

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 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.³²

Mary Hope, speaking the feelings of many black Saints in 1947, said, "We are not too much worried about the priesthood. We know that the Lord will take care of it. There is so much of the Gospel for us to live up to that we have a very great responsibility and about all we can do."³³

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, even though he was most keenly aware of its manifestations in the lives of the American Indians, for whom he had been assigned special responsibility (see ch. 30).

The priesthood policy repeatedly called for attention from the Presidency and Twelve to answer borderline questions. Shortly after World War II, the Twelve asked Frederick Babbel to compile sources on the issue.³⁴ In 1947, the year Jackie Robinson finally broke the color barrier in professional baseball, the First Presidency (then consisting of George Albert Smith, J. Reuben Clark, and David O. McKay) and the Twelve discussed the request by Brother and Sister Hope for patriarchal blessings. Spencer became acquainted with their story at that time and summarized in his journal the response to their request: "The Brethren seemed unified in feeling that we could not withhold the regular gospel blessings from the colored people, and that though we were unable yet to give them the Priesthood, perhaps we should not withhold from them the other blessings of the gospel [such as patriarchal blessings]." Elder Benson had described the Hopes' faithfulness despite being asked not to attend meetings.³⁵ Presiding Patriarch Eldred G. Smith

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

33. Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, October, 30, 1947, quoting Sister Hope. (Sister Hope is also quoted in Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, October 9, 1947: "We are not worrying about the Priesthood. We have so many blessings now to live up to that we have our hands full, and we are deeply grateful, and we are expending our every energy to magnify our present opportunities.") See also the attitudes expressed in Alan Gerald Cherry, *It's You and Me, Lord!* (Provo, Utah: Trilogy Arts, 1970), 43, 51, 63; Joseph Freeman, *In the Lord's Due Time* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 97; Martin, *Black Mormon Tells Her Story*, 76; Mary Frances Sturlaugson, *A Soul So Rebellious* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 54–57, 62–73; Helvécio Martins and Mark Grover, *The Autobiography of Helvécio Martins* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1994), 61; John L. Hart, "Eager to Serve on the Lord's Timetable," *Church News*, May 26, 1990, 12 (Helvécio Martins).

34. Bush, "History of My Research," 112 (date uncertain).

35. Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, October 9 and 30, 1947.

gave the Hopes their patriarchal blessings, identifying them as “associated with Manasseh,” not because of literal lineage, but consistent with his belief that blacks should be assigned to or adopted into that tribe of Israel.³⁶ Spencer sometimes related the Hopes’ experiences to congregations as he preached tolerance and Christian love for all. He praised their exemplary faithfulness when it would have been so easy for them to succumb to bitterness.³⁷

In that same year, 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.³⁸ In 1952, Nelson, still unable to reconcile this Church policy with his understanding of the gospel, published an article critical of the policy in *The Nation*, drawing national attention.³⁹

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 Elder McKay: “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,”⁴⁰ based on “some eternal law with which man is yet unfamiliar” by which men’s place and condition of birth and rights to priesthood must be explained, a plan “the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality.”⁴¹ 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 David O. McKay became Church president in April 1951, he continued to respond to queries with this same statement.⁴² [But behind the scenes application of the policy was changing to some degree. In 1948, during the George Albert Smith administration, priesthood](#)

36. E. Gary Smith to author, January 5, 1997. A letter from the First Presidency to Spencer W. Kimball stated that “Negro members may properly receive patriarchal blessings.” That they may be declared “of certain lineage does not mean that the person’s blood may not be intermingled with the blood of other races.” That persons baptized become “members of the House of Israel by adoption . . . is not the doctrine of the Church.” Joseph Anderson, by direction of the First Presidency, to Spencer W. Kimball, May 28, 1971, Kimball Papers. See Armand L. Mauss, “In Search of Ephraim,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 2 (spring 1999) 168–69.

37. Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, October 9, 30, 1947.

38. 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, no. 3 (fall 1981): 11; Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 183–84, 190; Stewart, *Mormonism and the Negro*, 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, no. 1 (spring 2002): 145.

39. Lowry Nelson, “Mormons and the Negro,” *The Nation* 174 (May 24, 1952): 488.

40. David O. McKay, letter dated November 3, 1947, published in McKay, *Home Memories*, 226–31. See also August 17, 1949, statement, quoted in Lester E. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” in *Neither White nor Black*, 221, (127 n. 199 for proper date).

41. McKay, *Home Memories*, 230.

42. 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.