

Official Declaration 2

Lesson 34, Doctrine & Covenants, Adult Religion Class, Monday, 12 June 2017

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General Introduction

During Joseph Smith's lifetime, the Church experienced various challenges relating to race relations; William W. Phelps' misunderstood but abolitionist-sounding editorials in *The Evening and the Morning Star* in Independence in 1833 led directly to the expulsion of the Saints from Jackson County. Initially compensating for that, Joseph distanced himself and the Church from abolitionist concepts. He expressed fear that slaves simply freed would "overrun our country and violate the most sacred principles of human society—chastity and virtue." He did not condone slavery but neither did he condemn it, citing Biblical passages that Canaan (interpreted as the descendent of Cain) should serve Shem. Here he was alluding to the prevailing belief that blacks were descended from Cain and black because of the curse put on him; this was a concept Brigham Young would later leverage for a stronger interpretation relating to the priesthood, though Smith said nothing about that. Instead, Joseph cited other scriptures requiring servants to obey their masters and masters to treat their servants with kindness.¹

Later in Nauvoo when the Prophet was running for President and he no longer felt any need to cater to those in Missouri who had fully cast out the Church, he put forth a plan to deal with the slave question. He proposed eliminating slavery by purchasing the slaves from the south for a fair price, then send them all to Texas and Mexico where they could establish self-rule without intermixing with their northern white neighbors. He taught missionaries not to teach to slaves without their master's permission, and indeed suggested it would be "much better and more prudent, not to preach at all to slaves, until after their masters are converted." Even though Joseph Smith advocated for a path to freedom for slaves, he was strongly against "amalgamation," which in the jargon of the day meant whites and blacks marrying and having children together—today we might say miscegenation or simply interracial marriage. Unlike many, however, Joseph believed that blacks' station in life was due only to their circumstances; "change their situation with the white & they would be like them," he taught.

While not large in numbers, some blacks did join the Church in Joseph Smith's lifetime. This group included

people like Elijah Abel, who famously was ordained an elder, served missions, had temple ordinances given to him in Kirtland, and was ordained a Seventy in Nauvoo. Another was Q. (or Kwaku) Walker Lewis of Massachusetts, who was ordained an elder by Joseph's brother, William. Jane Manning joined the Church and came to Nauvoo with many in her family, working for Joseph Smith as a housekeeper until his death. Later she married another black convert, Isaac James, and both lived the remainder of their lives in Utah.

Other more controversial black men also joined the Church. One man, known only as "Black Pete," joined the Church early in Kirtland. A runaway slave, Pete engaged in charismatic practices he likely learned as a slave, including writhing on the floor like a snake, running through the hills, and leaping off riverbanks through trees into the water, supposedly chasing after a black angel. Soon he started courting white women, claiming revelations that they were supposed to marry. This was so strongly out of favor with the vast majority of people that it raised great concerns about him which spread to the Church, even though he soon departed from it.

As Brigham Young assumed Church leadership after the death of Joseph Smith, the behavior of a black high priest in Boston came to his attention. Like Elijah Abel, Joseph T. Ball had been ordained by William Smith and was serving as branch president in Boston. However, Brigham Young discovered that he had entered into polygamist relationships without authorization, and in August 1845, Ball's association with the Church ended.

In 1846, Brigham Young led the Saints out of Nauvoo into Iowa and Indian territory just across the Missouri River, at a site named by them Winter Quarters. It was there that another black man, named William McCary, gave leaders a challenge. He joined the Church in 1845 and started going west with the Church. In Winter Quarters, McCary not only courted white women but engaged in sexual relations with some, claiming that doing so 'sealed' them to him. After lengthy conversations with Church leaders, McCary was excommunicated in 1847, and his antics likely had a strong influence on subsequent decisions.

¹ Harris and Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks*, 22-25.

Finally, also in late 1847, William Appleby, who had been sent by the Twelve to check on the eastern churches and bring back a report, arrived in Winter Quarters, raising the issue of Walker Lewis' son, Enoch, who had married a white woman named Mary, and had a child. Deeply concerned about amalgamation, Appleby sought direction from Brigham Young and the other apostles. His reaction had been, "Oh! Woman . . . where is thy shame?" His revulsion to racial intermarriage was shared by most if not all of the Twelve, yet at the same time, Young confirmed his positive assessment of the father, calling Walker Lewis "one of the best elders." There was no talk of a priesthood ban at that time, just censorship for amalgamation.²

That changed after the Saints began to be established in the Salt Lake valley, with Brigham Young as Territorial Governor. All of these previous events combined with the racial thinking of the day and the pressure on Latter-day Saints to distance themselves from others in order to become as "white" as possible to other Americans, to create a very negative environment for blacks in the Church. In addresses to the Territorial Legislature in January 1852 and again in February, which was dealing with a bill concerning the status of slaves in Utah, Young laid out a position he had likely already established privately examining the issue since 1847, but this was the first public statement of his conclusions.

Drawing on some of Joseph Smith's teaching against amalgamation but ignoring other positive statements about the status of the black race, Brigham Young drew a hard line against interracial marriage and saw as the best solution the denial of the priesthood to black men so that they could neither preside in the Church or in public positions in the community (which in Utah were mostly the same people in the 1850s). He combined ideas from various latter-day scriptures with common beliefs of the day about blacks to build a case for denying them the priesthood. Drawing on the concept that Cain's mark was a skin of blackness and that he was the ancestor of all black people, Young stated, "When the Lord God cursed old Cain, He said, 'Until the last drop of Abel's blood receives the priesthood, and enjoys the blessings of the same, Cain shall bear the curse.'" Of course, no one knows who Abel's descendants are, nor is there any way to know when they have all received the priesthood. This non-scriptural assertion left the end date of his declaration open-ended. And it flew in the face of the basic Mormon belief about agency and accountability. How could the penalty for one murder extend for thousands of years to all descendants of Cain? But it gave him what he needed—a platform to use to control race mixing, which was to take away authority from blacks like McCary

² There is an 1847 reference to Parley P. Pratt condemning McCary by saying he was of "the blood of Ham" which meant he

and Enoch Lewis who would mix white and black. "But they cannot hold the Priesthood, and inasmuch as they cannot bear any share in the Priesthood, they cannot bear rule, they cannot be rule in any place until the curse is removed from them." It was a position that Brigham Young held the rest of his life.

In the intervening years, the pre-Civil War policy that Young established—which was never voted on by any Church quorum or conference—became more entrenched and supporters began to look for more justification for it. After Brigham Young's death in 1877, John Taylor, his successor, tried to determine the origin of the priesthood ban. Calling a meeting in 1879 to explore it, and Zebedee Coltrin, an early Church member, testified that Joseph Smith had declared in 1834 that blacks were not to hold the priesthood, according to "the spirit of the Lord." Referring to an obvious example refuting this, Elijah Abel, Coltrin claimed that William Smith had ordained him but when Joseph Smith learned of his lineage, he was dropped from the quorum. Another meeting attendee, Abraham Smoot, claimed that Joseph Smith had also told him that blacks were not entitled to the priesthood. Though some disputed the facts of these testimonies, this was the planting of the seed that the ban originated with the founding Prophet.

With the canonization of the Pearl of Great Price in 1880, several passages in that book became "proof texts" for the doctrine of the priesthood restriction. This was presented very well by B. H. Roberts, a leading Church scholar and thinker, in 1885, in official Church publication for youth. Roberts quoted and interpreted scriptures from Moses and Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, then presented a theory that explained what Brigham Young did not—why the whole race could be cursed for one person's actions, when agency and accountability would say otherwise. His belief was that there was a group in the pre-earth life who were not rebellious against God but "were so indifferent in the support of the righteous cause of our Redeemer, that they forfeited certain privileges and powers granted to those who were more valiant for God." This group of people were sent to earth through the seed of Cain, marked black by his deed but cursed by their own pre-earth choices to a lower status. This line of thinking was repeated in an article addressed to missionaries in 1908, written by an unidentified author, marking two official Church publications with that thinking.

In 1931, the most authoritative writing on the topic was published by Joseph Fielding Smith, apostle and Church historian, called *The Way to Perfection*. Joseph Fielding Smith was well known as a Church scholar and theologian,

"was cursed as regards the priesthood." This is the first time anyone had tied Abraham 1:26-27 to the common Protestant view of the day that blacks were descended through Ham.

having been a member of the Quorum of the Twelve since his thirty-third year. He was unafraid of challenging topics, such as blood atonement and polygamy, and the priesthood ban was another place he was quite willing to explore. He told the sad story of the fall of Cain, surely one of the great ones that became Perdition, who sinned against perfect light. He traced Cain's line to the modern blacks using Moses and Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, calling them "an inferior race." He shifted the argument of when blacks might enjoy the full blessings of the gospel from when all of Abel's seed had enjoyed the priesthood (as Brigham Young postulated) to when all of Adam's other seed had done so, basically broadening that to the whole human race but the blacks. As a persuasive voice, Smith's views held sway with other Church leader, including his prolific son-in-law and apostle, Bruce R. McConkie, who wrote in 1958 in his well-known book, *Mormon Doctrine*, that blacks were less valiant in the preexistence and thus marked through Cain's lineage to never hold the priesthood. It was likely Smith's strong opinions and statements that helped stifle serious consideration of a change in policy until his death in 1972.

The first formal Church statement on the practice was issued by the First Presidency in 1949 when George Albert Smith was president. In the official statement, dated 17 August, they declared that not ordaining blacks was not just a policy but a "direct commandment from the Lord," a "doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization." Though it promised the ban would one day be lifted, it was only after all other children of heavenly Father had first received their blessings. The restriction was justified using the less-than-valiant argument of the premortal existence. By this concept, "there is no injustice whatsoever" in withholding the priesthood and temple blessings from the blacks.

Other Church leaders made statements supporting this position, including Mark E. Petersen in 1954, who affirmed the inferior status of blacks in the Church and the divine origin of their restriction in the midst of the civil rights discussions in the United States. President David O. McKay, who struggled with the restriction privately, nevertheless decreed in 1952 that no blacks were to speak at priesthood meetings or firesides. Utah became nearly as segregated as the south, with white members complaining about any blacks that attended their wards, blacks not allowed in the tabernacle or in pictures in the Church-owned *Deseret News*, and forcing blacks to ride in freight elevators away from other passengers. Other outspoken segregationists

were J. Reuben Clark, Henry D. Moyle, Ezra Taft Benson, and Harold B. Lee.

A second First Presidency letter was released in 1969 as the Church was under intense pressure on the civil rights issue. Though maintaining the Church's doctrinal issues on blacks, it nevertheless advocated strongly for the civil rights movement, calling for blacks to have all the same Constitutional rights as anyone else. It claimed that the ban began with Joseph Smith but softened the reasons which "we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man."

At the same time, however, efforts by faithful Church scholars to study the origins in more detail yielded new conclusions. Most notably was a lengthy study authored by Lester E. Bush and published in *Dialogue* in 1973. This article traced the ban to Brigham Young, not Joseph Smith, and gave credible details that demonstrated Young had acted by policy decision, not revelatory direction. It traced the origins of some of the statements supporting the practice to specific leaders and not to Joseph Smith or even Brigham Young. When it appeared, some Church leaders denounced the publication, but others, including senior apostle Spencer W. Kimball, saw it as weakening the traditional support of the ban as well as the scriptural justifications for it. His personal copy of *Dialogue* was well-marked and heavily read.³

Summary Chronology

- **Thu, 3 Mar 1836, Kirtland, OH** – Elijah Abel was ordained an elder; he was ordained a Seventy in December of the same year.
- **Fall 1842, rural Connecticut** – Jane Manning (later James) was baptized.
- **Summer 1843, Lowell, MA** – Walker Lewis was ordained an elder.
- **Thu, 5 Feb 1852, Salt Lake City** – Brigham Young gave his first speech on the topic of a priesthood restriction to blacks.
- **Sat, 31 May 1879, Salt Lake City** – Meeting called by John Taylor and held at Abraham Smoot's home where he and Zebedee Coltrin claimed that Joseph Smith began the priesthood ordination restrictions.
- **1885, Salt Lake City, UT** – B. H. Roberts wrote an article for *The Contributor*, a publication for LDS youth, first arguing that blacks were less valiant in the preexistence.

³ The introduction relies heavily on two main sources, Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color* and Harris and Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church & Blacks*. Both works offer reliable, document-

based approaches to the timing, issues, and people involved in this complex history.

- **Sat, 18 Apr 1908, Salt Lake City, UT** – Article published in *Liahona: The Elder’s Journal* affirms scriptural and pre-earth interpretations of why blacks cannot hold the priesthood, read by all missionaries.
- **1931, Salt Lake City, UT** – Joseph Fielding Smith published *The Way to Perfection* which included strong arguments and scriptural interpretations on blacks not holding the priesthood.
- **Wed, 17 Aug 1949, Salt Lake City, UT** – The First Presidency, led by George Albert Smith, issued a statement defending the practice of denying the priesthood to the blacks, calling it a “commandment from the Lord.”
- **Mon, 15 Dec 1969, Salt Lake City, UT** – The First Presidency, led by Hugh B. Brown and N. Eldon Tanner (President David O. McKay was too ill to function) issued a statement restating the position of the Church on blacks but calling for full constitutional privileges for blacks.
- **Sun, 2 Jul 1972, Salt Lake City, UT** – President Joseph Fielding Smith died, after less than eighteen months as president.
- **Wed, 26 Dec 1973, Salt Lake City, UT** – President Harold B. Lee died, after less than eighteen months as president.
- **Sun, 30 Dec 1973, Salt Lake City, UT** – President Spencer W. Kimball was ordained president of the Church.
- **Tue, 30 May 1978, Salt Lake City, UT** – President Spencer W. Kimball hand wrote a statement that removed all race restrictions in the Church, sharing it with and gaining the support of his counselors.
- **Thu, 1 Jun 1978, Salt Lake City, UT** – The First Presidency and the majority of the Quorum of the Twelve met in the temple to discuss and pray over the topic of priesthood for all worthy men; the Holy Spirit confirmed the correctness of President Kimball’s proposed action.
- **Thu, 9 Jun 1978, Salt Lake City, UT** – Counselor to the First Presidency N. Eldon Tanner released a letter to general and local authorities to the press, outlining the end of the priesthood restriction.
- **Sat, 30 Sep 1978, Salt Lake City, UT** – In the afternoon session of General Conference, President N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency read an introductory message and the letter to church authorities on the priesthood and called for a sustaining vote, which was unanimous. The text of that presentation and sustaining is Official Declaration 2.

Official Declaration 2 – The Priesthood to All

Date and Location

Thursday, 8 June 1978, Salt Lake City, UT

Setting

President Spencer W. Kimball became the president of the Church on 30 December 1975, following the unexpected death of Harold B. Lee. He was 80 years old. Throughout his life and especially during his service in the Quorum of the Twelve since 1943, President Kimball had seen members of the Church all over the world struggle with the Church’s policy of not ordaining those of black descent to the priesthood of the Church, or allowing them to enter the temple. He kept a personal binder full of information on the topic. In 1977, he requested three members of the Quorum of the Twelve—Bruce R. McConkie, Thomas S. Monson, and Boyd K. Packer—to research and write

memos to him on the topic, with the conclusion that there were no reasons to impede a change. He spent many hours alone in the Salt Lake temple praying about it.

On 30 May 1978, he wrote a statement by hand that removed all race restrictions, and shared it with his counselors. Two days later, on 1 June 1978, he met with the First Presidency and most of the Quorum of the Twelve⁴ and they discussed the topic at length, agreeing that the time had come. Kneeling to pray together, they sought the Lord’s will, and had a collective spiritual experience that confirmed the change was God’s will.

A week later, on 9 June 1978, the Church formally announced the news (with a letter dated 8 June, which is now Official Declaration 2), and on 30 September 1978, as part of the October General Conference, the proposal was voted on by the whole Church and received enthusiastically, as described in the Declaration’s heading.⁵

⁴ Mark E. Peterson was traveling on an extended trip and Delbert L. Stapley was too ill to attend; during the week of 1 June to 8 June, President Kimball met with both individually and discussed

the proposed change, gaining their support for a unanimous decision from the leading quorums of the Church.

⁵ “Race and the Priesthood,” Gospel Topics essay, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood>, accessed 9

Documents and Publication

It was first published in the *Deseret News* (9 June 1978), then as Official Declaration 2 in 1981.

Commentary

the expansion of the work of the Lord over the earth. In April 1974, President Kimball gave a landmark address to Church leaders outlining a plan to take the gospel to the whole world, which relied on local missionaries going to their own countries. He boldly imagined missionaries in India, China, and Russia, and challenged the Church to lengthen its stride. He called on all young men to serve missions, and the number of missionaries increased dramatically, as did the number of converts, going from 69,018 in 1974 to 152,000 in 1978.

people of many nations have responded. There were Church members in many countries where black citizens resided—and many black members who joined knowing their could not enjoy the full blessings of priesthood and temple. Many had faith their time would come, such as Charlotte Acquah of Ghana. When Charlotte was a youth, she attended a church where the Book of Mormon was taught alongside the Bible, though they had no ward or branch and no Church recognition. They decorated their humble building with a statue of Moroni and prayed and waited for official status. Charlotte represented thousands in similar situations in Africa, South America, the Caribbean, the United States, and other locations.

inspired us with a desire to extend to every worthy member of the Church all of the privileges and blessings. As mentioned in the Setting, President Kimball had labored over this for many months, even years. In addition, other prophets and Church leaders before had grappled with the priesthood restriction and came away believing that it needed to be dropped but not feeling like the timing was right.

promises made by the prophets and presidents. Several have mentioned that the priesthood restriction would be lifted, notably Brigham Young in 1852, when he first publicly announced the policy also left the door open that one day it would end.

witnessing the faithfulness of those from whom the priesthood has been withheld. The essay on Official Declaration 2 on history.lds.org shares three stories of such faithfulness, people who embraced the gospel and lived it

to the best of their abilities under the restriction. This includes Joseph Freeman, who joined the Church in 1973, disappointed in the barrier between him and service and the temple, but confident in the truth of the church he had embraced and patient and trusting in the Lord. He treasured the gift of the Holy Ghost and the dramatic impact it had on his life. After the revelation was received, Joseph Freeman was the first black man ordained and he and his wife were sealed two weeks later by Elder Thomas S. Monson.⁶

many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple. Not the celestial room but the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve meeting room above that, which includes an altar for praying.

by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come. Several of those in the room left accounts of the experience. Elder Bruce R. McConkie left the most detailed account, saying, “. . . the Lord in his providences poured out the Holy Ghost upon the First Presidency and the Twelve, in a miraculous and marvelous manner beyond anything that any then present had ever experienced And the result was that President Kimball knew and each one of us knew, independent of any other person, by direct personal revelation to us, that the time had now come.”⁷ President Gordon B. Hinckley, who was one of the Twelve at this time, related that “all of us knew that the time had come for a change and that the decision had come from the heavens. The answer was clear. There was perfect unity among us in our experience and in our understanding.”⁸

Results

The announcement of the revelation made worldwide press quickly. I saw it in French newspapers on my mission on Monday, 12 June 1978 (the paper come out on Sunday but I didn’t buy it until Monday). The headline read, “Les Noirs pourront devenir prêtres de l’Église mormone,” which means “Blacks can become priests in the Mormon Church.” That was the first we heard of the change and it was only confirmed by a letter sent to us by our mission president a couple weeks later.

The revelation has allowed the Church to spread in new and dramatic ways. Thousands of converts could now be organized into branches and eventually wards and stakes in Africa, where there are now three temples and hundreds of missionaries. Other countries, such as Brazil, where there are racially mixed populations, embrace the gospel and enjoy its full blessings. President Gordon B. Hinckley pronounced, “This is but the beginning of greater things to

June 2017; “Witnessing the Faithfulness,” Revelations in Context series, <https://history.lds.org/article/od2-witnessing-the-faithfulness>, accessed 9 June 2017; Harper, *Making Sense*, 521-528; Robinson and Garrett, *A Commentary*, 4:323-326; McConkie and Oster, *Revelations*, 1154-1156; Cook, *The Revelations*, 353-355.

⁶ “Witnessing the Faithfulness,” Revelations in Context series, <https://history.lds.org/article/od2-witnessing-the-faithfulness>, accessed 9 June 2017.

⁷ Cook, *The Revelations*, 354.

⁸ Harper, *Making Sense*, 527.

come as the truth of the restored gospel covers the earth as the waters cover the mighty deep.”⁹

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For text and publication notes:

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RB2 – Revelation Book 2, from *JSP*, MRB:407-665.

EMS – *The Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832-May 1833, from *JSP*, R2:202-299.

NKW – Newel K. Whitney papers (various Dx volumes)

SGN – Sidney Gilbert Notebook (various Dx volumes)

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⁹ Harper, *Making Sense*, 530.

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