

Race and the Priesthood

In theology and practice, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints embraces the universal human family. Latter-day Saint scripture and teachings affirm that God loves all of His children and makes salvation available to all. God created the many diverse races and ethnicities and esteems them all equally. As the Book of Mormon puts it, “all are alike unto God.”¹

The structure and organization of the Church encourage racial integration. Latter-day Saints attend Church services according to the geographical boundaries of their local ward, or congregation. By definition, this means that the racial, economic, and demographic composition of Latter-day Saint congregations generally mirrors that of the wider local community.² The Church’s lay ministry also tends to facilitate integration: a black bishop may preside over a mostly white congregation; a Hispanic woman may be paired with an Asian woman to visit the homes of a racially diverse membership. Church members of different races and ethnicities regularly minister in one another’s homes and serve alongside one another as teachers, as youth leaders, and in myriad other assignments in their local congregations. Such practices make The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a thoroughly integrated faith.

Despite this modern reality, for much of its history—from the mid-1800s until 1978—the Church did not ordain men of black African descent to its priesthood or allow black men or women to participate in temple endowment or sealing ordinances.

The Church was established in 1830, during an era of great racial division in the United States. At the time, many people of African descent lived in slavery, and racial distinctions and prejudice were not just common but customary among white Americans. Those realities, though unfamiliar and disturbing today, influenced all aspects of people’s lives, including their religion. Many Christian churches of that era, for instance, were segregated along racial lines. From the beginnings of the Church, people of every race and ethnicity could be baptized and received as members. Toward the end of his life, Church founder Joseph Smith openly opposed slavery. There has never been a Churchwide policy of segregated congregations.³

During the first two decades of the Church’s existence, a few black men were ordained to the priesthood. One of these men, Elijah Abel, also participated in temple ceremonies in Kirtland, Ohio, and was later baptized as proxy for deceased relatives in Nauvoo, Illinois. There is no reliable evidence that any black men were denied the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. In a private Church council three years after Joseph Smith’s death, Brigham Young praised Q. Walker Lewis, a black man who had been ordained to the priesthood, saying, “We have one of the best Elders, an African.”⁴

In 1852, President Brigham Young publicly announced that men of black African descent could no longer be ordained to the priesthood, though thereafter blacks continued to join the Church through baptism and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. Following the death of Brigham Young, subsequent Church presidents restricted blacks from receiving the temple endowment or being married in the temple. Over time, Church leaders and members advanced many theories to explain the priesthood and temple restrictions. None of these explanations is accepted today as the official doctrine of the Church.

The Church in an American Racial Culture

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was restored amidst a highly contentious racial culture in which whites were afforded great privilege. In 1790, the U.S. Congress limited citizenship to “free white person[s].”⁵ Over the next half century, issues of race divided the country—while slave labor was legal in the more agrarian South, it was eventually banned in the more urbanized North. Even so, racial discrimination was widespread in the North as well as the South, and many states implemented laws banning interracial marriage.⁶ In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that blacks possessed “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”⁷ A generation after the Civil War (1861–65) led to the end of slavery in the United States, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional, a decision that legalized a host of public color barriers until the Court reversed itself in 1954.⁸ Not until 1967 did the Court strike down laws forbidding interracial marriage.

In 1850, the U.S. Congress created Utah Territory, and the U.S. president appointed Brigham Young to the position of territorial governor. Southerners who had converted to the Church and migrated to Utah with their slaves raised the question of slavery’s legal status in the territory. In two speeches delivered before the Utah territorial legislature in January and February 1852, Brigham Young announced a policy restricting men of black African descent from priesthood ordination. At the same time, President Young said that at some future day, black Church members would “have [all] the privilege and more” enjoyed by other members.⁹

The justifications for this restriction echoed the widespread ideas about racial inferiority that had been used to argue for the legalization of black “servitude” in the Territory of Utah.¹⁰ According to one view, which had been promulgated in the United States from at least the 1730s, blacks descended from the same lineage as the biblical Cain, who slew his brother Abel.¹¹ Those who accepted this view believed that God’s “curse” on Cain was the mark of a dark skin. Black servitude was sometimes viewed as a second curse placed upon Noah’s grandson Canaan as a result of Ham’s indiscretion toward his father.¹² Although slavery was not a significant factor in Utah’s economy and was soon abolished, the restriction on priesthood ordinations remained.

Removing the Restriction

Even after 1852, at least two black Latter-day Saints continued to hold the priesthood. When one of these men, Elijah Abel, petitioned to receive his temple endowment in 1879, his request was denied. Jane Manning James, a faithful black member who crossed the plains and lived in Salt Lake City until her death in 1908, similarly asked to enter the temple; she was allowed to perform baptisms for the dead for her ancestors but was not allowed to participate in other ordinances.¹³ The curse of Cain was often put forward as justification for the priesthood and temple restrictions. Around the turn of the century, another explanation gained currency: blacks were said to have been less than fully valiant in the premortal battle against Lucifer and, as a consequence, were restricted from priesthood and temple blessings.¹⁴

By the late 1940s and 1950s, racial integration was becoming more common in American life. Church President David O. McKay emphasized that the restriction extended only to men of black African descent. The Church had always allowed Pacific Islanders to hold the priesthood, and President McKay clarified that black Fijians and Australian Aborigines could also be ordained to the priesthood and instituted missionary work among them. In South Africa, President McKay reversed a prior policy that required prospective priesthood holders to trace their lineage out of Africa.¹⁵

Nevertheless, given the long history of withholding the priesthood from men of black African descent, Church leaders believed that a revelation from God was needed to alter the policy, and they made ongoing efforts to understand what should be done. After praying for guidance, President McKay did not feel impressed to lift the ban.¹⁶

As the Church grew worldwide, its overarching mission to “go ye therefore, and teach all nations”¹⁷ seemed increasingly incompatible with the priesthood and temple restrictions. The Book of Mormon declared that the gospel message of salvation should go forth to “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.”¹⁸ While there were no limits on whom the Lord invited to “partake of his goodness” through baptism,¹⁹ the priesthood and temple restrictions created significant barriers, a point made increasingly evident as the Church spread in international locations with diverse and mixed racial heritages.

Brazil in particular presented many challenges. Unlike the United States and South Africa where legal and de facto racism led to deeply segregated societies, Brazil prided itself on its open, integrated, and mixed racial heritage. In 1975, the Church announced that a temple would be built in São Paulo, Brazil. As the temple construction proceeded, Church authorities encountered faithful black and mixed-ancestry Latter-day Saints who had contributed financially and in other ways to the building of the São Paulo temple, a sanctuary they realized they would not be allowed to enter once it was completed. Their sacrifices, as well as the conversions of thousands of Nigerians and Ghanaians in the 1960s and early 1970s, moved Church leaders.²⁰

Church leaders pondered promises made by prophets such as Brigham Young that black members would one day receive priesthood and temple blessings. In June 1978, after “spending many hours in the Upper Room of the [Salt Lake] Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance,” Church President Spencer W. Kimball,

his counselors in the First Presidency, and members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles received a revelation. “He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come,” the First Presidency announced on June 8. The First Presidency stated that they were “aware of the promises made by the prophets and presidents of the Church who have preceded us” that “all of our brethren who are worthy may receive the priesthood.”²¹ The revelation rescinded the restriction on priesthood ordination. It also extended the blessings of the temple to all worthy Latter-day Saints, men and women. The First Presidency statement regarding the revelation was canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants as Official Declaration 2.

This “revelation on the priesthood,” as it is commonly known in the Church, was a landmark revelation and a historic event. Those who were present at the time described it in reverent terms. Gordon B. Hinckley, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, remembered it this way: “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 of God who was joined by his Brethren. ... Every man in that circle, by the power of the Holy Ghost, knew the same thing. ... Not one of us who was present on that occasion was ever quite the same after that. Nor has the Church been quite the same.”²²

Reaction worldwide was overwhelmingly positive among Church members of all races. Many Latter-day Saints wept for joy at the news. Some reported feeling a collective weight lifted from their shoulders. The Church began priesthood ordinations for men of African descent immediately, and black men and women entered temples throughout the world. Soon after the revelation, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, an apostle, spoke of new “light and knowledge” that had erased previously “limited understanding.”²³

The Church Today

Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.²⁴

Since that day in 1978, the Church has looked to the future, as membership among Africans, African Americans and others of African descent has continued to grow rapidly. While Church records for individual members do not indicate an individual’s race or ethnicity, the number of Church members of African descent is now in the hundreds of thousands.

The Church proclaims that redemption through Jesus Christ is available to the entire human family on the conditions God has prescribed. It affirms that God is “no respecter of persons”²⁵ and emphatically declares that anyone who is righteous—regardless of race—is favored of Him. The teachings of the Church in relation to God’s children are epitomized by a verse in the second book of Nephi: “[The Lord]

denieth none that cometh unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; ... all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.”²⁶

The Church acknowledges the contribution of scholars to the historical content presented in this article; their work is used with permission.

1. 2 Nephi 26:33. See also Acts 10:34–35; 17:26; Romans 2:11; 10:12; Galatians 3:28.
2. To facilitate involvement of Church members who do not speak the dominant language of the area in which they live, some congregations are organized among speakers of the same language (such as Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, or Tongan). In such cases, members can choose which congregation to attend.
3. At some periods of time, reflecting local customs and laws, there were instances of segregated congregations in areas such as South Africa and the U.S. South.
4. Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, Mar. 26, 1847, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, spelling and punctuation modernized.
5. “An Act to Establish an Uniform Rule of Naturalization,” 1st Congress, 2nd Sess., Chap. 3 (1790).
6. Elise Lemire, *“Miscegenation”: Making Race in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Utah outlawed miscegenation between 1888 and 1963. See Patrick Mason, “The Prohibition of Interracial Marriage in Utah, 1888–1963,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 108–131.
7. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 347.
8. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896); *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954); *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967).
9. Brigham Young, Speeches Before the Utah Territorial Legislature, Jan. 23 and Feb. 5, 1852, George D. Watt Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, transcribed from Pitman shorthand by LaJean Purcell Carruth; “To the Saints,” *Deseret News*, April 3, 1852, 42.
10. In the same session of the territorial legislature in which Brigham Young announced the priesthood ordination policy, the territorial legislature legalized black “servitude.” Brigham Young and the legislators perceived “servitude” to be a more humane alternative to slavery. Christopher B. Rich Jr., “The True Policy for Utah: Servitude, Slavery, and ‘An Act in Relation to Service,’” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 80, no.1

(Winter 2012): 54–74.

11. David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 178–182, 360n20; Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
12. Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
13. Margaret Blair Young, “‘The Lord’s Blessing Was with Us’: Jane Elizabeth Manning James, 1822–1908,” in Richard E. Turley Jr. and Brittany A. Chapman, eds., *Women of Faith in the Latter Days, Volume Two, 1821–1845* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 120–135.
14. Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, for example, wrote in 1907 that the belief was “quite general” among Mormons that “the Negro race has been cursed for taking a neutral position in that great contest.” Yet this belief, he admitted, “is not the official position of the Church, [and is] merely the opinion of men.” Joseph Fielding Smith to Alfred M. Nelson, Jan. 31, 1907, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
15. Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (Spring 2008), 18–20; Marjorie Newton, *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia* (Laie: Hawaii: The Institute for Polynesian Studies, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, 1991), 209–10. Even before this time, President George Albert Smith concluded that the priesthood ban did not apply to Filipino Negritos. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on the Priesthood,” 18–19.

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16. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” 21–22.
17. Matthew 28:19.
18. Mosiah 15:28; 1 Nephi 19:17.
19. 2 Nephi 26:23, 28.
20. Mark L. Grover, “Mormonism in Brazil: Religion and Dependency in Latin America,” (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 1985), 276–78. For a personal account of events in Brazil, see Helvecio Martins with Mark Grover, *The Autobiography of Elder Helvecio Martins* (Salt Lake City: A B N , 1994), 64–66. For a more detailed account, see F. D. I.

Aspen Books, 1994), 64–68. For the conversions of Africans, see E. Dale LeBaron, ed., *All Are Alike unto God”: Fascinating Conversion Stories of African Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990); *Pioneers in Africa: An Inspiring Story of Those Who Paved the Way* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Broadcasting, 2003).

21. Official Declaration 2.
22. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Priesthood Restoration,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1988, 70, available at ensign.ChurchofJesusChrist.org. The impressions of others who were in the room have been compiled in Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” 54–59.
23. Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God” (CES Religious Educator’s Symposium, Aug. 18, 1978); available at speeches.byu.edu.
24. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Need for Greater Kindness,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2006, 58–61.
25. Acts 10:34.
26. 2 Nephi 26:33.