Since I wrote my last letter to you and thanked you for your great interest, you know what has happened and I assume that you are pleased with the move." Spencer later mentioned to his grandson Miles S. Kimball that Chase Peterson's letter was "very helpful" in thinking about the priesthood question. Miles S. Kimball to author, October 31, 1993.

41. The article almost surely was the 1973 article by Lester E. Bush Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (spring 1973): 11; Devery S. Anderson, "A History of *Dialogue*, Part Two: Struggle toward Maturity, 1971–1982," *Dialogue* 33, no. 2 (summer 2000): 64 (possible influence of Bush article). Mark E. Petersen, "Discussion Re: Utah Historical Quarterly," memo, Kimball Papers, notes that at the time, President Kimball considered taking on the subject of Blacks and the priesthood prayerfully.

42. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 294; G. Homer Durham, memo to Spencer W. Kimball, June 29, 1978, Kimball Papers, noting that the assignment was "now moot."

43. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 294. Events overtook that request, for confirmation of the rightness of change came just two days later.

44. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 294–95.

45. There was "a particularly high spiritual tone." McConkie, "Receipt of the Revelation," 3.

Brethren, I have canceled lunch for today. Would you be willing to remain in the temple with us? I would like you to continue to fast with me. I have been going to the temple almost daily for many weeks now, sometimes for hours, entreating the Lord for a clear answer. I have not been determined in advance what the answer should be. And I will be satisfied with a simple Yes or No, but I want to know. Whatever the Lord's decision is, I will defend it to the limits of my strength, even to death.⁴⁶

He outlined to them the direction his thoughts had carried him—the fading of his reluctance, the disappearance of objections, the growing assurance he had received, the tentative decision he had reached, and his desire for a clear answer. Once more he asked the Twelve to speak, without concern for seniority. “Do you have anything to say?” Elder McConkie spoke in favor of the change, noting there was no scriptural impediment. President Tanner asked searching questions as Elder McConkie spoke. Then Elder Packer spoke at length, explaining his view that every worthy man should be allowed to hold the priesthood. He quoted scriptures (D&C 124:49; 56:4–5; 58:32) in support of the change.⁴⁷ Eight of the ten volunteered their views, all favorable. President Kimball called on the other two, and they also spoke in favor. Discussion continued for two hours.⁴⁸ Elder Packer said, a few weeks later, “One objection would have deterred him, would have made him put it off, so careful was he . . . that it had to be right.”⁴⁹ The decision process bonded them in unity. They then sought divine confirmation.

President Kimball asked, “Do you mind if I lead you in prayer?” There were things *he* wanted to say to the Lord. He had reached a decision after great struggle, and he wanted the Lord's confirmation, if it would come. They surrounded the altar in a prayer circle. President Kimball told the Lord at length that if extending the priesthood was not right, if the Lord did not want this change to come in the Church, he would fight the world's opposition.⁵⁰ Elder McConkie later recounted, “The Lord took over and President Kimball was inspired in his prayer, asking the right questions, and he asked for a manifestation.”⁵¹

During that prayer, those present felt something powerful, unifying, ineffable. Those who tried to describe it struggled to find words. Elder McConkie said:

[It was as though another day of Pentecost came.] On the day of Pentecost in the Old World it is recorded that cloven tongues of fire rested upon the people. They were trying to put into words what is impossible to express directly. There are no words to describe the sensation, but simultaneously the Twelve and the three members of the First Presidency had the Holy Ghost

46. This is a composite of Gerry Avant's report of President Kimball's description, David B. Haight's recollection of President Kimball's introductory statement, and Bruce R. McConkie's recollection four weeks later. McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 3–4: “He [President Kimball] hoped for a clear affirmation of this [Blacks receiving the priesthood] so there would be no question in anyone's mind.”

47. Lucile C. Tate, *Boyd K. Packer: A Watchman on the Tower* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 225–26. President Kimball had also mused about the curse on idolaters (Ex. 20:5 and Num. 14:18) that ran to the third and fourth generation. This suggested to him that curses were not endless and that further descendants would be judged on their worthiness, not on their ancestry. Spencer W. Kimball, interview by author, July 5, 1978.

48. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 295; McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 4.

49. Packer, interview.

50. Avant, “Revelation Was Clear,” 15.

51. McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 5: “It was one of those occasions when the one who was mouth in the prayer, prayed by the power of the Spirit and was given expression and guided in the words that were used.”

descend upon them and they knew that God had manifested his will. . . . I had had some remarkable spiritual experiences before, particularly in connection with my call as an apostle, but nothing of this magnitude.

All of the Brethren at once knew and felt in their souls what the answer to the importuning petition of President Kimball was. . . . Some of the Brethren were weeping. All were sober and somewhat overcome. When President Kimball stood up, several of the Brethren, in turn, threw their their arms around him.⁵²

Elder L. Tom Perry recalled: “While he was praying we had a marvelous experience. We had just a unity of feeling. The nearest I can describe it is that it was much like what has been recounted as happening at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. I felt something like the rushing of wind. There was a feeling that came over the whole group. When President Kimball got up he was visibly relieved and overjoyed.”⁵³

Elder Hinckley said soon afterward that the experience defied description: “It was marvelous, very personal, bringing with it great unity and strong conviction that this change was a revelation from God.”⁵⁴ Ten years later he said:

There was a hallowed and sanctified atmosphere in the room. For me, it felt as if a conduit opened between the heavenly throne and the kneeling, pleading prophet. . . . And by the power of the Holy Ghost there came to that prophet an assurance that the thing for which he prayed was right, that the time had come. . . .

There was not the sound “as of a rushing mighty wind,” there were not “cloven tongues like as of fire” as there had been on the Day of Pentecost. . . .

. . . But the voice of the Spirit whispered with certainty into our minds and our very souls.

It was for us, at least for me personally, as I imagine it was with Enos, who said concerning his remarkable experience, “. . . behold, the voice of the Lord came into my mind.”

. . . Not one of us who was present on that occasion was ever quite the same after that.⁵⁵

Elder David B. Haight recalled, “The Spirit touched each of our hearts with the same message in the same way. Each was witness to a transcendent heavenly event.”⁵⁶ He spoke of the event again eighteen years later: “I was there. I was there with the outpouring of the Spirit in that room so strong that none of us could speak afterwards. We just left quietly to go back to the office. No one could say anything because of the heavenly spiritual experience.”⁵⁷ Elder Marvin J. Ashton called it “the most intense spiritual impression I’ve ever felt.”⁵⁸ Elder Packer said that during the prayer all present became aware what the decision must be.⁵⁹

52. McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 6.

53. L. Tom Perry, interview by author, June 15, 1978.

54. 1978 Draft.

55. Hinckley, “Priesthood Restoration,” 70.

56. Tate, *David B. Haight*, 280.

57. David B. Haight, “This Work Is True,” *Ensign* 26 (May 1996): 23. See John L. Hart, “Make Giants out of All Missionaries,” *Church News*, January 24, 1998, 4.

58. England, “Marvin J. Ashton,” 10.

59. Leonard J. Arrington, *Journal*, June 19, 1978, copy in Kimball Papers, quoting Gill Warner, who confirmed the statement to the author in interview, September 25, 2000.

Elder Benson recorded in his journal: “Following the prayer, we experienced the sweetest spirit of unity and conviction that I have ever experienced. . . . Our bosoms burned with the righteousness of the decision we had made.”⁶⁰ He also said he “had never experienced anything of such spiritual magnitude and power.”⁶¹ Each who felt this powerful spiritual experience confirming the decision proposed by President Kimball perceived it as a revelation.

Elder Hunter said, “Following the prayer . . . comments were made about the feeling shared by all, that seldom, if ever, had there been greater unanimity in the council.”⁶²

L. Tom Perry said, “I don’t think we’ve had a president more willing to entreat the Lord or more receptive since the Prophet Joseph. We knew that he had received the will of the Lord.”⁶³

As the prophet arose from his knees, he first encountered Elder Haight, the newest apostle, and they embraced. Elder Haight could feel President Kimball’s heart pounding and could feel his intense emotion. The president continued around the circle, embracing each apostle in turn.⁶⁴ Others spontaneously embraced, also.

Spencer felt that the reaction evidenced his brethren’s acceptance of the policy change and, at the same time, their acceptance of him. Elder Perry said,

It was just as though a great burden had been lifted. He was almost speechless. It was almost impossible for him to contain his joy. Nothing was said or had to be said. We sensed what the answer was, the decision was made. There was a great feeling of unity among us and relief that it was over. As I have talked with other members of the Twelve since then, they felt the same as I did. I don’t think the Twelve will ever be the same again. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.⁶⁵

President Kimball also later said, “I felt an overwhelming spirit there, a rushing flood of unity such as we had never had before.” And he knew that the fully sufficient answer had come.⁶⁶

Emotion overflowed as the group lingered. When someone reminded President Kimball of the earlier appearance of Wilford Woodruff to LeGrand Richards in the room, Spencer said he thought it natural: “President Woodruff would have been very much interested, because he went through something of the same sort of experience” with the Manifesto.⁶⁷ The Brethren expressed their elation at the events, pleasing President Kimball by the depth of their feeling. They felt greatly relieved that the decision was made and pleased with the outcome. They had yearned for this change but had needed the confirmation of the Spirit to reassure them. *After their experience—so sacred that some would not discuss it and the thought of it capable of bringing tears—every man stood resolute in support of the action.* Elder McConkie felt that

Because it was a revelation of such tremendous significance and import; one that would reverse the whole direction of the Church, procedurally and

60. Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 457.

61. McConkie, “New Revelation,” 128, quotes Ezra Taft Benson.

62. Eleanor Knowles, *Howard W. Hunter* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 235–36, quoting his journal.

63. Perry, interview. Spencer later said, “Finally we had the feeling, we had the impressions from the Lord who made them very clear to us that this was the thing to do to make the gospel universal to all worthy people.” Kimball remarks, Johannesburg, October 23, 1978, from Cardall recording in Kimball Papers. “But this revelation and assurance came to me so clearly that there was no question about it.” Susan Turley, “The Legacy,” *Latter-day Sentinel*, November 16, 1985, 32; Avant, “Revelation Was Clear,” 15.

64. Tate, *David B. Haight*, 280.

65. Perry, interview.

66. Avant, “Revelation Was Clear,” 15; Spencer W. Kimball, interview.

67. Spencer W. Kimball, interview.

administratively; one that would affect the living and the dead; one that would affect the total relationship that we have with the world. The Lord wanted independent witnesses who could bear record that the thing had happened.⁶⁸

68. McConkie, “New Revelation,” 134 (the two parts of the quotation are reversed in the original); McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 10–11. The revelation is not mentioned in President Tanner’s biography, G. Homer Durham, *N. Eldon Tanner: His Life and Service* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), and he did not describe the experience to his family. Ruth Tanner Walker, interview by author, August 19, 1998. Howard, *Marion G. Romney*, 239, mentions but does not describe the event.