

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 do understand revelation stand by and wait until the Lord speaks.”¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴

The issue unquestionably occupied President Lee’s mind.¹⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

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.

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 Theadore 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

Kimball Papers, Bonneville, March 27, 1980; Young and Gray, *The Last Mile*, 371-72, 381.

102. 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, *The Last Mile*, 408;.

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

104. 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.

105. 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. L. Brent Goates, interview by author, February 9, 1998.

106. 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.

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