



President Spencer W. Kimball spent many hours alone, pondering and praying, as he sought revelation on the priesthood question. Courtesy Church History Library. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

# Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood

*Edward L. Kimball*

No doubt the most dramatic moment of the Spencer W. Kimball administration and probably the highlight of Church history in the twentieth century occurred in June 1978, when the First Presidency announced a revelation allowing worthy men of all races to be ordained to the priesthood and allowing worthy men and women access to all temple ordinances. The history of this issue reaches back to the early years of the Church. Without understanding the background, one cannot appreciate the magnitude of the 1978 revelation.

When the Church was very young a few black men were ordained to the priesthood. But soon such ordinations ceased, and a tradition grew, supported by common Christian beliefs and certain scriptural interpretations, that African blacks bore the burden of a curse levied by God on Cain and his posterity, which precluded them from participating fully in the life of the Church.

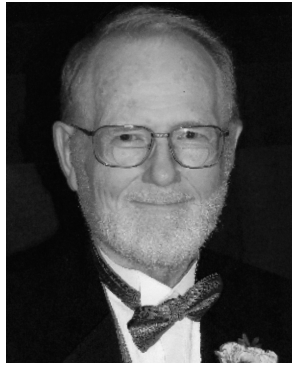
After World War II, the civil rights movement grew powerfully, calling for equal legal and social status for blacks. The movement gained strength through the 1960s, resulting in strong criticism of the Church for its exclusion of blacks from the priesthood and the temple, motivating some Church leaders to brace against attack and others to ask whether the time had come to seek a change.

## **The Traditional Explanation for Restrictive Policy**

The Church in which Spencer W. Kimball grew up in the early twentieth century accepted without question that “colored” or “Negro” members of the Church could not receive the priesthood. They were ineligible

## Edward L. Kimball

In 1977, my nephew Andrew and I published *Spencer W. Kimball*, describing the life of my father up to that time. He was then eighty-two years old, and we believed that the story was pretty much at an end. We thought that perhaps when he died we might put out a revised edition with a last chapter finishing his presidency years and summing up his place in Church history. But he not only extended his life another eight years, he also participated in the 1978 revelation on priesthood. It became apparent that a revision was not sufficient. There needed to be a second volume with focus on his presidency, the centerpiece being the revelation, its antecedents and consequences. I put off writing because I was occupied with my professional responsibilities as a law teacher at BYU, but I diligently collected the bits and pieces that would make writing possible. This included interviewing many of the people who were personally involved in the story.



In 1996, I retired and could turn more attention to the book project. It was not until 2002 that I had a full draft, but the manuscript was so voluminous with text and footnotes that it looked too long for normal publication. I wanted the book to serve as a tribute to my father's life and work, and I felt that the widest distribution would come by publication in a shorter form, say four or five hundred pages. One day as I was driving from Salt Lake City to Provo, a solution popped into my mind. It was to make available a reasonably priced, shorter printed version and include in the back of the book a CD containing the longer, footnoted version where it would be readily accessible to anyone who was interested in the more detailed history. A secondary benefit of creating a CD was the ability to include the text of six other out-of-print books, twenty-four articles, additional photographs, and several brief sound clips illustrating my father's voice before and after removal of most of his vocal cords.

The process of shortening the text, removing most of the footnotes, and creating the CD was undertaken with major help from

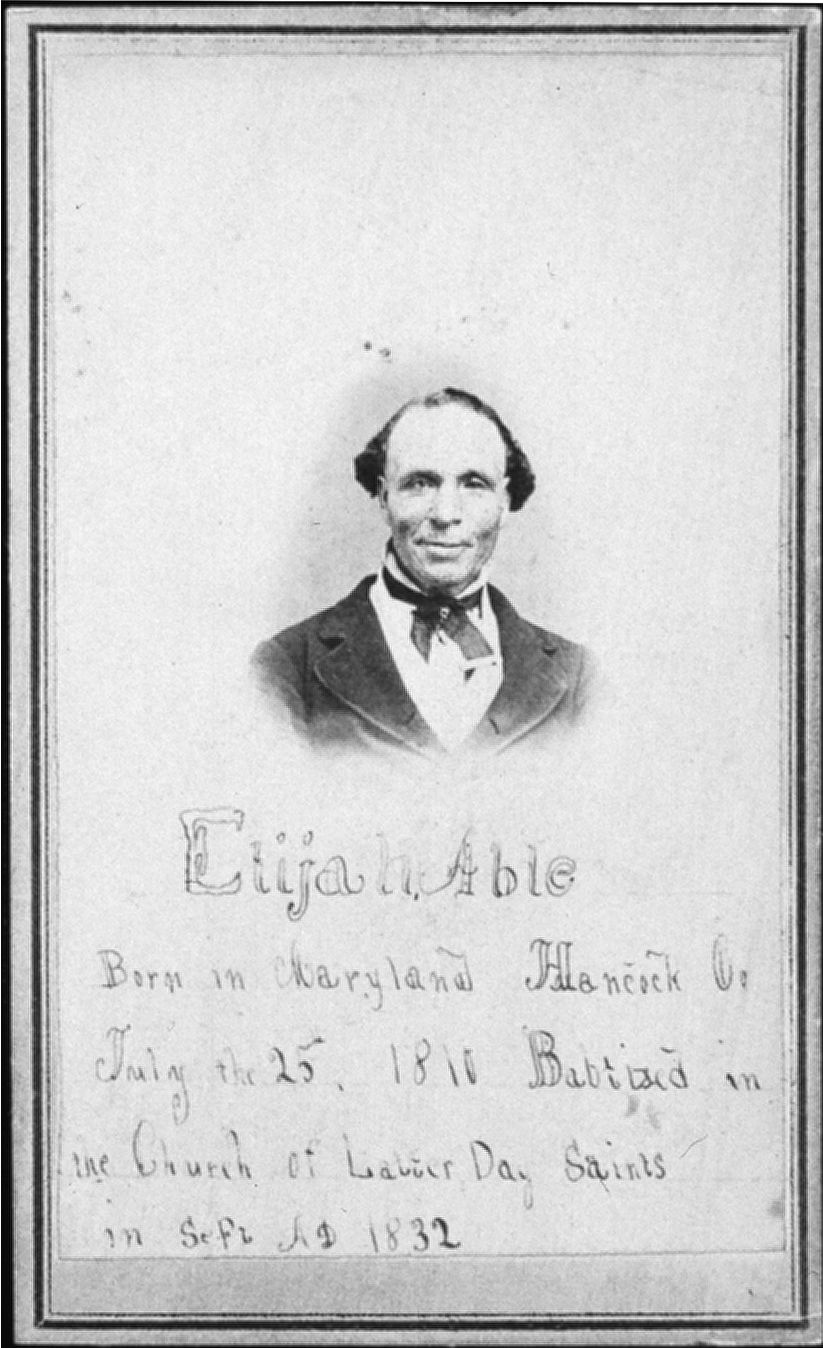
the editors and staff of BYU Studies. This effort continued until late 2004 when agreement was reached with Deseret Book to publish the book and the CD in 2005. The chapters concerning the revelation are physically and emotionally the heart of the book, yet until now the fuller version, with its notes, has been available only electronically. I am grateful for BYU Studies' interest in making most of those four chapters along with their notes accessible in hard copy as well.

for missionary service and all priesthood leadership positions. Neither men nor women of African descent could receive the temple endowment, although they could be baptized vicariously for their ancestors. They could receive patriarchal blessings, serve as secretaries (though not as ward clerks), teach classes, and participate in the music program. African American women could be visiting teachers, but men could not be home teachers because it was a priesthood assignment. Skin color was not the issue—blacks from Polynesia or Australia faced no such limitations. “Lineage,” or presumed genealogy, was the problem.

Church policy related only to priesthood, not to personal worth, but many Latter-day Saints shared with other Americans the general social prejudice that relegated blacks to secondary status. A study by Armand Mauss concluded that Mormons were prejudiced, but not more than other religious Americans. “Mormons . . . were no more likely to give anti-Negro responses than were the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans . . . or Baptists,” although their belief system could provide an easy rationalization for prejudice.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Armand L. Mauss, “Mormonism and the Negro: Faith, Folklore, and Civil Rights,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2 (winter 1967): 36 (hereafter cited as *Dialogue*); Armand L. Mauss, “Mormonism and Secular Attitudes toward Negroes,” *Pacific Sociological Review* 9 (1966): 91–99, cited in William A. Wilson and Richard C. Poulsen, “The Curse of Cain and Other Stories: Blacks in Mormon Folklore,” *Sunstone* 5 (November/December 1980): 13. Mormon opinions about race relations (intermarriage, segregation, civil rights, school integration, and so forth) are similar to national opinions. This was true before the 1978 revelation (1972–76), during the period when it was announced (1977–82), and afterward (1983–85). Data came from the annual General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Corporation under grants from the National Science



Elijah Abel, an early black convert, pioneer, and missionary, was ordained an elder on March 3, 1836. Zebedee Coltrin ordained Elijah a Seventy on December 20 that same year. Courtesy Church History Library. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

African-Americans in small numbers had been members of the Church from its days in Nauvoo. At least two black men, Walker Lewis, an elder, and Elijah Abel, a seventy, were ordained to the priesthood during Joseph Smith's lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Lewis was ordained by Apostle William Smith, brother of the Prophet, in 1843 or 1844 in Lowell, Massachusetts, and continued his involvement in the Church until at least 1852, when he returned to Lowell after a visit to Utah. Elijah Abel continued his activity in the Church in Utah, even though ordination of other blacks ceased.<sup>3</sup> By Spencer's day, Church members who were aware of Abel generally believed his ordination did not accurately reflect true doctrine but was either a mistake, an exception, or the result of Joseph Smith's still imperfect understanding. It was not thought impossible that a black man could be ordained, just that it was improper.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when such ordination errors came to light, the men would be asked to suspend use of their priesthood.

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Foundation. Armand L. Mauss, paper presented at Mormon History Association meeting, Logan, Utah, May 7, 1988; Armand L. Mauss to author, March 22, 2003. See also Armand L. Mauss, *Mormonism and Minorities* (Richmond: University of California Press, 1974). When Spencer was stake president in Arizona he observed that prejudice existed not only toward blacks, but also toward Latino members. See also Russell Peek to author, March 27, 1995, and March 14, 1995. In 1976, BYU students elected Robert L. Stevenson, a black man, as student body vice-president. *1977 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1977), 23. Spencer met him. Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, September 7, 1976, in possession of the author.

2. Newell G. Bringhurst, "Elijah Abel and the Changing Status of Blacks within Mormonism," in *Neither White nor Black*, ed. Lester E. Bush Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), 131, 133.

3. Connell O'Donovan, "The Mormon Priesthood Ban and Elder Q. Walker Lewis," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 48, and particularly pages 82–95. Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981). Reportedly some persons of mixed heritage received the endowment before 1907. Henry J. Wolfinger, "Jane Manning James: A Test of Faith," in *Worth Their Salt: Notable but Often Unnoted Women of Utah*, ed. Colleen Whitley (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996), 268 n. 60. Jane Manning James was not endowed during her lifetime. Jessie L. Embry, *Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African American Mormons* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1994), 40. Compare Roger D. Launius, *Invisible Saints: A History of Black Americans in the Reorganized Church* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1988). Mormon converts from the South brought a few slaves to the Utah Territory. Black slavery, though legal in Utah Territory until 1862, occurred rarely. Ronald G. Coleman, "African Americans in Utah," in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, ed. Allen Kent Powell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 2.

4. In 1908, Joseph F. Smith stated his understanding that Joseph Smith himself declared Abel's ordination "null and void." Excerpt from Council minutes,

By the twentieth century, the origin of the restriction had receded far enough into the past that it carried the sanctity of long-established tradition. Most Mormons felt satisfied that it had a scriptural basis, even though the cited passages were at best ambiguous. Spencer knew that the restriction did not come from explicit scriptures but rather from interpretations by various Church leaders. The reasoning, as often constructed, ran this way: If (as attributed to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young) God disapproved of blacks holding the priesthood, and if (in God's justice) individuals are accountable only for their own shortcomings, the withholding of priesthood from blacks who have lived worthily in mortality must reflect some kind of failure on their part before they were born.<sup>5</sup>

### Proposed Scriptural Basis

Looking for scriptural support, Church leaders found statements in the Bible and the Pearl of Great Price that allowed the conclusion that after the Flood the Pharaoh of Egypt was both black and cursed as to the priesthood, inviting the inference that Pharaoh was cursed as to the priesthood *because* he was black. The gaps in logic were bridged with supposition.

- God cursed Cain for killing Abel and placed a mark on him.
- Cain's descendants were black. (The mark, therefore, is assumed to be blackness.)
- Blackness came upon the Canaanites. (They are assumed to be descendants of Cain.)
- Pharaoh, descended from Ham and his wife, Egyptus, had Canaanite blood. (Thus Cain's bloodline survived the Flood.)
- Pharaoh, although blessed by Noah for righteousness, was cursed as pertaining to the priesthood. (Thus denial of

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August 26, 1908, Kimball Papers; these papers are in possession of the author but will eventually be donated to the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as Church History Library). President Smith offered no basis for that assertion. Abel did not believe that his ordination had ever been nullified. And twenty-nine years earlier, in 1879, Joseph F. Smith noted that Elijah Abel had two certificates identifying him as a seventy, one of them issued in Utah. Embry, *Black Saints in a White Church*, 39.

5. It is noteworthy that Joseph Smith, who translated the Book of Abraham, probably in 1835, drew no connection between premortal life and priesthood curses. Jay M. Todd, *The Saga of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 228, 264, 320–24.

priesthood is independent of righteousness in mortality and must derive from a premortal cause.)

- Some premortal spirits were noble and great (Abr. 3:22). (Thus some premortal spirits were less than noble and great. Without any injustice, these lesser spirits were sent to earth through the lineage of Cain to experience mortality, but without priesthood.<sup>6</sup>)

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6. There were and are, however, holes in this line of reasoning. For example:
- Cain's scriptural punishment was personal, that the earth would not yield its strength to his tillage and that he should be "a fugitive and a vagabond" (Gen. 4:12). Nothing was said in the scriptures about denial of priesthood.
  - The mark placed on Cain is not specified and, whatever the mark, it is not identified as a curse, since its purpose was to keep Cain from being killed (Moses 5:39–40).
  - No scripture says that either Cain's punishment or the mark placed on him would pass to his descendants.
  - Although it is said that Cain's descendants were black and shunned by others (Moses 7:22), their blackness is not identified as the mark placed on Cain.
  - The scriptures say of the Canaanites that "a blackness came upon all the children of Canaan" (Moses 7:8), and they provide a plausible explanation for the blackness in that they slaughtered the people of Shum (Moses 7:7–8). The scriptures do not identify the Canaanites as descendants of Cain, despite the fact that both groups were in some way "black." If the mark of Cain were blackness and Canaanites were descended from Cain, as supposed, it does not make sense to speak of blackness "coming upon them" as though it were a new event. Further, there is no reference to priesthood with respect to these Canaanites. Enoch was told not to preach to the Canaanites, but this, too, is in the context of their having slaughtered the people of Shum. Ham's wife apparently belonged to the Canaanite people (Abr. 1:21–22), because Pharaoh, a descendant of Ham and his wife, Egyptus, was "a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth . . . and thus, from Ham, sprang that race which preserved the curse [of blackness] in the land" (Abr. 1:21, 24).
  - The Book of Abraham speaks of Pharaoh, a king of Egypt, as belonging to a "lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood" (Abr. 1:27). The traditional explanation was that this lineage was the black lineage, but an alternate explanation may be that in a patriarchal society Pharaoh came through a female line, and it was this lineage that deprived him of the right to priesthood. We are told that Pharaoh descended from Noah, through Ham, but his lineage is further described only as coming through Ham's daughter by Egyptus (Abr. 1:21–25). As Pharaoh claimed a right to priesthood through Ham, he sought to skip the gap in his genealogy, but he could not. In contrast, when Abraham makes claim to priesthood he is careful to trace his own paternal line back to Noah. He says that by his righteous



In the modern Church, these ambiguities and gaps in logic did not in themselves refute the traditional explanation of priesthood restriction, but they showed how tenuous the reasoning was.

For Brigham Young, the matter was uncomplicated. It was simply a matter of lineage, a hierarchy of races.<sup>7</sup> So far as we know he did not ever rely on the notion of premortal misconduct as explanation. Indeed, the Pearl of Great Price, in which the teachings about premortal existence principally appear, was not published in the United States until 1878, a year after Brigham Young's death, and not canonized until 1880.<sup>8</sup> He saw the

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living "I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers . . . even the right of the firstborn . . . through the fathers, unto me" (Abr. 1:2-3). See Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 425-28, 578-87 (see 1st ed. at 134-37).

7. He said, for example, "Why are so many of the inhabitants of the earth cursed with a skin of blackness? It comes in consequence of their fathers rejecting the power of the Holy Priesthood, and the law of God." Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855-86), 11:272 (August 19, 1866). To him denial of priesthood to the descendants of Cain was no more puzzling than denial in the Bible of priesthood to Israelites not descended from Levi and Aaron. See also Armand L. Mauss, "In Search of Ephraim: Traditional Mormon Conceptions of Lineage and Race," *Journal of Mormon History* 25 (Spring 1999): 131-73, especially 163-71.

8. The Pearl of Great Price was published in Great Britain in 1851. The portions relevant to this discussion had previously appeared in *Times and Seasons*, so Young undoubtedly had knowledge of them. Perhaps the first person to speculate in print on a lack of premortal valiancy on the part of blacks was B. H. Roberts, who expressed his belief that the descendants of Cain are those who were "not valiant in the great rebellion in heaven." B. H. Roberts, "To the Youth of Israel," *Contributor* 6 (May 1885): 297. Joseph Fielding Smith relied on Roberts and became the major source of teaching about the issue in the twentieth century. He himself was fairly cautious, but others following him took a much more definitive stand. As early as 1931, he said that the Bible cannot answer the question about why Negro men cannot have the priesthood, but that the Pearl of Great Price and the teachings of early Church leaders offer some information. "It is generally believed," he said, that Ham's wife brought the curse of Cain through the Flood. In addition to quoting B. H. Roberts's conjecture, he also quoted Brigham Young as saying that Negroes were not neutral in heaven, but "the posterity of Cain are black because he (Cain) committed murder. He killed Abel and God set a mark upon his posterity. But the spirits are pure (i.e. innocent; see D.C. 93:38) that enter their tabernacles." Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection*, 5th ed. (Independence, Mo.: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1943), 105. ("Innocent" need not mean that men are born free from all consequences of premortal choices.) This statement appears to reject the "war in heaven" explanation and rely instead on the notion that blacks are punished for the sin of their fathers, a principle difficult to reconcile with teachings about individual responsibility. See Article of Faith 2;

enslaved condition of blacks in the United States as proof that they were under a curse.<sup>9</sup> His teaching—that the priesthood restriction on blacks could not be lifted until after the resurrection—came to be seen, in hindsight, as unwarranted.

In the twentieth century, doctrinal emphasis on blood and inheritance declined while emphasis on individual responsibility increased.<sup>10</sup> A belief

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Deuteronomy 24:16; Jeremiah 31:30; Ezekiel 18, especially verse 20; and Doctrine and Covenants 124:50.

Elder Smith renewed these teachings in later editions; and when Eugene England asked him in a 1963 private interview whether it was necessary for a faithful Latter-day Saint to believe that black men were denied priesthood because of their activities in the premortal existence, Elder Smith said, “Yes.” But when England asked for scriptural substantiation, Elder Smith reread the relevant passages, reflected, then finally stated, “No, you do not have to believe that Negroes are denied the priesthood because of the pre-existence. I have always assumed that because it was what I was taught, and it made sense, but you don’t have to believe it to be in good standing, because it is not definitely stated in the scriptures. And I have received no revelation on the matter.” Elder Smith added that logically no blacks would receive the priesthood in this life, because that would be inconsistent with God’s perfect justice to those who had previously been denied it in this life. Eugene England, “Are All Alike unto God? Prejudice against Blacks and Women in Popular Mormon Theology,” *Sunstone* 14 (April 1990): 20–21. Elder Smith’s logic seems to require that spirits who would have been Abel’s descendants were deprived of mortal experience until at least the Millennium and could not come to earth through another ancestor. Although Brigham Young originally indicated that blacks would receive the priesthood only after all others had had a chance to receive it, later prophets changed from “last of all” to “sometime.” President McKay answered a reporter, “Not in my lifetime.” “Mixed Messages on the Negro Doctrine: An Interview with Lester Bush,” *Sunstone* 4 (May/June 1979): 13. The McKay statement is illuminated in Robert F. Smith, “President McKay and Reporter,” *Sunstone* 4 (December 1979): 4. These shifts softened the policy a little, since it is easier to accept “not yet” than “at the end of time” or “never.”

9. Young criticized slavery but was content to continue the practice as lawful in Utah. And he said of slavery: “Another curse [in addition to blackness] is pronounced upon the same race—that they should be the ‘servant of servants;’ and they will be, until that curse is removed; and the Abolitionists cannot help it, nor in the least alter that decree. How long is that race to endure the dreadful curse that is upon them? That curse will remain upon them, and they never can hold the Priesthood or share in it until all the other descendents of Adam have received the promises and enjoyed the blessings of the Priesthood and the keys thereof.” Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:290 (October 9, 1859).

10. See, for example, Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:184 (February 18, 1855) and 7:289–91 (October 9, 1859). The interpretation relying on book of Abraham scriptures began after canonization of the Pearl of Great Price in 1880. The Article of Faith that “men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression” emphasized individual responsibility, and Ezekiel 18:20 is

that God is just led to a belief that when God sent spirits to a lineage to which he denied the priesthood, it must have been for some shortcoming of those spirits in the premortal world. Men reasoned that if there were “noble and great” spirits before mortality (Abraham 3:22–26), there must also be spirits of all degrees of lesser quality. But if, in the long run, men and women of all races would be blessed in accordance with their deserts, race is seen to be essentially irrelevant, except perhaps as a test.<sup>11</sup>

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critical of guilt by lineage. See also 2 Nephi 26:33 (black and white are all alike unto God); Moroni 8:12 (little children who die without baptism are alive in Christ). Still, the idea of a blessed or cursed lineage is not foreign to the scriptures. Notable examples are the descendants of Abraham, a blessed lineage (Gen. 22:17–18), and the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon, a cursed lineage (2 Ne. 5:21).

11. A puzzle was posed by the teaching of Joseph Smith that all children of all races who died too young to be morally accountable were heirs of the celestial kingdom, saved through Christ (D&C 137:10) because “they were too pure, too lovely, to live on earth.” Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 196–97. The Prophet also said “they will there enjoy the fullness of that light, glory and intelligence, which is prepared in the celestial kingdom.” Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 200. It would seem that “to inherit the *fullness* is to have exaltation.” Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 675. Apparently such children do not need the testing, probationary experience of mortality. This idea would certainly not seem to square with the view that black infants who die were among the least valiant in the premortal world.

In light of the fact that individual black Latter-day Saints might be as faithful and deserving as any other Church members of the blessings of priesthood and temple, Church leaders were confident that at some future point (often thought of as in or after the Millennium) all faithful black Church members would, in person or through vicarious ordinances, have all priesthood and temple blessings that others might enjoy. If faithful, they would suffer no disadvantage in the eternal world. See also Smith, *Teachings of Joseph Smith*, 200. On December 3, 1854, Brigham Young said the curse would be removed from the posterity of Cain after all others had been redeemed and resurrected. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:143. George Q. Cannon understood that the time would not come until Abel could beget spirit children and they obtain a body. Excerpt from Council minutes, March 11, 1900, Kimball Papers. For Church leaders, the issue was not whether, but when. A First Presidency statement in 1949 quoted Wilford Woodruff as having made the following statement: “The day will come when all that race will be redeemed and possess all the blessings which we now have.” Bush and Mauss, *Neither White nor Black*, 221.

## Origins of the Policy

Historically, the earliest race issue for the Church concerned slavery (see Doctrine and Covenants 134:12). In Missouri, Mormons avoided challenging their slaveholding neighbors' position that blacks were descendants of Cain, rightly held as slaves, even though the scriptural basis was fragmentary. Noah is said to have cursed his grandson Canaan that he would be "a servant of servants" (Gen. 9:25), but even in its strongest interpretation this merely predicts slavery, it does not justify it.

During the Nauvoo years, Joseph Smith announced his opposition to slavery and proposed emancipation by government purchase. This position did not necessarily repudiate the concept of a cursed lineage, but it did repudiate slavery as a justified consequence of lineage. He apparently held the widespread view of his time that blacks as a race had been degraded by slavery, but he also asserted that they could as individuals rise above others if given opportunity.<sup>12</sup> Thirty-five years later, Zebedee Coltrin and Abraham O. Smoot implied that Joseph Smith originated the priesthood restriction,<sup>13</sup> but it is clear that from 1836 on, Elijah Abel, a black man, served as an elder and then a seventy in Nauvoo, with Joseph's full knowledge.

The first known direct statement by a Church President that blacks were denied the priesthood came from Brigham Young in February 1849 when he said of "the Africans": "The curse remained upon them because Cain cut off the lives of Abel. . . . The Lord had cursed Cain's seed with blackness and prohibited them the Priesthood."<sup>14</sup> In 1852, Wilford Woodruff reported that Brigham Young, speaking to the Utah territorial legislature, took personal responsibility for articulating the restriction: "Any man having one drop of the seed of Cane [*sic*] in him Cannot hold the priesthood & if no other Prophet ever spake it Before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ. I know it is true & they know it."<sup>15</sup>

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12. Joseph Smith, "History of Joseph Smith," *Millennial Star* 20 (May 1, 1858): 278; Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 5:217–18; (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

13. Lester E. Bush Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," in Bush and Mauss, *Neither White nor Black*, 79. Smoot's statement seems to relate particularly to the question of ordaining slaves.

14. Journal History of the Church, February 13, 1849, Church History Library; microfilm copy in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. See Journal History of the Church, June 2, 1847, William Appleby to Brigham Young, raising the question.

15. Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 4:97

Thus Brigham Young consistently attributed priesthood denial to a man's ancestry, not to color, appearance, or premortal delinquency, and he held that any Negroid ancestry, however remote, tainted and disqualified a man for priesthood.

By the early twentieth century, when Spencer Kimball came to adulthood, members widely accepted that Joseph Smith originated the restriction (even though there was no substantial evidence to that effect). Many concluded, therefore, that it was the will of God, not a policy subject to human change; that it was explained by conduct during the premortal existence; that it applied to those with the slightest degree of African ancestry; that blacks would be eligible to receive priesthood after everyone else had had a chance—presumably at the end of time; and that any ordination of a black man by mistake would result in denying him use of that priesthood.<sup>16</sup>

### Implementation of Policy

Although the priesthood ban deeply disturbed many members of the Church, particularly as the civil rights movement heightened awareness about the historical horrors of racism, the issue remained abstract for most. So few blacks joined the Church that most white members never had

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(January 4, 1852). Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," 70 n. 85, attributes responsibility to Brigham Young; see also Lester E. Bush Jr., "Whence the Negro Doctrine? A Review of Ten Years of Answers," in Bush and Mauss, *Neither White nor Black*, 193–220. Newell G. Bringham, "An Ambiguous Decision: The Implementation of Mormon Priesthood Denial for the Black Man—a Re-examination," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (Winter 1978): 45–64, agrees. Ronald K. Esplin, "Brigham Young and Priesthood Denial to the Blacks: An Alternate View," *BYU Studies* 19, no. 3 (1979): 394–402, suggests that the restriction was already accepted in Joseph Smith's day and that the 1849 pronouncement by Brigham Young assumes a pre-existing practice. He also knows of no Joseph Smith statement on the subject. Marvin Hill, while agreeing that documentation is not available, suggested in private correspondence that Joseph Smith "was more susceptible to changing moods and changing policies or doctrines than Brigham Young could ever be. . . . But Brigham was committed as part of his role as successor to Joseph to not making changes but following the Prophet's lead." He further suggests that Joseph Smith was simply adopting the prejudice of the times. "The people themselves are fiercely prejudiced and that actually dictates what the leadership does." Lester E. Bush Jr., "History of My Research and Publications on Mormonism and Blacks," 1997 draft, 161, copy in Kimball Papers, quoting Marvin Hill to Lester Bush, June 5, 1976.

16. Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," 79–85. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith laid out this view in his widely read 1931 work, *Way to Perfection*, 97–111.

to deal with the effects of the ban. Those blacks who did accept baptism implicitly accepted their restricted status. Having sought membership in the Church and believing in its prophetic leadership, they found it unseemly to challenge the Church's settled practice. In the face of sometimes insensitive treatment by other members, faithful black members demonstrated amazing patience. In 1974 the First Presidency reiterated that black male members could attend elders quorum meetings in the same way that prospective elders could, and while it would be permissible for black members to hold leadership positions in the auxiliary organizations, preference should be given to calling them to teaching or clerical positions so as to avoid any misunderstanding.<sup>17</sup>

World War II and its aftermath began a cascade of changes that would continue in American society through the rest of the century. Black military units proved their competence and valor, and they expected to take advantage of postwar prosperity and the G.I. Bill. The decade of the 1950s was a period of great ferment that would lead to the next decade's explosion of civil rights action, with both moral and legal challenges to segregation in the South and social inequality elsewhere. Thus, during Spencer's apostleship, the issue of racism was never far from his mind.

In 1947, the First Presidency assigned Heber Meeks, president of the Southern States Mission, to explore the possibility of proselyting in Cuba. Meeks asked his knowledgeable LDS friend, sociologist Lowry Nelson of the University of Minnesota, about the mixed racial picture in Cuba and whether missionaries would be able to avoid conferring priesthood on men with some Negroid ancestry. Nelson sent his reply to both Meeks and to the First Presidency, expressing sharp dismay at the policy. The Presidency responded, "From the days of the Prophet Joseph even until now, it has been the doctrine of the Church, never questioned by any of the Church leaders, that the Negroes are not entitled to the full blessings of the Gospel." Its explanation, they said, was to be found in the premortal existence.<sup>18</sup> In 1952, Nelson, still unable to reconcile this Church policy with his understanding of the gospel, published an article critical of the

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17. First Presidency (Kimball, Tanner, Romney) to Ezra Taft Benson, May 7, 1974, Kimball Papers.

18. Armand L. Mauss, "The Fading of the Pharaoh's Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban against Blacks in the Mormon Church," *Dialogue* 14 (Fall 1981): 11; Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 183–84, 190; John J. Stewart, *Mormonism and the Negro* (Provo, Utah: Bookmark, 1960), 46–47. Special attention is given to the role of David O. McKay in Gregory A. Prince, "David O. McKay and Blacks: Building the Foundation for the 1978 Revelation," *Dialogue* 35 (Spring 2002): 145.

policy in *The Nation*, drawing national attention.<sup>19</sup>

In 1949, George Albert Smith's administration began sending out a consistent statement in response to inquiries. It followed the pattern set in earlier private correspondence by the First Presidency and by David O. McKay, who had been a counselor in the First Presidency since 1934: "It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord, on which is founded the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization, to the effect that Negroes . . . are not entitled to the priesthood at the present time,"<sup>20</sup> based on "some eternal law with which man is yet unfamiliar" and by which men's place and condition of birth and rights to priesthood must be explained; accordingly, "the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality."<sup>21</sup> The statement went beyond the evidence both in claiming a "direct commandment" from the Lord and in saying that the doctrine came "from the days of [the Church's] organization."

When McKay became Church President in April 1951, he continued to respond to queries with this same statement.<sup>22</sup> But behind the scenes, application of the policy was changing to some degree. In 1948, during the George Albert Smith administration, priesthood leaders in the Philippines



President David O. McKay. Courtesy Church History Library. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

19. Lowry Nelson, "Mormons and the Negro," *The Nation* 174 (May 24, 1952): 488.

20. David O. McKay, letter dated November 3, 1947, published in Llewelyn R. McKay, *Home Memories of President David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 226–31. See also August 17, 1949, statement, quoted in Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," 221 (127 n. 199 for proper date).

21. McKay, *Home Memories*, 230.

22. In 1951, by President McKay, with his counselors Richards and Clark, and again between 1959 and 1961, by McKay, Clark, and Moyle. Quoted in Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," 46–47, and various other sources.

were authorized by the First Presidency to ordain Negrito men to the priesthood. These were native men with black skin who had no known African ancestry.<sup>23</sup> Descent from black Africans only—not skin color or other racial characteristics—became the disqualifying factor.<sup>24</sup>

In 1954, President McKay is said to have appointed a special committee of the Twelve to study the issue. They concluded that the priesthood ban had no clear basis in scripture but that Church members were not prepared for change.<sup>25</sup>

In 1954, in an administrative decision, President McKay discontinued the practice in South Africa of requiring converts to trace all lines of their ancestry out of Africa as a way of establishing they had no Negroid forebears.<sup>26</sup> Four years later, in 1958, he authorized Church leaders to ordain

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23. Joseph Fielding Smith, in the Philippines to dedicate the land for proselyting, observed native peoples who appeared Negroid. Despite this he said, in the dedicatory prayer, “I bless the *native* inhabitants both black and white with the blessings of the gospel and the Priesthood—Amen.” When asked about it then, he responded, upset, “That is what the Lord required me to do.” He confirmed several years later that the event occurred and said, “I would not want it to be supposed that I gave the Priesthood to the negroes.” H. Grant Heaton to Spencer Palmer, June 11, 1975, Kimball Papers.

24. Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaoh’s Curse,” 36 n. 14; Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 68 n. 209.

25. Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 183, based on Arrington hearing a 1954 talk by Adam S. Bennion, a member of the committee. The Bennion Papers collected First Presidency minutes and letters relating to the priesthood policy, apparently as part of that review of the subject. The Kimball Papers include such a collection, not identified as to source. Compare Bush, “History of My Research,” 26; and Lester E. Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview’ (1973): Context and Reflections, 1998,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25 (Spring 1999): 245. G. Homer Durham, son-in-law of Apostle John A. Widtsoe, had mentioned such an investigating committee to Nicholas Udall, although Udall’s memory is that the committee convened during the George Albert Smith administration. Nicholas Udall, interview by author, July 6, 2001.

26. Prince, “David O. McKay and Blacks,” 146; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 840 (January 17, 1954); Mary Lythgoe Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian* (Salt Lake City: Dialogue Foundation, 1995), 165; Bush, “History of My Research,” 9 n. 27: “He thought that unless the requirement was changed the increasing inability of converts to accomplish this genealogical task would eventually leave the Church without sufficient men to assume the necessary leadership roles. He also thought that in the overwhelming majority of South African cases there was no black ancestry, and that errors subsequently discovered could simply be corrected.” Leonard J. Arrington, *Diary*, June 12, 1978, 17, cites that President McKay made the change “without consulting anyone.” Leonard J. Arrington



Fijian men to the priesthood based on his understanding that, despite their blackness, they were not related to Africans.<sup>27</sup> In 1965, that principle of assuming a male convert qualified to receive the priesthood unless there was evidence to the contrary was applied specifically in Brazil and soon afterward applied generally.<sup>28</sup> Candidates were no longer required to provide pedigrees. This policy was an accommodation to Brazilian culture. While American missionaries had traditionally treated race as a matter of genealogy, Brazilians identified race with appearance. In some areas of Brazil, 80 percent of the population was thought to have at least some traces of Negro ancestry,<sup>29</sup> but records often failed to provide evidence one way or the other. Consequently, as the Church grew, the native local leaders who took over from the missionaries were increasingly less concerned with genealogy. They resolved uncertainty about lineage when there was no strong Negroid appearance by ascertaining whether a patriarchal blessing designated the person to be “of Israel” or by obtaining a decision from

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Papers, Leonard J. Arrington Historical Archives, Utah State University Libraries, Logan Utah. These diaries are sealed until 2010. Information cited here and in notes 53, 118, 166, 180, 189, 194, 196, 203, 206, and 230 comes from photocopied pages of the diaries sent by Arrington to the author. Prince, “David O. McKay and Blacks,” 147 n. 6, says that McKay notified his counselors and the Twelve after the fact and received their endorsement. David O. McKay to Stephen L Richards and J. Reuben Clark Jr., January 19, 1954; and David O. McKay, Diaries, November 4, 1965, Special Collections, Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, photocopies provided by Prince.

27. Lester Bush to the editor, *Dialogue* 18 (Fall 1985): 4–6 (Fijians had been in and out of the category earlier); R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 502 (missionaries first went to Fiji itself in 1954; McKay 1958 decision); Norman Douglas, *Latter-day Saint Missions and Missionaries in Polynesia, 1844–1960* (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1974), 363–79 (appendix A); and see Norman Douglas, “The Sons of Lehi and the Seed of Cain: Racial Myths in Mormon Scripture and Their Relevance to the Pacific Islands,” *Journal of Religious History* 8 (June 1974): 90–104. According to Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaoh’s Curse,” 12 n. 14, West Irians (indigenous inhabitants of the western half of the island of New Guinea) were allowed priesthood by 1971–72. It appears that the decision was made group by group.

28. Mark L. Grover, “Religious Accommodation in the Land of Racial Democracy: Mormon Priesthood and Black Brazilians,” *Dialogue* 17 (Fall 1984): 31 n. 18, says that the abandonment of genealogical proof was intended to be Church-wide in 1954 but was applied in Brazil only in 1965 and announced more generally in 1967. See also Bush to the editor, 4.

29. “Racism at Carnival Ignites Cultural and Legal Fireworks,” *Deseret News*, February 6, 2000, A17.

the stake president or First Presidency, case by case.<sup>30</sup> These techniques followed President McKay's approach, evincing more concern that no eligible person be excluded than that no ineligible person be ordained.<sup>31</sup>

### Prospects for Change

Most General Authorities tried to avoid public discussion of the topic.<sup>32</sup> Hugh B. Brown, counselor to President McKay from 1961 to 1970, appears to have been the leader most open to change. He urged that the priesthood restriction could be dropped as a matter of Church administrative policy without requiring a specific revelation. He reasoned that if the restriction had not come by revelation,<sup>33</sup> it could be vacated without revelation. But despite his strongly held views and powerful influence, President Brown's position did not then prevail.<sup>34</sup>

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30. Grover, "Religious Accommodation," 32.

31. Grover, "Religious Accommodation," 28. W. Grant Bangertter, former mission president in Brazil, said: "We knew many people had received the priesthood who, perhaps if we had known the full facts, would not have been ordained." Vern Anderson, "Priesthood Ban Was Nearly Lifted Nine Years Earlier," *Provo Daily Herald*, June 5, 1988, 20.

32. In 1962, President Brown suggested to the First Presidency that perhaps blacks could be given at least the Aaronic Priesthood. Bush, "History of My Research," 2 n. 2, citing McKay, Office Journal, January 9, 1962, and June 7, 1963, copy in possession of author; Prince, "David O. McKay and Blacks," 148 n. 15, cites McKay, Office Journal, October 11, 1962, for a similar reference. In June 1963, a few months after the decision to send missionaries to Nigeria, the *New York Times* quoted President Brown as saying, "We are in the midst of a survey looking toward the possibility of admitting Negroes [to the priesthood]. . . . Believing as we do in divine revelation through the President of the church, we all await his decision." Wallace Turner, "Mormons Consider Ending Bar on Full Membership for Negro," *New York Times*, June 7, 1963, 17. The statement created a flurry of excitement and anticipation. President Brown afterward said he had been misquoted, but Church media representative Ted Cannon, who had been present, thought not. President Brown may have been referring to his private suggestion that Nigerian male converts might be ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood, or he could have been overly optimistic that President McKay would receive inspiration to change the policy. Besides Elder Brown, one of the few General Authorities to comment publicly was Joseph Fielding Smith, who stated on October 22, 1963, that he expected no change. Bush, "History of My Research," 2; Spencer W. Kimball to author, June 15, 1963, and about June 21, 1963.

33. There has never been any suggestion that the restriction was based on an unpublished revelation. Bush, "History of My Research," 26; Bush, "Writing 'Mormonism's Negro Doctrine,'" 245.

34. Bush, "History of My Research," 118.

President McKay sometimes said in private conversations that the restriction on priesthood was not a doctrine but was a policy and subject to change.<sup>35</sup> Although one might assume that this “policy rather than doctrine” distinction would make change easy, President McKay himself apparently meant only that the rule or practice was not established by direct revelation. He did not mean that change could come by the simple administrative decision of Church leaders. He maintained the position that the long-established policy was inspired and that change would require divine intervention.<sup>36</sup> President McKay desired and sought such revelation, but he did not receive it. He told Elder Marion D. Hanks that “he had pleaded and pleaded with the Lord but had not had the answer he sought.”<sup>37</sup> Leonard Arrington reported a statement by Elder Adam S. Bennion in 1954 that President McKay had prayed for change “without result and finally concluded the time was not yet ripe.”<sup>38</sup>

Even so, with the concurrence and encouragement of his counselors, President McKay took several important steps toward establishing missionary work in black Africa and made more liberal the interpretation

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35. Sterling McMurrin reported that President McKay made such a statement to him in 1954. Sterling M. McMurrin and L. Jackson Newell, *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 199–201. McMurrin had made the same report in 1968. Llewellyn McKay in 1968 confirmed this as his understanding of his father’s position. Bush, “History of My Research,” 6. About May 1964, Paul Dunn asked President McKay, “What about the blacks?” President McKay replied, “Paul, that has never been a doctrine, but always a policy.” Paul H. Dunn, interview by author, August 8, 1996; Paul Dunn, interview by Gregory Prince, May 21, 1996, copy in Kimball Papers.

36. Bush, “History of My Research,” 7, 13; Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,’” 236–39. President McKay never expressed doubt about the disqualifying effect of black African ancestry and about its justification in the premortal existence. Bush, “History of My Research,” 8 n. 20; Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,’” 240. President McKay said to a meeting of missionaries in South Africa, January 17, 1954, that blacks could not be ordained “until the Lord gives us another revelation changing this practice.” Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 840; McKay, Office Journal, September 10, 1969, photocopy of entry provided by Gregory A. Prince in which Alvin R. Dyer referred to a 1961 statement by David O. McKay that priesthood denial could only be changed by revelation. Prince, “David O. McKay and Blacks,” 153 n. 39, cites an interview with Paul H. Dunn, February 18, 1995, in which Dunn said he asked President McKay whether blacks might, in his lifetime, hold the priesthood and received the reply, “The question sounds like I make the decision. When the Lord tells me, then we’ll do it.”

37. Marion D. Hanks to author, January 30, 1997.

38. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian*, 183.

and application of the priesthood policy.<sup>39</sup> In individual cases of genuine uncertainty, he believed in erring on the side of compassion. However, he held consistently to the policy that Negroid ancestry, once established, was disqualifying.

### Interest in the Church by Black Africans

The first LDS missionaries in South Africa arrived in 1853 and proselyted largely among the British settlers, although a few blacks were baptized.<sup>40</sup> The mission closed in 1865 and reopened in 1903 after the Boer War and again concentrated on teaching white settlers.<sup>41</sup> While in South Africa there was a Church presence but very little interest among blacks, Ghana and Nigeria had no Church organization but produced a stream of letters begging for missionaries to come and teach large numbers of blacks already converted to the Restoration message.

In 1960, Glen G. Fisher, newly released president of the South African Mission, stopped in Nigeria to visit groups that were using the Church's name. He reported to the First Presidency that their faith was genuine. He urged sending missionaries to baptize believers and to organize branches.<sup>42</sup> LaMar Williams, who as secretary to the Church Missionary Committee answered letters that came from Africa, was sent to Nigeria in 1961. He was met at the airport by ten pastors he had been corresponding with and discovered that they were unaware of one another. Williams returned with the names of fifteen thousand unbaptized converts who were waiting for the Church to come to them.<sup>43</sup> No further action was taken until

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39. Edwin B. Firmage, ed., *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh Brown* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books 1999), 142–43, aligns President Brown with these changes.

40. Kate B. Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1965), 49, refers to at least four blacks.

41. Newell G. Bringhurst, "Mormonism in Black Africa: Changing Attitudes and Practices, 1830–1981," *Sunstone* 6 (May/June 1981): 15–21.

42. E. Dale LeBaron, "Black Africa: Prepared and Waiting for the Glorious Day," *Mormon Heritage Magazine* 1, no. 1 (March/April 1994): 20; E. Dale LeBaron, "The Dawning of a New Day in Africa," *Utah County Journal*, May 27, 1989, 12, also published as E. Dale LeBaron, "Revelation on the Priesthood," in *Out of Obscurity: The LDS Church in the Twentieth Century* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 177.

43. R. Scott Lloyd, "Revelation Rewarded Those Who Waited," *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, December 18, 1999, 4–5; E. Dale LeBaron, "African Converts without Baptism: A Unique and Inspiring Chapter in Church History," *Brigham Young University 1998–99 Speeches* (Provo, Utah: BYU Publications and Graphics, 1999), 58.

Christmas 1962, when newly ordained Apostle N. Eldon Tanner spent two weeks in the Lagos area, visiting three groups using the Church's name, one of which claimed four thousand baptized adherents. When he reminded them that they did not have authority to baptize, their leader said he understood that, but he wanted the people to feel they belonged to the Church while they waited for the proper authority. Elder Tanner reported "cautious optimism" to the First Presidency.<sup>44</sup>

Despite their misgivings about proselyting in an area where the lack of priesthood leadership would create a serious problem, the First Presidency felt keenly that they could not deny the Restoration message to those openly yearning for it. In early 1963, President McKay called LaMar and Nyal B. Williams and four other couples to serve missions in Nigeria. He set Williams apart as presiding elder of Nigeria with tentative plans to establish Sunday Schools headed by Nigerians but supervised by white missionaries who would teach and administer ordinances. They hoped eventually to set up schools and medical facilities.<sup>45</sup> The plan, however, foundered when a March 1963 editorial in the newspaper *Nigerian Outlook* condemned the Church as racist and the Nigerian government denied visas to the missionaries.<sup>46</sup>

Williams visited Nigeria in 1964 and 1965 to negotiate for visas, but during the second trip, a telegram recalled him to meet with the First Presidency. They informed him that they did not know why, but they felt it right to discontinue the effort for the present.<sup>47</sup> Spencer Kimball, then serving on the Missionary Executive Committee, asked Williams to "keep

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44. G. Homer Durham, *N. Eldon Tanner: His Life and Service* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 193–94; Edward L. Kimball, Journal, September 6, 1979; James P. Bell, *In the Strength of the Lord: The Life and Teachings of James E. Faust* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 122, says there were four groups in Nigeria and one in Ghana with 456 members. Alexander B. Morrison, *The Dawning of a Brighter Day* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 84, says Ralph Walker also visited Nigeria.

45. James B. Allen, "Would-Be Saints: West Africa before the 1978 Priesthood Revelation," *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991): 229.

46. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 190; Bringhurst, "Mormonism in Black Africa," 18.

47. President Tanner reportedly told Williams that the First Presidency did not know why he had been recalled, but they soon would know. Williams brought the names and addresses of fifteen thousand Africans in some sixty congregations who had expressed an interest in the Church. E. Dale LeBaron, "Mormonism in Black Africa," in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, ed. Douglas J. Davies (New York: Cassell, 1996), 81; LeBaron, "African Converts without Baptism," 59.

in touch” with the believers.<sup>48</sup> Almost immediately, in January 1966, the Biafran War broke out. For the next five years, civil strife kept Nigeria in turmoil. Even after the war ended, political instability continued until a peaceful military coup in July 1975.<sup>49</sup>

Developments in Ghana closely paralleled those in Nigeria. In fact, the International Mission received more letters from Ghana than from any other country without active missionary proselyting.

### Civil Rights Movement

As awareness of the priesthood policy grew, many white potential investigators found the priesthood ban offensive and refused to listen to the missionaries. The escalation of the civil rights movement during the 1960s sensitized Americans to racial bigotry, and they found it difficult to see the Church’s prohibition on black ordination as anything else.

Protest against the Church policy took many forms—rejection of missionaries, public demonstrations, even sabotage. In 1962, a small bomb damaged the east doors of the Salt Lake Temple and blew out some windows.<sup>50</sup> While no one claimed responsibility, many people assumed it was motivated by opposition to the priesthood policy. The Utah chapter of NAACP threatened to picket October general conference in 1963 but dropped the plan when President Hugh B. Brown indicated in a meeting with NAACP leaders that he would read a statement supporting full civil rights.<sup>51</sup>

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48. Allen, “Would-Be Saints,” 239.

49. Allen, “Would-Be Saints,” 237.

50. “Police Checking for Leads in Temple Blast,” *Deseret News*, November 14, 1962, B1; “Blast Damages Salt Lake Temple—Believed Work of Vandals,” *Deseret News*, November 15, 1962, B1.

51. The matter was complicated by Elder Benson’s worries in a time of Cold War tensions that the civil rights movement was used by the Communists to promote revolution and eventual takeover of America. Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 78, 81, 83–85, 98–100, 449 n. 141; Russell Chandler, “Mormons: New Test of Their Faith, Change Is in the Wind,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1983, 3 (1967 statement); Ezra Taft Benson, in *Official Report of the 135th Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965), 121–25; Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 169–70, quotes Elder Benson’s 1967 talk as it appeared in “President McKay Emphasizes Individual,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 7, 1965, A5. Passages referring to “the dangerous Civil Rights agitation in Mississippi” and to “traitors in the Church” do not appear in either the April conference report or the issue of the *Improvement Era* reporting the talk.

Congress adopted the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol occurred in 1965, and that same year three hundred protesters paraded to the Church Office Building demanding that the Church endorse a civil rights bill then languishing in the Utah legislature. The Church did not make a public statement, but the legislation passed.<sup>52</sup>

Between 1968 and 1970 at least a dozen demonstrations or violent acts occurred when BYU athletic teams played other schools. Opposing players refused to participate or wore black armbands. One spectator threw acid, and another threw a Molotov cocktail that failed to ignite. Stanford severed athletic relations with BYU.<sup>53</sup>

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52. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 181; Jerome K. Full, "House Okehs First Utah Rights Move," *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 5, 1965, A1; O. N. Malmquist, "Utah Senate Passes Rights Bill on Accommodations," *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 29, 1965, A1; M. DeMar Teuscher, "Racial Bill Goes to Governor," *Deseret News*, March 10, 1965, A1.

53. These athletics-related demonstrations generated enormous negative publicity for the school and the Church. Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 299–301; Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 181–82. Jeffery O. Johnson, "Change and Growth: The Mormon Church and the 1960s," *Sunstone* 17 (June 1994): 28; *Evans v. State Bd. of Agriculture*, 325 F. Supp. 1353 (D. Colo. 1971); *Williams v. Eaton*, 333 F. Supp. 107 (D. Wyo. 1971) (to let players at state university protest during football game religious practice of opponents would be impermissible mixing of state and religion), affirmed 443 F.2d 422 (10th Cir. 1972). Bruce Blumell reported acid incident at University of Washington in early 1970. Arrington, *Diary*, June 12, 1978, 10. See also Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 857, 859. Brian Walton, "A University's Dilemma: B.Y.U. and Blacks," *Dialogue* 6 (Spring 1971): 35, reports that a fact-finding group from the University of Arizona found BYU students neither more nor less racist than other schools.

Heber G. Wolsey, BYU's public relations director, visited several universities where demonstrators planned protests and defused the situation, in most cases, by explaining the Church's position on civil rights more fully. Heber G. Wolsey, "PR Man for a Prophet," unpublished manuscript, 1994, in Wolsey's possession. He took with him Darius Gray, a black Church member. BYU ran a full-page ad, "Minorities, Civil Rights, and BYU," in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 5, 1970, A18, to publicize its stand in favor of civil rights for all citizens. The protests motivated a meeting in New York in February 1970 of President Lee and four Apostles with several advisers that led to the creation in the summer of 1972 of an External Communications Department, later called the Department of Public Communications, to deal proactively with publicity and protest. Wendell Ashton served as the first director. Francis M. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball: Resolute Disciple, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 262; L. Brent Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet and Seer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 433–35.

## Changing Perceptions of the Policy in the Church

The possibility for changing the policy increased subtly as scholarly efforts to trace the restriction to its source showed no certain beginnings and shaky reasoning in support of the practice. A 1967 article by Armand L. Mauss pointed out the speculative nature of the explanations based on premortal conduct and the “curse of Cain.” He concluded that the policy rested on tradition, not on scriptural mandate.<sup>54</sup>

A 1970 book by University of Utah student Steven Taggart proposed that the policy began in Missouri in the 1830s as an expedient for dealing with the slavery question among slaveholders.<sup>55</sup> Lester E. Bush responded in 1973 with an exhaustive monograph-length study, concluding that the earliest clear evidence of priesthood denial dates only to Brigham Young.<sup>56</sup>

As the doctrinal foundations of the policy grew increasingly problematic, members focused on its social aspects. Armand Mauss, Eugene

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54. Mauss, “Mormonism and the Negro,” 19–39.

55. Steven Taggart, *Mormonism’s Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1970). This book grew out of an article for *Dialogue* that Taggart shelved in favor of the book, published by his family after his untimely death in 1969. The First Presidency discussed the Taggart article draft September 10, 1969. Bush, “History of My Research,” 12–14; and Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,’” 238–40; both quote from and cite President McKay’s diaries. President Brown firmly believed this “Missouri hypothesis.” Edwin B. Firmage, “Hugh B. Brown in His Final Years,” *Sunstone* 11 (November 1987): 7–8.

56. Lester E. Bush Jr., “A Commentary on Stephen Taggart’s *Mormonism’s Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins*,” *Dialogue* 4 (Winter 1969): 86–103; Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 11–68, 75. Bush suggests also that the Church should feel no embarrassment that a nineteenth-century prophet held nineteenth-century secular views about race. Bush, “History of My Research,” 108. Bush suggests that even if Joseph did not believe in racial equality, he did not carry that view so far as to deny all black men priesthood. Bush, “History of My Research,” 162.

Bush further points out that Brigham Young did not use the premortal-conduct rationale that later Church leaders saw as crucial to the “justice” of the policy. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 75.

General Authorities knew of these publications. Lester Bush sent Marion Hanks, Hartman Rector, and President Brown copies of his review of Taggart’s work. Elder Packer received a draft of the 1973 article. Bush, “History of My Research,” 48, 52–53; Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,’” 250–55, 266. And Edward Ashment, then a Church employee, told Bush that he saw Elder McConkie reading the *Dialogue* issue featuring the Bush article. Bush, “History of My Research,” 133 n. 2; Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,’” 267.



England, and Elder Marion D. Hanks, among others, hypothesized that change in the policy perhaps depended on LDS members' willingness to accept black men and women in true fellowship.<sup>57</sup> Lowell Bennion, charismatic Institute of Religion teacher at the University of Utah, felt that members could properly pray for change. In 1963, he pointed out: "God's revelations . . . depend upon our minds, our eagerness, upon our search, upon our questions, upon our moral disturbances, if you will, upon our needs. . . . It may be that the Lord can't get through to us sometimes on things. Therefore we ought to be thinking and searching and praying even over this Negro problem."<sup>58</sup> This position accepted that God allows people—even Church leaders—to make mistakes.

But others thought it presumptuous for members to do anything but wait patiently and faithfully defend the Church's position. Spencer Kimball, to whom loyalty was an article of faith, placed himself in this latter group. In two letters to his son Ed in 1963, he explained: "These smart members who would force the issue, and there are many of them, cheapen the issue and certainly bring into contempt the sacred principle of revelation and divine authority." Continuing the dialogue a few days later, he added:

The conferring of priesthood, and declining to give the priesthood is not a matter of my choice nor of President McKay's. It is the Lord's program. . . . When the Lord is ready to relax the restriction, it will come whether there is pressure or not. This is my faith. Until then, I shall try to fight on. . . . I have always prided myself on being about as unprejudiced

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57. Mauss, "Mormonism and the Negro," 38: "Perhaps . . . the chief deterrent to a divine mandate for change is not to be found in any inadequacy among Negroes, but rather in the unreadiness of the Mormon whites, with our heritage of racial folklore; it is perhaps we whites who have a long way to go before 'the Negroes will be ready' for the priesthood." Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian*, 183, reports a 1954 talk by Adam S. Bennion suggesting that Church members were not ready. Eugene England, in "The Mormon Cross," *Dialogue* 8 (spring 1973): 82–85, urged that God was waiting for the general membership of the Church to change. See also Eugene England, "Becoming a World Religion: Blacks, the Poor—All of Us," *Sunstone* 21 (June/July 1998): 57. Marion D. Hanks said, much later, "For me it was never that blacks [were unqualified but that] the rest of us had to be brought to a condition of spiritual maturity . . . to meet the moment of change with grace and goodness." Marion D. Hanks to author, January 30, 1997. In 1964, President McKay explained that to change the policy then would be divisive in the Church, like the question among early Christians of preaching to the Gentiles. Dunn, interview by author, August 8, 1996. Matthew 19:8 explained that Moses prescribed divorce "because of the hardness of your hearts." And God gave Israel a king because of the people's insistence, not because it was a good thing to do (1 Sam. 8:18–22).

58. Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion*, 249.

as to race as any man. I think my work with the minorities would prove that, but I am so completely convinced that the prophets know what they are doing and the Lord knows what he is doing, that I am willing to rest it there.<sup>59</sup>

Church leaders felt themselves under attack, unable to change a policy that left many of them deeply uncomfortable. In January 1970, after several years of physical incapacity, President McKay died. During these last years, Presidents Brown and Tanner discussed with University of Utah philosophy professor Sterling McMurrin, who was actively associated with the NAACP, whether the First Presidency should make another statement supporting civil rights for blacks that would go further than the 1963 statement. President Brown was dubious, believing that a few of the Brethren would resist another statement.<sup>60</sup> Brown also reportedly urged the Twelve to make an administrative decision to change the priesthood policy but was thwarted.<sup>61</sup> As an Apostle, Spencer was undoubtedly involved in discussions of these issues, but his journal makes no reference to them. He would have been aware of their divisiveness, leading him to strive hard for unity when the question came up during his presidency.

Elder Lee, convinced that the ban was doctrinally fixed and wishing to reaffirm the traditional Church position, persuaded Presidents Brown and Tanner to send a letter to that effect on December 15, 1969, to bishops and stake presidents.<sup>62</sup> After news of the in-house statement became

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59. Spencer W. Kimball to author, June [21?] 1963. The letter is dated only June 1963 but responds to a letter of June 18. The ellipses within the McMurrin quotation are by Spencer W. Kimball. Compare Juan Henderson, "A Time for Healing: Official Declaration 2," in *Out of Obscurity*, 151–160.

60. President Brown mentioned by name only Harold B. Lee. McMurrin, interview by author, January 17, 1989.

61. The policy change was thwarted primarily because of Harold B. Lee's strong opposition. President Brown's grandson says that when Elder Lee was away President Brown had persuaded the Twelve to his point of view. But Elder Lee, on his return, obtained reconsideration of and withdrawal from such agreement. Firmage, "Hugh B. Brown in His Final Years," 8; Firmage, *Abundant Life*, 142–43. However, L. Brent Goates, biographer of President Lee, expressed doubt that any such agreement was reached. L. Brent Goates, interview by author, February 9, 1998. Prince, "David O. McKay and Blacks," 151 n. 27, cites Ernest L. Wilkinson, *Journal*, October 27, 1969, which mentions he was told by N. Eldon Tanner that President Lee was inflexible in opposing change and that in any meeting on the issue "others, regardless of their feelings, would go with Brother Lee." Copy provided by Prince. The meeting minutes that could answer this question are not available.

62. "Letter of First Presidency Clarifies Church's Position on the Negro," *Improvement Era* 73 (February 1970): 70–71 (signed only by the two counselors,

widely known, the full First Presidency and Twelve jointly signed the statement and released it publicly on January 10, 1970, just a week before President McKay's death. Like the 1949 statement, it attributed the policy to Joseph Smith and explained that the reason for the exclusion "antedates man's mortal existence." Both statements also asserted that the ban would someday be terminated. But while the 1949 statement said that blacks would receive the priesthood "when all the rest of the children [of God] have received their blessings in the holy priesthood," the 1969 statement omitted this idea and pointed out that the Church is founded in "the principle of continuous revelation" that could change the policy. The 1949 statement referred to a "curse on the seed of Cain," while the 1969 statement said only that the restriction was "for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man." In commenting on the statement, President Brown was quoted in the *Salt Lake Tribune* as saying that the policy "will change in the not too distant future."<sup>63</sup>

Despite the now-official, public "we don't know" position, most leaders still privately stood by the traditional twentieth-century explanation that a spirit's premortal conduct justified priesthood restriction in mortality.<sup>64</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, who succeeded President McKay, was among those most consistently supporting the traditional views, as was Harold B. Lee, who became his First Counselor.

In June 1971, three black Mormons in Salt Lake City, Ruffin Bridgeforth, Darius Gray, and Eugene Orr, petitioned the Church for help in keeping and reactivating the relatively small number of black members in the city. A committee of three Apostles, Elders Gordon B. Hinckley, Thomas S. Monson, and Boyd K. Packer, met with them a number of times. They suggested organizing an auxiliary unit, assigned to the Salt Lake

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Hugh B. Brown and N. Eldon Tanner). President Brown signed reluctantly and then only after insisting that it include a statement about civil rights. Firmage, "Hugh B. Brown in His Final Years," 8; Firmage, *Abundant Life*, 142-43; Goates, *Harold B. Lee*, 379-80; Goates, interview; Prince, "David O. McKay and Blacks," 150-52.

63. "LDS Leader Says Curb on Priesthood to Ease," *Salt Lake Tribune*, December 25, 1969, 4D; Bush, "History of My Research," 17. President Brown later qualified the statement as only his personal opinion. Bush, "Writing 'Mormonism's Negro Doctrine,'" 241; Bush, "History of My Research," 15 n. 38. He also said, "As to the consensus, the Brethren are all united now that the time has not come until the President speaks on it." Richard D. Poll, "Apostle Extraordinary—Hugh B. Brown (1883-1975)," *Dialogue* 10 (Spring 1975-76): 70.

64. Bush, "History of My Research," 45.

Liberty Stake.<sup>65</sup> In October, Bridgeforth, a member for eighteen years, was set apart as the president of the Genesis Group, with Gray and Orr as his counselors. Genesis members attended sacrament meeting in their geographical wards but met together monthly to hear speakers and bear testimony and weekly for Relief Society, Primary, and youth meetings. Genesis served important social and religious functions, providing opportunities to serve and lead that were otherwise unavailable.<sup>66</sup>

Spencer and Camilla happily accepted an invitation to attend a Genesis picnic, visiting with the adults and holding little children on their laps.<sup>67</sup> While Spencer was President of the Twelve, he personally took Christmas fruit baskets to the homes of the Genesis presidency.<sup>68</sup>

When Harold B. Lee succeeded Joseph Fielding Smith in July 1972, in his first press conference he took the position on the priesthood ban articulated in the 1969 statement he had drafted: “For those who don’t believe in modern revelation there is no adequate explanation. Those who

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65. The first meeting took place on October 19, 1971, with 175 in attendance. Leitha Orr, Journal excerpts, in possession of Darius Gray. Margaret Blair Young and Darius Aidan Gray, *The Last Mile of the Way* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2003), 376–80, 388–90, 397–404. Lloyd, “Revelation Rewarded Those Who Waited,” 4–5. George M. McCune, *Gordon B. Hinkley: Shoulder for the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1996), 466, notes that Elder Hinckley was a member of a “Special Committee on Church Activities for African Races,” presumably this committee.

66. Darius Gray, in *Utah’s African-American Voices*, KUED-TV, October 19, 1998; Darius Gray to author, September 24, 2000; Joseph Freeman, *In the Lord’s Due Time* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 101; Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion*, 254; Goates, *Harold B. Lee*, 380; Embry, *Black Saints in a White Church*, 182–85. The idea for something like the Genesis Group had been suggested in the Quorum of the Twelve at least as early as 1954. Statement of Spencer W. Kimball to Twelve, December 17, 1954, Kimball Papers. Joseph Fielding Smith, as President of the Twelve, transmitted such a recommendation in a letter to President McKay and counselors, March 30, 1955, copy in Kimball Papers. The letter reported that a survey in the Salt Lake area showed about fifteen active black members and perhaps 130 others who were inactive or were family of members. After a brief lapse in interest after the 1978 revelation, the group resumed its activity. Ruffin Bridgeforth led the group until his death in 1997, when Darius Gray was called by the First Presidency to succeed him and served until 2003. Genesis meets monthly and has Primary and Young Adult activity programs, as well as Relief Society compassionate service.

67. Ruffin Bridgeforth, interview in unreleased video, “General Authority Interviews,” Bonneville, March 27, 1980, transcript in Kimball Papers; Young and Gray, *Last Mile*, 371–72, 381.

68. Darius Gray, interview by author, October 9, 1996; Darius Gray to author, June 16, 2000. He was counselor to Bridgeforth. The date would be 1971. Young and Gray, *Last Mile*, 408.

do understand revelation stand by and wait until the Lord speaks.”<sup>69</sup> A few months later at another media interview, he gave a more positive response: “It’s only a matter of time before the black achieves full status in the Church. We must believe in the justice of God. The black will achieve full status, we’re just waiting for that time.” He proposed no time schedule and reiterated that change would have to come through revelation.<sup>70</sup>

The issue unquestionably occupied President Lee’s mind.<sup>71</sup> For example, he asked Marion D. Hanks to describe what answer he gave as president of the Temple Square Mission and elsewhere when asked about the Church policy on race and priesthood.<sup>72</sup> Like the Presidents before him, President Lee responded to specific issues as they arose. He approved a general policy that black children could be sealed to nonblack adoptive parents. President McKay had previously approved such sealings on an individual basis.<sup>73</sup>

Doctrine aside, practical problems persisted—how to respond to letters arriving from Nigeria and Ghana year after year pleading for missionaries, how to deal with the widespread charge of racial bigotry, and how to respond to investigators.

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69. Goates, *Harold B. Lee*, 465.

70. Goates, *Harold B. Lee*, 506, quoting UPI interview published November 16, 1972. AP religion specialist George W. Cornell, “Remembering a Brother,” in *He Changed My Life*, ed. and arr. L. Brent Goates (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 216, quoted Elder Lee as saying on the issue that “it was going to change when God willed it. He always attached that qualification.” Repeatedly he added that “the barrier would be removed.” Bruce R. McConkie, the one new Apostle President Lee called, had articulated in strongest terms the traditional view in successive editions of his book *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 476; 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 108, 114, 343, 526, 616.

71. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian*, and Arrington to author, February 10 and June 15, 1998, assert that President Lee, shortly before his death, sought the Lord’s will on the question of blacks and priesthood during “three days and nights [of] fasting in the upper room of the temple, . . . but the only answer he received was ‘not yet.’” Arrington relied on an unidentified person close to President Lee, but President Lee’s son-in-law and biographer found no record of such an incident and thought it doubtful. Goates, interview.

72. Marion D. Hanks to author, January 30, 1997. President Lee did not comment on Elder Hanks’s response, which was that change awaited whites’ coming “to a condition of spiritual maturity” and would come “when the President of the Church felt the strength of the Lord to direct him.” Marion D. Hanks to author.

73. Bush, “History of My Research,” 135, quoting Hartman Rector. However, the policy seems not to have been fully settled because President Kimball also later approved such sealings individually. Spencer W. Kimball, *Journal*, November 30, 1976 and June 2, 1977.

In December 1973, President Lee died unexpectedly. The thorny issue of black restriction passed on to his successor, Spencer W. Kimball.

### Spiritual Premonitions of Others

After the revelation, a number of people identified unusual experiences that in retrospect signaled the change to come. In a 1973 patriarchal blessing, Oscar L. McFarland, patriarch of the stake in Covina, California, promised Theodore Britton, a black Sunday School superintendent, that if he remained faithful he would one day enjoy all the blessings of the priesthood. It was clear from context that by “one day” he meant in mortality. Frightened by what he had said, the patriarch called his stake president, who told him, “Send me a copy. I’ll send it on to President Kimball.” The blessing transcript later came back with a red question mark by the passage in question but no annotation. The cover note from President Kimball said only, “A fine blessing.”<sup>74</sup>

A number of other blessings received by black male members indicated that they would have opportunities not presently available to them—promises that included priesthood, missions, or temple blessings. People generally accepted these promises as things that would occur in the next life or in the Millennium, not a prophecy of imminent change.<sup>75</sup>

In 1973, Helvécio and Rudá Martins and their son Marcus (see essay on page 79) received extraordinary patriarchal blessings that promised things that seemed impossible. The patriarch told Helvécio and Rudá that they would be privileged to live on the earth in the joy of an eternal covenant. He also promised their son Marcus that he would preach the gospel, and the language the patriarch used suggested to them a full-time mission.

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74. Oscar L. McFarland, interview by author, Provo, Utah, January 12, 1994; Catherine Britton Hoffman to Oscar L. McFarland, March 11, 1994. McFarland did not designate lineage in this case.

75. There is no way of knowing whether the frequency of such promises increased in the time just before the revelation or whether the promises were merely reported more often in light of their quick fulfillment. In a solemn assembly in December 1975, President Kimball instructed: “One of our patriarchs in a blessing promised a Black man the priesthood. The patriarch made a mistake. The man should be treated with full respect, but he cannot have the priesthood.” Kyle Probst, interview by author, February 21, 2002. In the Kimball Papers, there is an undated sheet with a list of subjects to be mentioned in a solemn assembly. Among the subjects is “Patriarch Black.”

Despite uncertainty about the blessing, the Martinses opened a mission savings account for Marcus.<sup>76</sup>

Black college student Mary Frances Sturlaugson, shortly after her baptism in 1975, received a blessing from a seminary teacher in South Dakota that asserted she would serve a mission. He said afterward he didn't know how it would happen. When she received her patriarchal blessing in 1977, patriarch Rodney Kimball (the son of Spencer's cousin), said, "I feel strongly impressed to tell you that if there is something you greatly desire that is not said at this time in this blessing, write it on the back of your blessing and it will become binding, depending on your faithfulness." She wrote down that she wanted to serve a mission. Another blessing told her, "The desire of your heart will be granted unto you."<sup>77</sup> She became the first black woman missionary after the revelation.

In 1976, Bishop Fujio Abe, a high councilor in Greensboro North Carolina Stake, heard a knock late one evening. He found black member Joseph Freeman and his wife, Isapella, standing on his doorstep, carrying their one-year-old son, Alexander, who had a high fever that would not respond to medicine. While Brother Freeman held the child, Bishop Abe administered a blessing. Halfway through he felt impressed to say that the child would one day hold the priesthood and serve a mission for the Church. Both men felt the fever leave the child as the blessing was pronounced. His temperature dropped to normal.

The bishop had scarcely said, "Amen," before Sister Freeman asked, "Do you realize what you just said?"

"Yes," Brother Abe replied, "I do. Those were not my words. I suggest that it be something private and sacred, between us. Others would not understand."<sup>78</sup>

In the spring of 1978, shortly before the revelation announcement, F. Briton McConkie was in Manila by assignment giving patriarchal

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76. Helvécio Martins with Mark Grover, *The Autobiography of Elder Helvécio Martins* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1994), 56–57; John L. Hart, "Eager to Serve on Lord's Timetable," *Church News*, May 26, 1990, 6, 12; "Elder Helvécio Martins of the Seventy," *Ensign* 30 (May 1990): 106.

77. Mary Frances Sturlaugson, *A Soul So Rebellious* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 65–68.

78. Fujio Abe to author, April 21, 1991; Freeman, *In the Lord's Due Time*, 96–97. In 1978, Joseph Freeman was believed to be the first black man to be ordained to the priesthood after the announcement of the revelation. Edward L. Kimball, Journal, April 21, 1979, reporting Joseph Freeman talk in Provo temple. In March 1987, Alexander became a deacon, and the same day his father was set apart as a counselor in the elders quorum presidency in Denver. Isapella Freeman to Fujio Abe, March 16, 1987, photocopy in Kimball Papers.

blessings. To a woman of African descent, he promised she would receive the blessings of the temple. To Alonzo Harris, a black man, he promised that he would receive the priesthood and the blessings of the temple in his lifetime. Upon his return to Utah, Briton told his brother Elder Bruce R. McConkie about the unusual blessings, and Bruce responded noncommittally, “I am glad to know you have given those blessings.”

In only a few days, these otherwise mystifying events would be seen as part of a foreshadowing.

### The Questioner

In his first press conference, held immediately after his ordination, President Kimball faced a number of predictable questions. In response to the restriction on priesthood for blacks, he answered straightforwardly:

[I have given it] a great deal of thought, a great deal of prayer. The day might come when they would be given the priesthood, but that day has not come yet. Should the day come it will be a matter of revelation. Before changing any important policy, it has to be through a revelation from the Lord. But we believe in revelation. We believe there are yet many more things to be revealed from the Lord. . . . We are open to the Father on every suggestion that he gives us, to every direction he gives us, to every revelation of desire for change.<sup>79</sup>

At the time, no one saw this statement as a harbinger of change; similar statements had been made before and been seen as a kind of hedge: Change could come, but it would take a miracle, so don’t count on it.

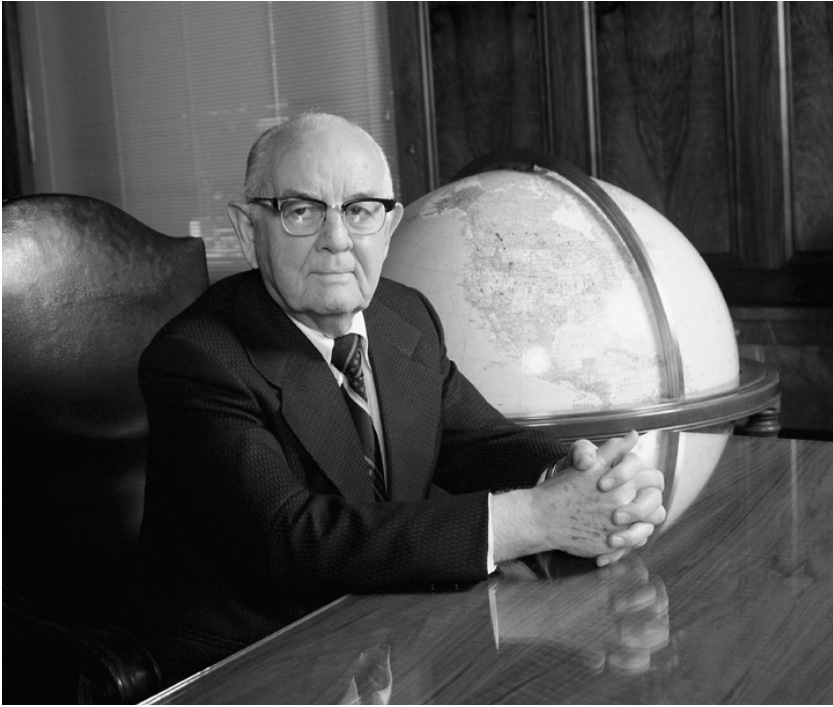
Less than four months later, when an interviewer for a national telecast asked, “Do you anticipate a change in the racial policy?” President Kimball gave a similar answer: “No, I do not anticipate it. If it should be done the Lord will reveal it and we believe in revelation. We believe that the leader of the Church is entitled to that revelation. And that it would come if it is necessary and if it is proper.”<sup>80</sup>

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79. Charles J. Seldin, “Priesthood of LDS Opened to Blacks,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 10, 1978, 1A; compare David Mitchell, “President Spencer W. Kimball Ordained Twelfth President of Church,” *Ensign* 4 (February 1974): 6, quoting him as saying, “I am not sure that there will be a change, although there could be. We are under the dictates of our Heavenly Father, and this is not my policy or the Church’s policy. It is the policy of the Lord who has established it, and I know of no change, although we are subject to revelations of the Lord in case he should ever wish to make a change.”

80. Bush, “History of My Research,” 139, quoting President Kimball on NBC *Today Show*, March 12, 1974.





A primary emphasis of Spencer W. Kimball's presidency was taking the gospel and its blessings to the whole world. Courtesy Edward L. Kimball.

It is difficult to know President Kimball's inner feelings as he made these statements, whether he was putting the best face on a policy he supported or expressing a deepening hope and desire that the time for change had come. While he was sensitive to the concerns and needs of minorities and while he showed no personal denigration of blacks, he also gave no encouragement to others who pressed for change. "I decided long ago," he said, "that I would be loyal to the Brethren."<sup>81</sup> He reacted especially

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81. Spencer W. Kimball, interview by author, June 1978. In his personal copy of the October 1956 Conference Report, in possession of author, Spencer heavily marked up a J. Reuben Clark talk about priesthood, which concluded that from the beginning priesthood was never universal and "our rights [to priesthood] depend upon our course before we came here, and our course since we arrived." J. Reuben Clark, in *127th Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1956), 82–86. Although Clark made no direct reference to race, Spencer wrote "Negro" in the margin.

negatively to militant protests against the Church and coercive methods, particularly when those protesting had themselves no interest in becoming priesthood holders. Spencer believed that external pressures made revelation even less likely to come.<sup>82</sup>

During his life in Arizona, Spencer had few personal contacts with blacks. Inevitably, he absorbed general social prejudices against blacks, but they were vague, based upon assumptions and other people's attitudes, not on his own experience, because there were very few blacks in his community.<sup>83</sup> Of his youth he said, "I had grown up with the belief that Negroes should not have the priesthood."<sup>84</sup> As an adult in Arizona, he showed no personal bias toward the Mexicans and Native Americans with whom he dealt. In fact, his twenty-five years as an Apostle working closely with North and South American native peoples gave Spencer a degree of comfort with ethnic and racial diversity that some other Church leaders lacked.<sup>85</sup>

His response to individuals was generous and compassionate. As stake president in Arizona, he approved the use of the Lebanon Ward chapel for graduation ceremonies of a black school, despite some member opposition.<sup>86</sup> In 1959, he recorded in his journal meeting a member in Brazil who had a remote Negro ancestor, giving him about 5 percent Negroid heritage. "My heart wanted to burst for him."<sup>87</sup> He sympathized with and admired Monroe Fleming, who worked at the Hotel Utah for many years and had suffered with patience and dignity the scorn of other blacks for his faithfulness to the Church.<sup>88</sup>

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82. But compare the 1890 Woodruff Manifesto that gives as its reason the government's imminent threat to confiscate the Church's property, including the temples.

83. Susan Turley, "The Legacy," *Latter-day Sentinel*, November 16, 1985, 32.

84. Gerry Avant, "President Kimball Says Revelation Was Clear," *Church News*, January 6, 1979, 15. In the back of the copy of the Pearl of Great Price that Spencer took to the mission field in 1914, he listed citations to the several scriptural passages used to support the restriction on priesthood.

85. Leonard J. Arrington, "The Long-Promised Day," in *Adventures of a Church Historian*, 176. Arrington expressed the personal opinion that of all General Authorities Spencer was the most personally inclined to disregard race.

86. Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977), 173.

87. Spencer W. Kimball, *Journal*, March 10, 1959; Kimball and Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 317, 349.

88. Kimball and Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 345.



Spencer W. Kimball with Native American children in front of a school. Courtesy Edward L. Kimball.

In 1964, when Spencer visited the Church exhibit at the New York World's Fair, he noted with regret the absence of black faces in the murals and wondered whether black members should have been included as guides at the exhibit.<sup>89</sup> That same year as Spencer toured the South American missions, Fernandez, an eighteen-year-old church building missionary in Rivera, Uruguay, embraced him and smiled radiantly. "I felt impressed to promise him blessings beyond his fondest imagination if he remained totally true to the Cause," Spencer wrote in his journal. The young man was "working against great odds but still sweet and unembittered."<sup>90</sup>

Spencer's personal position toward blacks was the uneasy and ultimately unsatisfactory one of "separate but equal." Even though he was in favor of equality, he strongly opposed integration because the partners in a mixed marriage could not be sealed in the temple and their children would be similarly limited. In contrast, while advising prospective couples about

89. Spencer W. Kimball, *Journal*, October 12, 1964; Kimball and Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 345.

90. Spencer W. Kimball, *Journal*, May 21, 1964; see also May 27, 1964.

other interracial marriages (most often it was of a Native American with a Caucasian), he frankly pointed out the social and psychological risks for the couple and their children but reassured them that the decision was personal and involved no theological issues.<sup>91</sup>

On occasion, though, Spencer did specifically raise the question about the priesthood ban. In 1967, when he reorganized a stake presidency in Salt Lake City, he called Arvil Milne as counselor to the new stake president. Brother Milne, expecting questions about his worthiness, was startled when Spencer's first substantive question was, "Brother Milne, what do you think about black people receiving the priesthood?"

Milne reflected for a moment and then responded: "I suppose when the Lord decides it is time he'll let the prophet know. Until then they'll have to get along without it."

Elder Kimball said, "Thank you." That ended the curious interview.<sup>92</sup>

In April 1969, while interviewing James Polve for employment as a professor of engineering at BYU, Spencer asked him only one question, "What do you think about whether the Negroes should receive the priesthood?" Surprised, Polve assumed the question was a test of his orthodoxy and knowledge of Church teachings. He responded with a traditional answer. The interview so mystified him that he did not dare write it in his journal.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps such questions were intended only to probe loyalty; more likely they reflected Spencer's personal concerns.<sup>94</sup>

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91. In a discussion of racially mixed marriages, President McKay expressed the same view, that people should be urged to marry within their own race, but we should not condemn them if they fail to do so. Meeting notes, October 6, 1966, Kimball Papers. In 1977, "it was the sense of the discussion that while the brethren will counsel against interracial adoptions for the same reasons they counsel against interracial marriages, there will be no prohibition against Church adoption agencies arranging interracial adoptions where there appears to be good reason for doing so." Memo, June 2, 1977, Kimball Papers.

92. Audiotape from Arvil Milne, made about March 20, 1998, Kimball Papers.

93. James H. Polve, interview by author, January 7 and 9, 1989. In 1966, when a stake was first organized in Brazil, Antonio Camargo was called as counselor in the stake presidency. In the interview, Spencer asked him, "What do you think about polygamy?" Antonio Camargo, interview by author, November 17, 1999.

94. In 1970, Spencer obtained a number of letters exchanged between LaMar Williams of the missionary committee and black correspondents in Nigeria and Ghana. Church History Library.

## The Presidential Years before 1978

Spencer always responded to questions about policy and doctrine with traditional, orthodox explanations, even within his family. But it is clear that inwardly he struggled with the priesthood issue and wished the Lord would permit a change. He felt compassion toward those excluded and perhaps guilt that faithful men were banned from a responsibility and blessing he himself prized.

From his statements to the press at the time he became president, few expected any such revelation.<sup>95</sup> Probably he himself did not. But one huge factor had changed: the ultimate responsibility for the policy fell to him. His duty was no longer that of the loyal supporter. He had the direct, personal responsibility to ascertain the Lord's will by study, faith, and prayer, and he was determined not to be motivated by earthly pressures. He had a hundred other things that demanded his immediate attention, but the matter of priesthood continued to hang heavy in the air.<sup>96</sup>

Spencer maintained a notebook full of correspondence and clippings about blacks and priesthood. The range and extent of the notebook's content show that the matter concerned him greatly. But the latest item is dated about 1975, well before the 1978 revelation. Perhaps his accelerating presidential schedule did not allow him to maintain the notebook, or perhaps he turned more to internal seeking.

By the time Spencer became President, external pressures to change the priesthood policy had slackened greatly, but they did not disappear.<sup>97</sup> In 1974, the NAACP sued the Boy Scouts of America over the policy in LDS Church-sponsored Boy Scout troops of having deacons quorum presidents serve also as senior patrol leaders. The Church quickly changed the policy.

In April 1976, Douglas A. Wallace, an elder living in Vancouver, Washington, took it upon himself to baptize and ordain a black man in defiance of Church policy. He was soon after excommunicated. The publicity surrounding the incident brought hidden divisions in the Genesis Group to the fore. Some members openly criticized Church leaders for failing to revoke the priesthood restriction and drew up a petition. The document asked President Kimball to "modify previous statements on interracial marriage and make a firm commitment" about when black men

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95. "Smooth Succession?" *Time*, January 14, 1974, 41.

96. Avant, "President Kimball Says Revelation Was Clear," 15.

97. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 182–83; "Marketing the Mormon Image: An Interview with Wendell J. Ashton," *Dialogue* 10 (Spring 1977): 16.

could be ordained.<sup>98</sup> A significant minority of the group signed. People on both sides—both those pressing for change and those who abhorred the contention—withdrew from Genesis. The leaders persisted faithfully despite the difficulty. After the split, Genesis slowly regained strength.<sup>99</sup>

Wallace continued his protest by storming down the Tabernacle aisle with two associates at the April 1976 general conference, yelling, “Make way for the Lord! Don’t touch the Lord!” Ushers swiftly escorted him and two companions from the Tabernacle. Outside he announced to news representatives that he was trying to put President Kimball “on trial.”<sup>100</sup> Since President Kimball had reason to believe that Wallace intended to confront him again, the Church obtained a temporary restraining order to prevent Wallace from disrupting subsequent conferences.<sup>101</sup> Although Wallace obeyed the restraining order keeping him out of the Tabernacle, he held a news conference at Temple Square criticizing the Church for its racial restriction.<sup>102</sup>

When in 1975 President Kimball announced the construction of a temple in São Paulo, Brazil, there was concern about how to determine who, in such a racially mixed country, would be eligible to enter the completed temple. He later said that at the time he “was not thinking in terms of making an adjustment.” He thought, rather, that the Church would simply have to inquire even more carefully into the racial background of members seeking recommends.<sup>103</sup>

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98. Freeman, *In the Lord’s Due Time*, 103.

99. Freeman, *In the Lord’s Due Time*, 102–3; Bringham, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 185; Joe Costanzo, “Group Marks 20 Years of Black Priesthood,” *Deseret News*, June 8, 1998, B2.

100. “LDS Dissident ‘to Attend,’” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 25, 1977, C3. Language is from *Corporation of the President v. Wallace*, 573 P.2d 1285 (Utah Supreme Court, 1978).

101. “LDS Dissident ‘to Attend,’” C3; “The Mormon Media Image,” *Sunstone* 3, no. 1 (November/December 1977): 25; “Ordination of Black Declared Null,” *Deseret News*, April 6, 1976, A4. Wallace unsuccessfully sued the Church in both state and federal courts. “Update,” *Sunstone* 3 (March/April 1978): 6. See *Corporation of the President v. Wallace* (restraining order against Wallace properly issued).

102. “Security Department Yearly Activity Report” (1977): 7, Kimball Papers. Wallace also circulated a list of subjects on which he offered to lecture against the Mormon “menace”: the Church’s plan to set up an earthly government, the Council of Fifty, Mormon economic tentacles, the Mormon infiltration of federal agencies, and the ways in which a doctrine of blood atonement would be used to justify assassination. Spencer W. Kimball, *Journal*, August 3, 1977.

103. Spencer W. Kimball, interview by author, July 1978.

In about 1976, a lawsuit was initiated in Costa Rica by a black lawyer seeking to disenfranchise the Church in that country for violating laws prohibiting racial discrimination in its proselyting. The man was offended by the missionaries' use of a "genealogical survey" as a technique for ascertaining whether contacts had Negroid ancestry. President Kimball sent attorney F. Burton Howard, a future member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, to deal with the situation. When Howard returned to report a successful conclusion to the lawsuit, Spencer confided "his concern for giving the priesthood to all men and said that he had been praying about it for fifteen years without an answer, . . . but I am going to keep praying about it."<sup>104</sup>

As President, Spencer consistently sought to grant the priesthood when circumstances were unclear. The family of John L. Pea, for example, came to October general conference in 1976 to be sealed in the temple after the First Presidency rescinded an earlier denial. Spencer recorded:

Forty-three years ago Brother Pea was judged by the mission president to have some possible Negro lineage. As a result he and 4 sons never had the Priesthood and none have been to the temple. Recently the Genealogical Society investigated the circumstances and the First Presidency then reviewed the facts and determined that there was no justification for withholding the Priesthood from Brother Pea and authorized the bishop and stake president to ordain the brethren and give approval for temple recommends for those worthy.

Thirty members of the family came for conference and to be sealed. The whole group met with the First Presidency and sang for them.<sup>105</sup>

President Kimball, in a 1971 devotional address given at BYU, spoke of the Apostle Peter and specified that Peter "announced a major policy change in the church whereby gentiles might be accepted." In hindsight, he could be seen as reminding the Church that change can come by revelation.<sup>106</sup>

In the fall of 1977, President Kimball, visiting with LDS economist Jack Carlson, asked, "What do you think would happen if we changed the policy? Give me a scenario." President Kimball expressed his own concerns

104. F. Burton Howard to author, June 15, 1995; F. Burton Howard, interview by author, July 30, 2002. Caroline Miner is reported to have asked President Kimball, her brother-in-law, some years earlier whether he sought revelation on the issue and he said, "Every day." Devery S. Anderson, "A History of *Dialogue*, Part Two: Struggle toward Maturity, 1971–1982," *Dialogue* 33 (summer 2000): 62 n. 297.

105. Spencer W. Kimball, *Journal*, October 4, 1976.

106. Spencer W. Kimball, "Peter, My Brother," *Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1971), 7 (July 13, 1971).

about internal dissent, particularly from members in the American South or even from the Quorum of the Twelve.<sup>107</sup>

### Setting the Stage

The days leading up to June 1978 offer a classic illustration of the pattern leading to much of revelation—an urgent question, an intense consideration, a prayerfully formulated tentative answer, and a spiritual confirmation.<sup>108</sup>

Many factors set the stage for change, although it is impossible to determine how much each contributed:

- Requests for missionaries continued to come from individuals and groups in Africa, particularly Nigeria and Ghana. How could the Church deny gospel teaching to sincere seekers? And how would they function without priesthood?
- The American conscience was awakening to the centuries of injustice against blacks; the balance had tipped decisively

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107. Renee Pyott Carlson, interview by Gregory A. Prince, Potomac, Md., June 2, 1994, referring to a time he was present. He recalled also that President Kimball said, “I don’t know that I should be the one doing this, but if I don’t my successor won’t.”

108. A major source of information concerning the 1978 revelation is a July 5, 1978, interview by author with Spencer W. Kimball, a month after announcement of the revelation. On July 8, Spencer W. Kimball and Camilla Kimball read and amended a description by the author of events based on that interview. Additions were made on July 12, after interviews with President Romney and Elders Packer and Hinckley. This document will be hereafter cited as “1978 Draft.” Nearly four years later, on May 12, 1982, the author met with Elder McConkie and Francis M. Gibbons, secretary to the First Presidency, to discuss the 1978 Draft. Neither pointed out any errors. Gibbons provided additional information by reading from the council minutes of June 1978 in his possession. This composite document is found in Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, May 12, 1982. Another important recital is a document by Bruce R. McConkie, “The Receipt of the Revelation Offering the Priesthood to Men of All Races and Colors,” June 30, 1978, Kimball Papers, which he sent to Spencer W. Kimball with a cover letter stating, “Pursuant to your request I have prepared the attached document. . . . It summarizes what I said in the home of Dr. LeRoy Kimball in Nauvoo on Wednesday, June 28, 1978.” This document appears to be the source of the information in Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 373–79. On the document, Spencer W. Kimball made minor editorial changes on nearly every page, suggesting that he agreed with the text, as amended. Six times he added “temple blessings” to “priesthood” as having become available to all worthy men. This document is cited here as McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation.” See also Oscar W. McConkie Jr., interview by author, June 15, 1978.



against racism and toward egalitarianism, preparing whites to accept blacks as both legal and social equals. This consciousness did not happen at once, nor did it reach everyone, but it prepared white Mormons to welcome blacks as full participants.

- This new ethos also created social pressure. Many Americans scorned Mormons as bigots, and the perception may have affected missionary efforts.
- The Church's commitment to missionary work—always high—had achieved unprecedented heights under President Kimball's vision of missionary work sweeping the earth. Both leaders and members continually confronted the logical consequence: missionary efforts had to include black Africa.
- Study by General Authorities and independent scholars had weakened the traditional idea that Joseph Smith taught priesthood exclusion and cast a shadow on the policy's purported scriptural justifications.<sup>109</sup>
- The Church's surging growth in Brazil and the temple there, rapidly moving toward completion, created an insoluble dilemma. In such a racially mixed society, many people had remote Negroid ancestry but did not know it. Application of the policy would be accompanied by the near certainty of error.
- And finally, the person responsible for directing the Church had changed. President Hinckley said, "Here was a little man, filled with love, able to reach out to people. . . . He was not the first to worry about the priesthood question, but he had the compassion to pursue it and a boldness that allowed him to act, to get the revelation."<sup>110</sup>

## Seeking Revelation

As a follower, Spencer had proved loyal and conservative. He did not come to leadership intending to be a reformer, but he was not afraid of

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109. According to Leonard Arrington, as early as 1954 a committee of the Twelve concluded that denial of priesthood was not soundly based on scripture. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian*, 183.

110. Sheri Dew, interview by author, September 18, 1995 (President Hinckley's biographer, reporting her understanding of his views).



President Kimball with his counselors, President N. Eldon Tanner (*middle*) and President Marion G. Romney (*right*). Courtesy Edward L. Kimball.

change. His only desire was to push the work of the Church forward. If doing so required changes, he stood prepared to make them.

President Kimball felt that his predecessors had sought the Lord's will concerning the priesthood policy, and for whatever reason "the time had not come."<sup>111</sup> But Spencer had to ask anew. He wanted urgently "to find out firsthand what the Lord thought about it." It was not enough just to wait until the Lord saw fit to take the initiative: the scripture admonished him to ask and to knock if he wanted to know for himself. He prayed, trying not to prejudge the answer: Should we maintain the long-standing policy, or has the time come for the change? He received no immediate answer to his prayers.<sup>112</sup>

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111. Avant, "President Kimball Says Revelation Was Clear," 15. Gordon B. Hinckley says that the question had "become a matter of particular concern to Spencer W. Kimball." Gordon B. Hinckley, March 15, 1988, at a Church-wide fireside commemorating restoration of the priesthood, "Priesthood Restoration," *Ensign* 18 (October 1988): 69–70.

112. 1978 Draft.

In May 1975, President Kimball referred to his counselors various statements by early Church leaders about blacks and the priesthood and asked for their reactions.<sup>113</sup> Wary of ways in which the question had been divisive during the McKay administration, he asked the Apostles to join him as colleagues in extended study and supplication.<sup>114</sup> Francis M. Gibbons, secretary to the First Presidency, observed special focus on the issue in the year before the revelation.<sup>115</sup> Ten years after the revelation, Dallin H. Oaks, president of BYU in 1978, recalled this time of inquiry: “[President Kimball] asked me what I thought were the reasons. He talked to dozens of people, maybe hundreds of people . . . about why, why do we have this.”<sup>116</sup>

Years earlier, talking about revelation in general, Spencer had written in a letter to his son:

Revelations will probably never come unless they are desired. I think few people receive revelations while lounging on the couch or while playing cards or while relaxing. I believe most revelations would come when a man is on his tip toes, reaching as high as he can for something which he knows he needs, and then there bursts upon him the answer to his problems.<sup>117</sup>

In June 1977, Spencer invited at least three General Authorities to give him memos on the implications of the subject.<sup>118</sup> Elder McConkie wrote a long memorandum concluding that there was no scriptural barrier to a change in policy that would give priesthood to black men.<sup>119</sup> Considering Elder McConkie’s traditional approach to the topic during the Lee

113. Edward L. Kimball, Journal, May 12, 1982, discussion with Francis M. Gibbons and Bruce R. McConkie.

114. In a prayer, Elder Packer “pleaded with the Lord that the way be opened for those from whom the priesthood is withheld.” John Forres O’Donnal, *Pioneer in Guatemala: The Personal History of John Forres O’Donnal, Including the History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Guatemala* (Yorba Linda, Calif.: Shumway Family History Services, 1997), 223–24.

115. Boyd K. Packer, interview by author, July 12, 1978 (Spencer W. Kimball raised the issue with him two years earlier); Breck England, “Elder Marvin J. Ashton,” *Ensign* 16 (July 1986): 10; Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 292–96.

116. “Apostles Talk about Reasons for Lifting Ban,” *Provo Daily Herald*, June 5, 1988, 21.

117. Spencer W. Kimball to author, March 11, 1963.

118. Arrington, Diary, June 27, 1978, copy in Kimball Papers, relying on Jay Todd, memo, naming specifically Packer, Monson, and McConkie. Arrington, Diary, June 9, 1978, indicates that in late 1977 or early 1978, Neal Maxwell of the Seventy inquired of the Church Historian about a statement Joseph Fielding Smith had made about blacks.

119. Edward L. Kimball, Journal, May 12, 1982, discussion with Bruce R. McConkie and Francis M. Gibbons.



The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles at the time of the priesthood revelation. *Front row, left to right:* Mark E. Petersen, Ezra Taft Benson, Delbert L. Stapley. *Back row, left to right:* Boyd K. Packer, Thomas S. Monson, LeGrand Richards, Marvin J. Ashton, Howard W. Hunter, Bruce R. McConkie, Gordon B. Hinckley, L. Tom Perry, David B. Haight. Courtesy Church History Library. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

administration, this conclusion explains why, according to Elder Packer, “President Kimball spoke in public of his gratitude to Elder McConkie for some special support he received in the days leading up to the revelation on the priesthood.”<sup>120</sup> Although minutes of quorum meetings are not available and participants have not commented in detail, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve discussed the issue repeatedly, at length, and over a period of months.<sup>121</sup>

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120. Boyd K. Packer, *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 264.

121. Bruce R. McConkie, “The New Revelation on Priesthood,” in Spencer W. Kimball and others, *Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 127, appearing also in Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 159. On two occasions in 1978, Spencer W. Kimball invited written memos from members of the Twelve. McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 2.

Elder James E. Faust, head of the International Mission, which included nearly all of Africa, conferred with President Kimball a number of times in early 1978 about the priesthood issue.<sup>122</sup> At one meeting, Elder Faust displayed a stack of letters received from Africa during just the previous month. Asked to read a sample, Elder Faust chose a letter from a boy whose “greatest hope was to one day sit in the Salt Lake Tabernacle and there hear the Lord’s prophets speak.”<sup>123</sup>

During the months leading up to June 1978, President Kimball spoke with the Twelve repeatedly about the question, asking them to speak freely.<sup>124</sup> He invited associates who had not expressed themselves in the group setting to talk with him in private.<sup>125</sup> He seemed so intent on solving the problem that others worried about him. A neighbor of the Kimballs, Richard Vernon, had noticed that Spencer seemed somewhat withdrawn. Normally relaxed and comfortable with friends in his ward, Spencer responded to one inquiry that he was not feeling well and changed the topic. Many in the ward had noticed the difference and felt concerned. Many also noticed that Camilla was anxious and worried about Spencer. Elder Packer, concerned at President Kimball’s inability to let the matter rest, said, “Why don’t you forget this?” Then Elder Packer answered his own question, “Because you can’t. The Lord won’t let you.”<sup>126</sup>

Spencer later described:

Day after day, and especially on Saturdays and Sundays when there were no organizations [sessions] in the temple, I went there when I could be alone.

I was very humble . . . I was searching for this . . . I wanted to be sure. . . .

I had a great deal to fight . . . myself, largely, because I had grown up with this thought that Negroes should not have the priesthood and I was prepared to go all the rest of my life until my death and fight for it and defend it as it was.<sup>127</sup>

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122. See James E. Faust, “The Doctrine and Covenants and Modern Revelation,” in *Hearken, O Ye People: Discourses on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Sandy, Utah: Randall Press, 1984), 287–97. President Kimball’s journal for January through May 1978 shows that Elder Faust came eight times, four times for an identified purpose and four for unspecified purpose.

123. James P. Bell, *In the Strength of the Lord: The Life and Teachings of James E. Faust* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 122–23.

124. 1978 Draft.

125. Lucile C. Tate, *David B. Haight: The Story of a Disciple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 279.

126. Packer, interview.

127. Avant, “President Kimball Says Revelation Was Clear,” 15; Lloyd, “Revelation Rewarded Those Who Waited,” 4–5.

On returning from the airport in February 1978 after one of his trips, Spencer asked the driver to let him off at the temple and sent Camilla home alone. “I want to go to the temple for a while,” he said. “I’ll get a way home.”<sup>128</sup> Some days he went more than once, often alone.<sup>129</sup> Sometimes he changed into temple clothing; he always took off his shoes. He obtained a key that gave him access to the temple night or day without having to involve anyone else. Few knew, except the security men who watched over him. One of them mentioned it to President Kimball’s neighbor, who told Camilla. So she knew that much, but she had no idea what problem so occupied Spencer. She worried that one of the Brethren might be involved in serious transgression. Spencer gently suggested to the security supervisor that his men should be careful about what they disclosed, even to his wife.<sup>130</sup>

Camilla called Arthur Haycock to ask what was making Spencer so distressed and concerned. The only answer Arthur felt free to give was that something was troubling the President but everything would be all right.<sup>131</sup>

On March 9, 1978, as the First Presidency and Twelve met in the temple, the Apostles unanimously expressed their feeling that if the policy were to change, any change must be based on revelation received and announced by the prophet. President Kimball then urged a concerted effort from all of them to learn the will of the Lord. He suggested they engage in concerted individual fasting and prayer.<sup>132</sup>

Over time, through the many days in the temple and through the sleepless hours of the night, praying and turning over in his mind all the consequences, perplexities, and criticisms that a decision to extend priesthood would involve, Spencer gradually found “all those complications and concerns dwindling in significance.” They did not disappear but seemed to decline in importance. In spite of his preconceptions and his allegiance to the past, a swelling certainty grew that a change in policy was

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128. Edward L. Kimball, Journal, February 27, 1985, quoting Camilla Kimball.

129. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Savior: The Center of Our Lives,” *New Era* 10 (April 1980): 36.

130. Spencer W. Kimball, interview.

131. Heidi S. Swinton, *In the Company of Prophets: Personal Experiences of D. Arthur Haycock* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993): 83.

132. Francis M. Gibbons, interview by author, May 12, 1982, recorded in Edward L. Kimball, Journal, May 12, 1982, as Gibbons referred to council minutes.

what the Lord wanted.<sup>133</sup> “There grew slowly a deep, abiding impression to go forward with the change.”<sup>134</sup>

This answer had become clear in Spencer’s mind as early as late March, but he felt unity within the leadership was important, and he continued to discuss the matter with others. He sensed resistance from some, which he fully understood. He did not push, lobby, pressure, or use his office to seek compliance. Instead, he increased his visits to the temple, imploring the Lord to make his will known, not only to him but also to the Twelve, to these good men who all their lives had quoted other Presidents of the Church that it was not yet time. In a sense, the past prophets of the Church stood arrayed against this decision. The wisdom of the dead often seems loftier than the word of an imperfect living spokesman. Spencer wanted more than anything to have his fellow servants share with him a witness of the Lord’s will. Camilla noted that in their prayers together, where he had always asked for “inspiration” or “guidance,” he began to plead for “revelation.” She also noticed that he read the scriptures even more intently than usual during that spring.<sup>135</sup>

On March 23, Spencer reported to his counselors that he had spent much of the night in reflection and his impression then was to lift the restriction on blacks. His counselors said they were prepared to sustain him if that were his decision. They went on to discuss the impact of such a change in policy on the members and decided there was no need for prompt action; they would discuss it again with the Twelve before a final decision.<sup>136</sup>

Francis Gibbons, secretary to the First Presidency, had the impression that President Kimball had already come to know God’s will and was now struggling with how to resolve the matter in a way that the entire leadership would stand behind.<sup>137</sup>

On April 20, President Kimball asked the Twelve to join the Presidency in praying that God would give them an answer. Thereafter he talked with

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133. Spencer W. Kimball, interview.

134. Spencer W. Kimball, interview.

135. Spencer W. Kimball, interview. Camilla Kimball, interview by Andrew E. Kimball Jr., January 18, 1979, transcript in Kimball Papers.

136. Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, May 12, 1982, reporting discussion with Francis M. Gibbons. See also Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 293.

137. Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, May 12, 1982. Elder Gibbons has confirmed that his description of “events leading up to and surrounding the Revelation on Priesthood are based upon personal, eye witness knowledge and are supported by my diary entries made soon after they occurred.” Francis M. Gibbons to author, November 6, 1995.



Over time, President Kimball felt a swelling certainty that a change in policy was what the Lord wanted. As early as late March 1978, the answer had become clear to him. Courtesy Edward L. Kimball.



the Twelve individually and continued to spend many hours alone in prayer and meditation in the Holy of Holies, often after hours when the temple was still.<sup>138</sup> He described the burden of his prayers in an extemporaneous talk to missionaries in South Africa several months later:

I remember very vividly the day after day that I walked over to the temple and ascended up to the fourth floor where we have our solemn assemblies, where we have our meetings of the Twelve and the Presidency. And after everybody had gone out of the temple, I knelt and prayed. And I prayed with such a fervency, I tell you! I knew that something was before us that was extremely important to many of the children of God. And I knew that we could receive the revelations of the Lord only by being worthy and ready for them and ready to accept them and to put them into place. Day after day I went and with great solemnity and seriousness, alone in the upper rooms of the Temple, and there I offered my soul and offered our efforts to go forward with the program<sup>139</sup> and we wanted to do what he wanted. As we talked about it to him, we said, "Lord, we want only what is right. We're not making any plans to be spectacularly moving. We want only the thing that thou dost want and we want it when you want it and not until."<sup>140</sup>

On one occasion during this time, a temple administrator brought an organ tuner into the room where the Presidency and Twelve met. They interrupted President Kimball at prayer and withdrew, flustered.<sup>141</sup> Another time Spencer found one of the temple workers standing guard outside the room to protect him from interruption. Spencer thanked him for his vigil but protested that it was unnecessary.<sup>142</sup>

At the end of the joint meeting of the Presidency and Twelve on May 4, when the priesthood policy was discussed, LeGrand Richards asked permission to make a statement. He then reported:

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138. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 293–94; Gordon B. Hinckley, "Priesthood Restoration," *Ensign* 18 (October 1988): 70; F. Burton Howard, *Marion G. Romney: His Life and Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 239.

139. President Kimball often used the word "program" to mean an idea or concept, rather than a plan or agenda or design. He might say, "That's the program," meaning, "That is a good idea."

140. Spencer W. Kimball, remarks, Johannesburg, South Africa, October 23, 1978, transcript of tape by Duane Cardall, Kimball Papers.

141. Spencer W. Kimball, interview; Jack Purser, temple recorder, interview by author, June 19, 1989, describing the experience of another.

142. Spencer W. Kimball, interview. Spencer might stay from a half hour to three hours. Geraldine Bangerter interview by author, February 2000, reflecting her notes of President Kimball's remarks at the dedication of the São Paulo temple, October 30, 1978.

I saw during the meeting a man seated in a chair above the organ, bearded and dressed in white, having the appearance of Wilford Woodruff. . . . I am not a visionary man. . . . This was not imagination. . . . It might be that I was privileged to see him because I am the only one here who had seen President Woodruff in person.<sup>143</sup>

Late on Saturday, May 6, 1978, a friend of President Kimball, Bryan Espenschied, met him walking alone as they both left the temple. Brother Espenschied had the impression that Spencer was greatly worried or distressed. Later Spencer explained that he had on that occasion been in the temple, praying about the question of priesthood.<sup>144</sup> Spencer's counselors shared his anxieties. President Tanner's family saw him during this time seeming "greatly concerned, as though he carried the burdens of the world."<sup>145</sup>

Spencer continued to receive many letters from Church members concerning the issue. Some writers criticized and demanded; others expressed faith and hope. A letter dated May 19 from Chase Peterson, then a Harvard University administrator and soon to be president of the University of Utah, urged a "present opportunity," while external pressures had slackened, to open the priesthood to black men. After thoughtful expression of this view, he concluded:

Could it be that the Lord has been both preparing us to accept the black man into full Priesthood fellowship and preparing the black man for Priesthood responsibility? . . . [Perhaps the Lord] is waiting for us to be ready, and if we fail to demonstrate our readiness, there may not be a [right] time again [soon].<sup>146</sup>

A few days later Spencer replied, "I thank you very much for your delightful letter and for the suggestions you have offered. Please accept my sincere thanks and best wishes."<sup>147</sup>

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143. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 294; Gibbons, interview; F. Gibbons at Mormon History Association Annual Meeting, Snowbird, May 18, 1996. See also Lucile Tate, *LeGrand Richards: Beloved Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 291–92, quoting Elder Packer's recollection.

144. Bryan A. Espenschied, interview by author, September 3, 1997. Espenschied later became mission president of the first formal mission in West Africa.

145. Ruth Tanner Walker, interview by author, August 19, 1998.

146. Chase Peterson to Spencer W. Kimball, May 19, 1978.

147. Spencer W. Kimball to Chase Peterson, dated May 30, postmarked June 2, 1978. A letter of June 28 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.

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.<sup>148</sup>

On May 30, Spencer read his counselors a tentative statement in long-hand removing racial restrictions on priesthood and said he had a "good, warm feeling" about it.<sup>149</sup> They reviewed past statements and decided to ask G. Homer Durham, a Seventy supervising the Historical Department, to research the matter further.<sup>150</sup> 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.<sup>151</sup>

### 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

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148. The article almost surely was the 1973 article by Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," 11; Anderson, "History of *Dialogue*, Part Two," 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.

149. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 294.

150. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 294. Events overtook that request, for confirmation of the rightness of change came just two days later. G. Homer Durham, memo to Spencer W. Kimball, June 29, 1978, Kimball Papers, noting that the assignment was "now moot."

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

in a prayer circle.<sup>152</sup> 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 that 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:

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.<sup>153</sup>

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.<sup>154</sup> Eight of the ten volunteered their views, all favorable. President Kimball called on the other

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152. There was “a particularly high spiritual tone.” McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 3.

153. 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.”

154. 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.

two, and they also spoke in favor. Discussion continued for two hours.<sup>155</sup> 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.”<sup>156</sup> 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.<sup>157</sup> 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.”<sup>158</sup>

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 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 arms around him.<sup>159</sup>

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

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

156. Packer, interview.

157. Avant, “President Kimball Says Revelation Was Clear,” 15.

158. 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.”

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

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.”<sup>160</sup>

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.”<sup>161</sup> 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.<sup>162</sup>

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.”<sup>163</sup> 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.”<sup>164</sup> Elder Marvin J. Ashton called it “the most intense spiritual impression I’ve ever felt.”<sup>165</sup> Elder Packer said that during the prayer all present became aware what the decision must be.<sup>166</sup>

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

161. 1978 Draft.

162. Hinckley, “Priesthood Restoration,” 70.

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

164. 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.

165. Breck England, “Elder Marvin J. Ashton,” *Ensign* 16 (July 1986): 10.

166. Arrington, *Diary*, June 19, 1978, quoting Gill Warner, who confirmed the statement to the author in interview, September 25, 2000.

President Ezra Taft 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.”<sup>167</sup> He also said he “had never experienced anything of such spiritual magnitude and power.”<sup>168</sup> Each who felt this powerful spiritual experience confirming the decision proposed by President Kimball perceived it as a revelation.

Elder Howard W. 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.”<sup>169</sup>

Elder 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.”<sup>170</sup>

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.<sup>171</sup> 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.<sup>172</sup>

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

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

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

170. 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, “President Kimball Says Revelation Was Clear,” 15.

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

172. Perry, interview.

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.<sup>173</sup>

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.<sup>174</sup> 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

this was done by the Lord in this way because it was a revelation of such tremendous significance and import; one that would reverse the whole direction of the Church, procedurally and administratively; one that would affect the living and the dead; one that would affect the total relationship that we have with the world; one . . . of such significance that the Lord wanted independent witnesses who could bear record that the thing had happened.<sup>175</sup>

### The Announcement and Reactions

Ordinarily after the weekly meeting the group would change out of temple clothing and conduct Church business. One suggested that because of the experience they had just had, they adjourn for the day. But President Kimball, intent on moving the Church forward, asked them to continue. They did so, but because their intense feelings continued they were reluctant to bring forward any business that could wait.

Among the undecided business was how to announce the decision. President Kimball asked Elders Packer, McConkie, and Hinckley each to propose in writing a course of action.<sup>176</sup>

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173. Avant, “President Kimball Says Revelation Was Clear,” 15; Spencer W. Kimball, interview.

174. Spencer W. Kimball, interview.

175. McConkie, “New Revelation,” 134; McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 10–11.

176. Tate, *Boyd K. Packer*, 226.



Though the decision had been made and the Twelve had agreed, President Kimball continued to go to the temple, praying that the rest of the General Authorities would accept this momentous change. During the next days, Camilla thought him as agitated as she had ever seen. But she still had no idea what was causing him such concern.

On Wednesday, June 7, President Kimball advised his counselors in their meeting that he had decided the time had come to announce the removal of priesthood restrictions on black male members and that he had asked three of the Twelve to propose drafts of an announcement. Francis Gibbons had constructed from the three memoranda a composite draft. The First Presidency revised this draft, spending a good deal of time on the exact wording.<sup>177</sup>

On Thursday, June 8, the Presidency presented to the Twelve the proposed announcement.<sup>178</sup> All of the Twelve present had a chance to comment, and minor editorial changes were made.<sup>179</sup> They discussed timing. Some thought it best to wait for October general conference. Others suggested making the announcement at the mission presidents' seminar the next week. But Elder McConkie urged immediate release: "It will leak, and we have to beat Satan. He'll do something between now and then to make it appear that we're being forced into it." Despite tight security, employees at the Church Office Building sensed that something important was afoot, though no one knew exactly what.<sup>180</sup> Rumors had already begun to spread.

After discussion, the First Presidency and Twelve adopted Elder Packer's suggestion that they make the announcement in the form of a letter to local Church leaders throughout the world. Before sending the letter, they would release it through the media, making the new policy known to the whole world simultaneously (after presenting it first to the other General Authorities).<sup>181</sup> After the meeting, President Kimball

177. Edward L. Kimball, Journal, May 12, 1982, discussion with Francis M. Gibbons; Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 295. According to Swinton, *In the Company of Prophets*, 83, "President Kimball dictated the declaration [in final form] to Arthur [Haycock], who took it down in shorthand and transcribed it."

178. Hinckley, "Priesthood Restoration," 69–70.

179. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 29; McConkie, "Receipt of the Revelation," 8, says that during this process he felt a renewed assurance of the rightness of the change.

180. Arrington, Diary, June 27, 1978, recording Bruce R. McConkie and family memo to Jay Todd, June 26, 1978; Arrington, Diary, June 12, 1978.

181. With this important business and more routine matters, the meeting lasted longer than usual. Elder Hinckley was scheduled to host the wife of the British ambassador—a significant public relations opportunity—but he remained

felt tremendously weary but pleased at the sense he had of continuing unity. He knew that others did not always fully share his views,<sup>182</sup> and he may have feared that this change in policy would be seen by some as his personal objective. He seems to have carefully laid the groundwork for consensus with the Twelve by consultation, discussion, and full inclusion in the crucial temple meeting when he prayed for the Lord's will to be known.<sup>183</sup>

The significance President Kimball attributed to unanimity can be seen in how President Tanner presented the matter to the Church at the next general conference:

President Kimball has asked that I advise the conference that after he had received this revelation, which came to him after extended meditation and prayer in the sacred rooms of the holy temple, he presented it to his counselors, who accepted it and approved it. It was then presented to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who unanimously approved it, and was subsequently presented to all other General Authorities, who likewise approved it unanimously.

He then proposed acceptance as “the word and will of the Lord.”<sup>184</sup>

Two of the Twelve had not attended either meeting. Elder Mark E. Petersen was on assignment in South America, and Elder Delbert L. Stapley was seriously ill in the LDS Hospital. Later in the day of June 8, Spencer telephoned Elder Petersen in Quito, Ecuador, informed him what

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in the temple for the meeting and sent his apologies for missing the reception being held for her.

182. For example, the Church Indian programs had sometimes been referred to condescendingly as “Brother Kimball’s programs,” as though they were his and not the Church’s. Espenschied, interview; Kimball and Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 366, 377.

183. It is alleged that Wilford Woodruff signed the Manifesto alone because his counselors would not join him. He had not presented it to the whole Quorum of Twelve because he expected they would not fully support a decision that he considered his responsibility. Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 48-49; see also Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 140, 143.

184. N. Eldon Tanner, “Revelation on Priesthood Accepted, Church Officers Sustained,” *Ensign* 11 (November 1978): 16. Curiously, the only further reference in the conference (four months after the announcement) was one oblique sentence by Bruce R. McConkie, “bearing testimony of the great and wondrous outpouring of divine knowledge that came to President Spencer W. Kimball.” Bruce R. McConkie, “Thou Shalt Receive Revelation,” *Ensign* 11 (November 1978): 61. The announcement was added to the Pearl of Great Price, later shifted to the Doctrine and Covenants as Official Declaration-2, following the 1890 Manifesto on plural marriage.

had happened, had Francis Gibbons read him the announcement about to be published, and received his approval. Elder Petersen later recalled, “I was delighted to know that a new revelation had come from the Lord. I felt the fact of the revelation’s coming was more striking than the decision itself. On the telephone I told President Kimball that I fully sustained both the revelation and him one hundred percent.”<sup>185</sup>

All three of the First Presidency visited Elder Stapley. He responded, “I’ll stay with the Brethren on this.” Thus, support from the Twelve was unanimous.<sup>186</sup>

On the afternoon of June 8, the First Quorum of the Seventy held its regular monthly meeting. President Kimball sent a message that the First Presidency wanted to meet with all available General Authorities the next morning in the Salt Lake Temple’s fourth-floor council room, and all were to come fasting. They were asked to postpone travel if possible and cancel any conflicting appointments without advising their secretaries or anyone else of the meeting. Some had trouble figuring out how to manage that. The regular monthly meeting of all the General Authorities had been held in the temple just a week before, so the purpose of this special meeting generated much speculation on subjects such as the Second Coming, authorization to ordain blacks to the priesthood, and building a temple in Missouri.<sup>187</sup>

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185. Peggy Barton, *Mark E. Petersen: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 176. Elder Petersen continued to disapprove of interracial marriage and expressed low expectations for the first mission in black Africa. Espenschied, interview. The June 17 issue of the *Church News* that ran the revelation announcement also ran, reportedly at the instance of Elder Petersen, the article “Interracial Marriage Discouraged,” which quotes three Spencer W. Kimball statements originally directed to Indian-white marriages: Although unwise, “there is no condemnation” (January 1965); stability in interracial marriage is more difficult (January 1965); and “we recommend that people marry those who are of the same racial background generally, and of somewhat the same economic and social and educational backgrounds, and above all, the same religious background, without question” (September 1976). *Church News*, June 17, 1978, 4; Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 870. Quinn, at 840, quotes a 1954 Petersen statement that intermarriage between any races is contrary to the Lord’s plans. As late as 1983 Elder Petersen was also highly critical of Lester Bush’s research into the origins of the priesthood policy and asked Bush’s stake president to call him in. Bush, “History of My Research,” 199; Kimball Papers, May 15, 1983. But note also that Elder Petersen is apparently the one who suggested that President Kimball consider the Bush article.

186. Spencer W. Kimball, interview. Elder Stapley died six weeks later.

187. Henry Dixon Taylor, *Autobiography of Henry Dixon Taylor* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1980), 286.

Also on Thursday, June 8, Heber Wolsey, managing director of Public Communications, went home early because he felt ill. About four o'clock, President Tanner came to Heber's office and asked the secretary to have him come back. After a brief meeting with President Tanner, Heber told his associate that they should be standing by at 7:30 the next morning prepared to handle "an important announcement."

That afternoon, Bill Smart, editor of the *Deseret News*, attended an unrelated meeting with Elder Monson, who quietly told him, "Reserve space for an important announcement tomorrow."

"What is it?"

"I can't say anything now; it is confidential."

"Can you tell me whether to put it on the front page or on B-1 [the first page of the local news section]?"

"You'll know when you see it!"<sup>188</sup>

On Friday, the meeting commenced at 7 a.m., with all dressed in their temple clothing.<sup>189</sup> After the hymn "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet," President Benson offered the prayer. Elder Maxwell later said, "I had no inkling what was going on. And as we knelt down to pray, the spirit told me what it was going to be . . . and after that prayer, President Kimball began the description. I began to weep."<sup>190</sup>

As Elder Paul H. Dunn recalled, President Kimball said:

Thank you for making the necessary arrangements to be here. I want to tell you about some important things. As a boy in Arizona I wondered why the Indians were so poor and looked down upon. I asked my father, who was kind and never too busy to answer my questions, and he told me about the Book of Mormon and its connection with the Indians and their condition. My father never lied to me. Later I asked him about blacks and the priesthood. My father said that the time would come when they would receive the priesthood. I believed him, although it troubled me. I was called as a stake president. When one of the Twelve

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188. William B. Smart, "From the Editor," *This People* 9 (Summer 1988): 6; William B. Smart, interview by author, winter 1988.

189. Description of the June 9 meeting is a composite of many sources, including 1978 Draft; Taylor, *Autobiography*, 287–88; Marion G. Romney, interview by author, July 12, 1978; Dunn, interview, August 8, 1996; Gibbons, discussion; Arrington, Diary, April 9, 1979, recording his interview with Henry D. Taylor; Arrington, Diary, June 27, 1978, recording Jay Todd memo. Shorter versions of these events are found in Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 295–96; Hinckley, "Priesthood Restoration," 70; and Knowles, *Howard W. Hunter*, 236.

190. "Apostles Talk about Reasons for Lifting Ban," 20; Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 417 ("the waves of the Spirit washed over us like surf").

came I asked him. He said, “I don’t know, but the time will come.” I became a General Authority and asked President Grant, “If I am to represent you and the Lord, I need to be able to answer questions about race and priesthood.” He said that the time would come when that restriction would change.<sup>191</sup>

By now, the Seventies realized where President Kimball was going; they were first stunned, then ecstatic.<sup>192</sup>

According to Elder Dunn, President Kimball continued:

Then one day the mantle fell on me. Brethren, you will never know how many times when you have gone home at night, instead of going home I have come to this room and poured out my heart. Now the Lord has answered me, and the time has come for all worthy men to receive the priesthood. I shared that with my counselors and the Twelve, and after getting their response I present it to you. But I won’t announce it to the world without first counseling with you. We are not in a hurry. I want to hear from you.<sup>193</sup>

He had Frances Gibbons read the text of the proposed announcement and asked for comments. The Apostles led the way. Elder McConkie, among the first to speak, gave an impassioned extemporaneous lecture on the relevant scriptures.<sup>194</sup> President Benson confirmed that he had never experienced so remarkable a manifestation as on the first of June.<sup>195</sup> President Romney said:

Brethren, I have a confession to make. I knew President Kimball was searching for an answer, and whenever we discussed the question, I told him, “If you get an answer I will support you with all my strength,” but I did not expect him to get an answer. If the decision had been left to me, I would have felt that we’ve always had that policy and we would stick to it no matter what the opposition. I resisted change in my feelings, but I came to accept it slowly. I have now changed my position 180 degrees. I am not just a supporter of this decision. I am an advocate. When the revelation came, I knew the mind and the will of the Lord had been made manifest.<sup>196</sup>

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191. Dunn, interview, August 8, 1996.

192. 1978 Draft.

193. Dunn, interview, August 8, 1996. Note that this reconstruction of his words came after eighteen years, but to the author the phrasing rings true.

194. Arrington, Diary, June 27, 1978, recording Jay Todd memo.

195. 1978 Draft.

196. Romney statement is composite of Edward L. Kimball, Journal, May 12, 1982; notes taken from Francis Gibbons’s reading of the council minutes; 1978 Draft; and memo of interviews by Jay Todd recorded in Arrington, Diary, June 27, 1978.

President Romney made a similar statement a few weeks after the events:

Another of the brethren said, “I would have voted against such a proposal until I experienced the feeling that I did in this room this morning.” Each of the others verbally endorsed the proposal. Elder Hanks, nearly overcome with emotion, said, “I thank God I lived long enough to see this day.”<sup>197</sup> A vote approved the decision unanimously.<sup>198</sup> Spencer put his hand on President Tanner’s knee and said, “Eldon, go tell the world.” President Tanner left to deliver the announcement to Heber Wolsey, managing director of Public Communications, who was standing by. President Tanner returned in a few moments and reported: “It’s done.”<sup>199</sup>

Members of the Twelve were assigned to contact the few General Authorities who were absent as mission presidents, and the absent men all gave their assent.<sup>200</sup> By the time the General Authorities had dressed and returned to their offices, the word was out. Phone lines were jammed.

Without addressing questions of history or justification, the announcement said simply God had revealed that the day had come for granting priesthood and temple blessings to all who are worthy.<sup>201</sup> The final

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“I knew President Kimball was moved in his spirit with the problem of permitting blacks to receive the priesthood. It had gone on for months, at least. It troubled him. We as his counselors encouraged him to get it off his mind, to rest, but he was moved upon by the Spirit. The idea of change was new to me. I had gone eighty years defending the Church position. I am a Romney, you see, and a stubborn man. I was personally slow to accept change. I prayed hard that the Lord would give the president the right answer, but I did not presume to urge that the answer be yes or no. I was most interested that he be sure. And from the experience we had in the temple, I was sure that he had the answer. I got a witness in my own soul; I would not have gone along without a witness that he had received the answer he sought. I felt a quiet warmth and whisperings of the Spirit. I didn’t want to get excited; I wanted to be rational. It was not an emotional thing with me, but I was as sure as I have ever been of anything. This is the most far-reaching event of his administration, an historic event that opens up to vast numbers of people all the blessings of the gospel. It ranks well up with Wilford Woodruff’s Manifesto in importance in Church history.” Romney, interview.

197. Marion D. Hanks, interview by author, April 19, 2003.

198. Dunn, interview, August 8, 1996.

199. McConkie, “Receipt of the Revelation,” 9.

200. W. Grant Bangerter in Brazil received a call from Bruce R. McConkie about 10:30 a.m., Utah time. Geraldine Bangerter, *Journal*, June 9, 1978, copy in Kimball Papers.

201. The revelation itself was not reduced to text. A forged document purporting to be the revelation itself is in circulation, phrased as an answer from God that he had heard the cries of his dark-skinned children, who had borne the burdens of others; that the Church should without delay extend missionary efforts to them; that priesthood should be given to those who are worthy; that racial intermarriage

text, canonized as Official Declaration–2 in the Doctrine and Covenants, reads, in critical part:

Dear Brethren:

[T]hat people of many nations have responded to the message of the restored gospel . . . has inspired us with a desire to extend to every worthy member of the Church all of the privileges and blessings which the gospel affords.

. . . [W]e have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance.

He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come when every faithful, worthy man in the Church may receive the holy priesthood, with power to exercise its divine authority, and enjoy with his loved ones every blessing that flows therefrom, including the blessings of the temple. . . .

Sincerely yours, . . .

The First Presidency.

The General Authorities were instructed not to interpret or editorialize but to let the announcement speak for itself. The First Presidency would also not be available for media interview concerning the revelation.<sup>202</sup>

Friday morning Heber Wolsey waited for the announcement President Tanner had told him to expect. When Heber received a copy of the announcement and read it over, he wept. President Tanner said, “You’re not the first to shed tears,” and instructed him to release the statement.

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was “for the present” inadvisable because of social prejudice; that the end-time is near; and that the faithful will receive exaltation.

The document is typed, headed “A Revelation,” and labeled in pen on the upper left corner “First Draft.” At the end appears a signature block: “Faithfully yours,” signed by President Kimball. Shadows of paper edges on the photocopied document show it to be a composite of four segments: the letterhead, two poorly aligned parts of the body, and the signature block (which appears to be from a different typewriter). The ending, “Faithfully yours,” hardly fits a revelation purporting to be the words of God. Richard E. Turley Jr., managing director of the Church Historical Department, reports that copies of unknown origin circulated as early as October 1978 and that Elder G. Homer Durham ascertained directly from President Kimball on February 21, 1979, that the document was a forgery. Richard E. Turley Jr. to author, October 6, 1997. The purported revelation proved innocuous because it differs little from official Church positions.

202. The revelation is not mentioned in President Tanner’s biography, and he did not describe the experience to his family. See Durham, *N. Eldon Tanner*. Walker, interview. Howard, *Marion G. Romney*, 239, mentions but does not describe the event.

Back in his office, Heber said to Jerry Cahill, “What would you consider ‘an important announcement?’” The response was: perhaps a new temple. Then Heber joyously handed Jerry a copy. At his first free moment, Jerry Cahill closed the door to his office and knelt to pray. “An overwhelming feeling swept through [him] as in a wave.” He could not utter a formal prayer, but experienced the most striking expression of divine power of his life, confirming to him the revelation.

Despite their emotions, they had to deal with the business at hand. The first press run at the *Deseret News* sometimes began as early as 10:30, so speed mattered. Quickly they went about their duties. They prepared a two-paragraph press release and an audiocassette of the letter, then called a press conference at which Heber Wolsey would read the announcement. They were under instructions to get the widest possible dissemination of the full text of the letter but to offer no explanations or commentary. Primary concerns were accuracy, simplicity, and dignity. The Brethren wanted a modest, straightforward announcement with no cross-examination.<sup>203</sup>

The Public Communications staff of forty came together to hear the announcement read, then dispersed to inform their assigned contacts about the press conference. When Duane Cardall, religion reporter for KSL-TV, got the call that an important announcement would be made, he queried, “What is it?”

“We can’t tell you.”

“Come on, what is it?”

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203. Jerry Cahill to author, December 13, 1995, correcting author’s notes of the conversation. “Mormonism Enters a New Era,” *Time*, August 7, 1978, reported President Kimball saying, “I spent a good deal of time in the temple alone, praying for guidance, and there was a gradual and general development of the whole program, in connection with the Apostles.” Without understanding the whole story, this comment could be taken as a description of an essentially rational, administrative decision-making process, but the description also meshes well with a spiritual explanation. “New Priesthood Policy Stirs Media Interest,” *Sunstone* 3 (September/October 1978): 4.

In an interview, LeGrand Richards talked of consultations and development of a position. LeGrand Richards, *Interview with Mormon Apostle LeGrand Richards concerning the 1978 Negro “Revelation”* (Phoenix: Bob Witte, 1978); interview by Wesley P. Walters and Chris Vlachos. Church critics interpreted the decision as a wholly human one. Robert Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, *America’s Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984), 184. See John L. Smith to the Editor, *Sunstone* 5 (January/February 1980): 2, interpreting Richards’s account as describing what was “simply a corporate decision.” In contrast, see Arrington, Diary, June 18, 1978, Kimball Papers, quoting Mamie Silver that Elder Richards, her brother-in-law, “emphasized that all of the Twelve were certain it was a revelation from the Lord.”



“The blacks are going to get the priesthood.”

“Come on, what is the announcement?”

“No, it is serious.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Cardall drove in a microwave truck to the Church Office Building, ran into the building, and hurried to the Public Communications office on the 25th floor. With a copy of the statement in hand, he sped downstairs and broadcast a news bulletin standing on the street, interrupting regular programming.

With no advance notice, the story hit like a bolt out of the blue, an incredible, stunning announcement.<sup>204</sup> By late morning, all the news media had copies of the release.

Meanwhile, amid all the excitement, the routine work of the kingdom went on. Spencer’s journal for the day reads, laconically:

This morning at seven o’clock by prior arrangement met in the upper room of the Salt Lake Temple with all of the General Authorities to consider with them the matter of giving the Priesthood to all worthy male members of the Church.

After our meeting returned to the office and released the following letter concerning giving the priesthood to all worthy male members of the Church: (See above copy of letter.)

Immediately following the release of this announcement the telephones started to ring and rang continuously the balance of the afternoon. People, members and nonmembers, called from around the world to learn if what they had heard on the radio and TV was true.

The First Presidency met with the Presiding Bishopric at 10:15 A.M. which was much later than usual due to our meeting in the Temple.

At 11:00 A.M. the First Presidency met with a Mr. Ron Smith of Newsmaking International.

This afternoon at 2:30, President David P. Gardner of the University of Utah brought [the eminent historian] Dr. [John Hope] Franklin, a black man, in to meet me and came into my office for a short visit.<sup>205</sup>

Had appointments with several of the General Authorities this afternoon on matters they needed to discuss with me. Also my counselors and I met with the Missionary Committee and then later with Brother Heber G. Wolsey and Wendell J. Ashton [of Public Communications].

It was a very busy day today and did not get away from the office until six o’clock tonight.

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204. Duane V. Cardall, interview by author, recorded on cassette tape, August 30, 1990, Kimball Papers.

205. In this courtesy call, neither Franklin nor President Kimball mentioned the revelation. Ronald Coleman paper presented at Mormon History Association, Logan, Utah, May 7, 1988.

## First Responses

The word spread like lightning through official Church channels, over radio and television, and by word of mouth. In some heavily Mormon communities, the telephone circuits became so overloaded that it was nearly impossible to get a call through. Exultation, gratitude, excitement, and other emotions competed for place.

When Elder Dunn arrived at a board of directors meeting right after the temple meeting, it was obvious that he had been weeping.<sup>206</sup>

At lunchtime, Heber Wolsey went home to share the news with his wife, Fay. She said she had received a call from his office and “when you get back to your office you’re going to have a surprise.” Heber recounts:

On returning to the office, I opened the door and saw Darius Gray [a black LDS businessman and good friend] looking fondly out the window at the Salt Lake Temple. He rushed to me, and we threw our arms around each other and wept for gratitude and joy. When we regained a little composure, I whispered, “I never thought . . .”

“I always knew,” said Darius. “I just didn’t know if it would happen on this side of the veil.”

“. . . in our lifetime!”

Darius looked at me, then out the window at the temple, and then at me again. He closed his eyes, opened them slowly, and said softly, “God is good.”<sup>207</sup>

Max Pinegar, president of the Language Training Mission (later renamed the Missionary Training Center), had an appointment with Elder Packer that morning. Elder Packer arrived late for the appointment and said, “Come sit by me,” then handed him the press release. To Max’s tears, he said, “This means that you will be teaching black missionaries at the LTM.” Elder Packer bore personal witness of the correctness of the change. Knowing that the LTM would be in commotion, Max got permission to

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206. Arrington, *Diary*, June 18, 1978, quoting Bill Pulsipher.

207. Heber Wolsey, foreword to Margaret Blair Young and Darius Aidan Gray, *One More River to Cross* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2000), xiii; Darius Gray to author, June 16, 2000; Heber G. Wolsey, interview by author, September 8, 2000. Wolsey recalls Gray saying, “I always knew,” but Gray says he thought priesthood would have to come after this life. Gray had been unwilling to believe rumors flying around the Church Office Building that announcement of a revelation was imminent until he had personally confirmed it with President Kimball’s office. Young and Gray, *Last Mile*, 418. Costanzo, “Group Marks 20 Years of Black Priesthood,” B2; Gray to author.

call a mission conference for that evening. They parted without ever having dealt with the issues of their planned meeting.<sup>208</sup>

Rick Vernon, a neighbor of the Kimballs, was working at a bank; he received an emotional call about 11:30 a.m. from Elder Hinckley's secretary, a personal friend. Now he understood why President Kimball had seemed withdrawn.

While Camilla was working in the garden in the late morning, she heard the telephone ring and came in to answer it. Her daughter, Olive Beth, asked excitedly, "Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"About the revelation that all worthy men can receive the priesthood!"

Camilla sat down on the floor and wept in joy and relief—joy for the revelation and relief for her husband. She understood now what had weighed so heavily on Spencer's mind. She had seen him so distraught only one other time.<sup>209</sup> Spencer had always maintained strict confidentiality where Church business was concerned. She sometimes humorously complained that he couldn't remember what was confidential and what was not, so he solved the problem by never telling her anything. She had to read about new developments in the *Church News*.<sup>210</sup>

Camilla went into the bedroom and poured out her heart in a prayer of gratitude and in desire that this development would not burden Spencer with new controversy. She worried that it might cause a schism in the Church, that there would be those who could not accept a change.<sup>211</sup> Her first thought was that Spencer's anxiety had arisen from fear of possible schism, but she later concluded that his intensity stemmed rather from his

208. Max Pinegar, interview by author, June 10, 1996.

209. Camilla, interview. The other occasion was the 1943 excommunication of Apostle Richard R. Lyman.

210. She sometimes grumbled a little, "How is it that I have to hear about things like this on the radio?" Paul H. Dunn, interview, August 8, 1996, quoting Spencer W. Kimball. Bruce McConkie had at least intimated to his wife that something significant was going to happen: "You'll be surprised." Olive Beth Kimball Mack, interview by author, March 6, 1997, quoting Amelia Smith McConkie. It was Elders Perry and McConkie, not Spencer, who later related to Camilla the intense spiritual experience in the temple. Similarly, Spencer had never talked to her about his spiritual experience on the mountain in Colorado at the time of his call. Camilla, interview. See Kimball and Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 192–95.

211. "Conversations with Camilla," videocassette, interview by *This People*, February 27, 1985; see Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, April 25, 1982, and February 27, 1985.

deep desire to receive some sort of manifestation confirming the decision he had arrived at.<sup>212</sup>

Spencer tried soon afterward to call Camilla with the news, but she was back in the garden and did not hear the telephone. He then called Olive Beth to ask if she knew where her mother was. Then he hesitated, as if wondering what he should tell her, so Olive Beth went on, “I just heard the wonderful news. It is marvelous!”

Spencer responded, “It is the most earthshaking thing that has happened in my lifetime.”<sup>213</sup>

That evening the story led off NBC News. That afternoon and the next morning the story ran on the front page of major newspapers across the country—the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*. *Time* and *Newsweek* stopped their presses to include the news in their weekly runs.<sup>214</sup> Most newspapers reported neutrally: “The Mormon Church announced Friday a revelation from God will give its priesthood to all worthy male members.” Some commentators scorned the “convenience” of a “revelation” that allowed a way out of an intolerable bind, but others noted accurately that it had been some years since any significant demonstrations against BYU and the Church had occurred. External pressure was the lowest it had been for years.<sup>215</sup>

Because Church leaders declined to comment, reporters began to interview men and women on the street for reactions, NAACP officials, and leaders of other local churches. The responses were almost uniformly



President Kimball with his wife, Camilla Eyring Kimball, 1974. Courtesy Edward L. Kimball.

212. Camilla, interview.

213. 1978 Draft.

214. 1978 Draft. Stephen W. Stathis, “Mormonism and the Periodical Press: A Change Is Underway,” *Dialogue* 14 (Summer 1981): 51–52.

215. Janet Brigham, ““To Every Worthy Member,”” *Sunstone* 3 (July/August 1978): 14.

positive. The media next turned to black members of the Church, who proved to be articulate and devoted, fielding questions—often barbed—with tact, patience, and humility. An elderly lifetime member said, “We have all waited for this, but I didn’t think it would come in my lifetime.”<sup>216</sup> Monroe Fleming, expressing his happiness, said, “It’s like not feeling you’re a guest in your father’s house anymore.”<sup>217</sup> Robert Stevenson said, “After hearing the news, I called my wife at work and told her to come home immediately. When she was home I told her the news and she broke into tears and laughter at the same time. We are already planning our temple marriage.”<sup>218</sup> Joseph Freeman said, “This is something we’ve waited a long time for,” though he had never been primarily concerned with the question of priesthood. “I knew for sure that this was Christ’s church. . . . I felt certain that the time would come . . . when I would be able to hold the priesthood.”<sup>219</sup>

The news brought nearly universal rejoicing among members, both because of the extension of blessings to worthy families who had been denied them, but also because it illustrated in dramatic fashion the Church teaching that revelation continues to the present. As the news spread through Utah and beyond, people embraced and cried and rejoiced. As with such events as Pearl Harbor and the John F. Kennedy assassination, Latter-day Saints remember where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news.<sup>220</sup>

A reporter who came from a local television station to the press conference had been somewhat antagonistic to the Church. When he was told to cover an “extremely important announcement” at Church headquarters, he and a cameraman ran the several blocks to the Church Office Building. Breathless, he received a copy of the announcement from hands shaking in excitement.

He said later, “I felt that I was being a witness to history. I remember being emotional. I sensed a lot of happiness at the Church offices . . . a great burden being lifted. There was a sense of joy; people were genuinely thrilled.” He understood then that the Mormons had not been acting out

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216. Lucille Bankhead, quoted in “Tears Tell Feelings of Black Members,” *Deseret News*, June 10, 1978, A3.

217. Monroe Fleming, quoted in “Tears Tell Feelings,” A3.

218. Robert L. Stevenson, quoted in David Liggett, “Former Black ASBYU Executive Excited about New Opportunities,” (BYU) *Daily Universe*, June 9, 1978, 4.

219. Freeman, *In the Lord’s Due Time*, 67.

220. Lester E. Bush Jr., “Introduction,” *Dialogue* 12 (Summer 1979): 9; Brigham, “To Every Worthy Member,” 12.

of bigotry, as he supposed, but out of principle. “I experienced a change in feelings toward the Church that day.” The exultant reactions of the Public Communications staff members and others he interviewed on the street persuaded him, as years of explanation and protestation had not. He rushed back to his station and personally read on the air the bulletin: “God has spoken to the prophet of the Mormon Church.”<sup>221</sup>

Mary Frances Sturlaugson, a young black woman, recorded that in a downtown office a friend told her the news. She said, “Please don’t joke with me about something like that.”

At that instant a young man who had been talking on the phone stood up and, with his fists stretched above his head, shouted, “All right!”

Cold chills went completely through my body. All I could say was, “I don’t believe it’s happened.” An older man beside me kept repeating, “I’ll be darned, I’ll be darned.”

As I walked outside, crying like a happy kid at Christmastime, horns were honking like crazy. I stopped for a red light and a car pulled up. The driver asked me if I had heard what he had just heard. I half mumbled and half nodded a disbelieving yes. He whooped and started blowing his horn as he drove off. When I arrived at my apartment my roommates ran out to meet me, and we jumped up and down screaming with joy. Finally we went inside and each said a prayer, sobs punctuating every one.<sup>222</sup>

In Brazil, Helvécio Martins returned home from work to find his wife Rudá extremely excited. “I have news, amazing news!” Her friend had received a telephone call from the United States about the announcement. Helvécio could not respond. Could it be true? A rumor? Then the telephone, which had been out of service because of nearby construction, suddenly rang and a call from a friend in Salt Lake City confirmed the news.<sup>223</sup>

The wedding invitations for the Martinses’ son, Marcus, had already been distributed when the announcement came. But he and his fiancée,

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221. Lorry E. Rytting to author, April 18, 1990, and June 12, 1990, from reporting his March 4, 1990, interview with Bill Brown, then a Dallas TV reporter, and Rytting’s own observations in the Public Communications Department; Brigham, “To Every Worthy Member,” 12.

222. Sturlaugson, *A Soul So Rebellious*, 65–68.

223. Martins, *Autobiography*, 68; Hart, “Eager to Serve on Lord’s Timetable,” 6, 12; Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 293. Brother Martins became the first black mission president (Brazil Fortaleza Mission) in 1987, and the first black General Authority in 1990. “Elder Helvécio Martins of the Seventy,” 106; Martins, *Autobiography*, 115. The first stake where all the priesthood leaders were black was organized in Nigeria in 1988. *1989–1990 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1988), 323 (May 15, 1988).



This photograph was taken in the Martins living room in Rio de Janeiro the day Marcus left for his mission. Among the family and friends shown are Marcus (*standing, left*); his future wife, Mirian Barbosa (*seated, next to Marcus*); Mirian's mother, Gloria Barbosa (*also seated*); Marcus's father, Helvécio (*standing, center*); and Mirian's father, Manoel Barbosa Filho (*standing, right*). Courtesy Marcus H. Martins.

Mirian Abelin Barbosa, decided to postpone the wedding because he now could serve a mission. He became the first black missionary to be called after the revelation and served in the Brazil Porto Alegre Mission.<sup>224</sup>

Twenty-six-year-old Joseph Freeman, a black member of the Church for five years, rose the morning of June 9 knowing that the lawn of his home in Salt Lake Valley needed watering and weeding. The insistent ringing of the telephone brought him in from the yard, and a white friend asked, "Have you heard? Well, listen! President Kimball has had a revelation—about your people, the blacks."

Waiting for the punch line of what he assumed was a bad joke, Joseph kept calm.

"Turn on the TV and see for yourself," the friend insisted.

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224. Martins, *Autobiography*, 68–73. 1979 *Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1979), 6. Soon afterward Jacques M. G. Jonassaint, of Haiti, was called to the Florida Spanish Mission, and Mary Sturlaugson, of Provo, Utah, went to the Texas San Antonio Mission as the first African American woman missionary. Golden A. Buchmiller, "3 Black Members Called on Missions," *Church News*, September 16, 1978, 5.

Joseph telephoned the Church switchboard, and the operator put him through to the First Presidency's office. A secretary told him, "Yes, Brother Freeman, what you've heard is true." On Sunday, June 11, Joseph Freeman became the first black man in Utah to be ordained to the priesthood.<sup>225</sup> Being first made him an instant celebrity, and he was deluged with interview requests from *Time*, *Ebony*, *People*, writers, television news commentators, national television shows, and disk jockeys with call-in shows. Church meetings and firesides booked him six months in advance. Sometimes he had three or four appointments in a single Sunday.<sup>226</sup>

New York lawyer George H. Mortimer recalled:

I was working in the public search room at the Patent Office in Washington, D.C. . . . The clerk had a radio playing and as I walked past the little office I heard the announcer say, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has just made public a revelation that Negroes may now hold the Priesthood." I will always remember the thrill. . . . The following Sunday I was in Manhattan . . . [and] every black member over 12 years of age [was ordained] to an appropriate office in the Priesthood. The joy expressed in the faces . . . is indescribable.<sup>227</sup>

A week after the announcement, Ruffin Bridgeforth, leader of Genesis, had still not been ordained because his local leader with that responsibility was out of town. Elder Packer, discussing the situation with President Kimball, asked whether Brother Bridgeforth might properly be ordained a high priest rather than an elder in light of his long and faithful service. After pondering the question, President Kimball said, "Yes, that's right. You do that." After Brother Bridgeforth was ordained, he asked Elder Packer to give his wheelchair-bound wife, Helena, a priesthood blessing. Elder Packer later recalled, "I laid my hands on her head and just as I was to speak, I thought, 'Ruffin, you can now give this blessing.' And when he

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225. It may be that another man was ordained to the Aaronic priesthood in Guam sooner than Joseph Freeman, because in Guam, on the other side of the international dateline, it was Sunday while it was still Saturday in Utah. L. Brent Goates to author, March 17, 1998, referring to William W. Cannon, *Beachheads in Micronesia* (Salt Lake City: Privately published, 1997), 102–3.

226. Freeman, *In the Lord's Due Time*, 1–2, 106–10. Within two weeks, he and his wife went to the temple for their endowments. Elder Monson sealed them and their two sons. Others also ordained that first Sunday were Jose Ramon Diaz of the San Juan (Puerto Rico) Branch and Robert Lang of Los Angeles. Brother Lang and his wife were reportedly the first to be sealed in the temple. "Blacks Talk about Membership in the LDS Church," *Provo Daily Herald*, June 5, 1988, 22.

227. George H. Mortimer, interview by author, undated but after Spencer W. Kimball's death.





President Kimball with the first two Ghanaian missionaries, Samuel Bainson and Crosby Sampson-Davis. Both missionaries served in the England Manchester Mission. Courtesy Emmanuel Abu Kissi.

began that blessing—and he needed no coaching—by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, that . . . was a moment in Church history.”<sup>228</sup>

Spencer attended Helena’s funeral in 1980. Ruffin said of him, “What manner of man is this who can take away my sadness?”<sup>229</sup>

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228. Tate, *Boyd K. Packer*, 227–28; Young and Gray, *Last Mile*, 417, 422; R. Scott Lloyd, “Ruffin Bridgeforth, First Black High Priest, Eulogized as a Pioneer,” *Church News*, April 5, 1997, 7; Lloyd, “Revelation Rewarded Those Who Waited,” 4–5, quoting Elder Packer’s remarks at Ruffin Bridgeforth’s funeral, March 26, 1997.

229. Margaret Young to author, July 29, 2002, quoting taped interview with Ruffin Bridgeforth in 1996.

## President Kimball, Immediately Afterward

The day after the announcement, Spencer's barber trimmed his hair in preparation for a trip to Hawaii and found him "happy, buoyant, and warm . . . [with] a great weight off his shoulders."<sup>230</sup> In Hawaii President Kimball attended a stake conference, rededicated the temple,<sup>231</sup> conducted an area conference (the first in the United States), and convened a solemn assembly for leaders. Elder John H. Groberg asked if Spencer had time to meet some of the faithful black Church members living in the islands. "I would like to meet all of them," Spencer answered. When he met with a small group he gave each a bear hug. With characteristic warmth, he told a black Marine, "I just so appreciate your joining the Church under trying conditions—and now you're being blessed for it."<sup>232</sup> Many people reported to him that they had wept tears of joy and gratitude upon hearing of the revelation. Some wept anew in the retelling.<sup>233</sup>

When reporters in Hawaii asked about the revelation, Spencer answered, "It is a different world than it was twenty or twenty-five years ago. The world is ready for it." The reporters also asked him for details about receiving the revelation, but the president described it as "a personal thing." He sidestepped further questions on the subject, saying he was there to rededicate the temple.<sup>234</sup>

Although he felt the subject inappropriate for a press conference, Spencer willingly talked about the revelation in a personal conversation with his son, expressing the view that this revelation was "the most important thing to happen in the Church since the Manifesto" in 1890, yet he felt great concern lest some people sensationalize it. He particularly stressed that it had not come in an open vision. "Some people would try to figure it out that I had a personal visitation from the Almighty as in the First Vision. I would not want to make the revelation different from what it was. When I meet little children they sometimes look up at me and say, 'Do you talk to Jesus?' It sets my heart in a whirl, because their simple expectations are so high." Still, he had no doubts that he had received a revelation

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230. Arrington, Diary, June 12, 1978, quoting Glen Leonard quoting Ross Pyper, barber at Deseret Gym.

231. The first session was held in the temple, the remaining eight in the BYU-Hawaii auditorium because of the temple's small size.

232. Golden A. Buchmiller, "President Kimball Inspires Members to Improve Their Lives," *Church News*, December 19, 1981, 6.

233. Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, June 11, 1978.

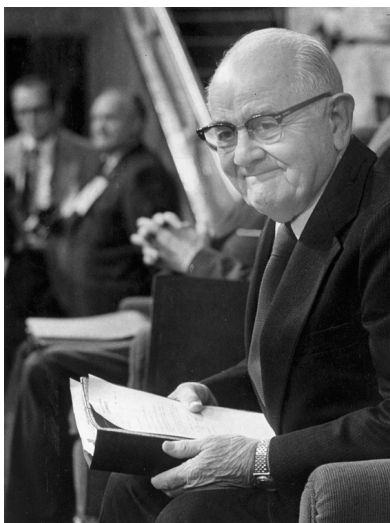
234. Phillip Colton Smith (high councilor who was present at the press conference) to author, January 11, 1994.

and that its source was divine. The strong, distinct, sacred impression he experienced banished for him even the thought of questioning its source.<sup>235</sup>

For the Twelve, their respect for President Kimball was augmented by the revelatory process. Elder Perry commented, “This is an example of President Kimball’s willingness to take on himself the prophetic calling. It was not a result of a ‘policy decision,’ but of his going to the Lord. He has the courage to be a prophet.”<sup>236</sup>

And Elder Hinckley said, “It is a tremendous thing. It came as a result of great effort and prayer, anxious seeking and pleading. Anyone who does not think that is a part of receiving revelation does not understand the process.”<sup>237</sup>

A few weeks after the event, Elder Packer said, “I have feared we might lose him, now that this great work is done. I hope there is something else only he can do, to keep him here. No one else could have done this; there is none so innocent and open, so sensitive.”<sup>238</sup>



President Spencer W. Kimball at general conference, October 1974. Courtesy Edward L. Kimball.

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235. 1978 Draft.

236. 1978 Draft. Gene Dalton, interview by author, June 1978.

237. Gordon B. Hinckley, interview by author, July 12, 1978.

238. Packer, interview.

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