Cursed with a Skin of Blackness

African Americans and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the late 1940s and 1950s

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Abstract

The late 1940’s and 1950’s were times of great social change in regard to race relations in the United States. African Americans and sympathetic Whites struggled to establish integrated and equal communities. The civil rights movement was met with significant resistance and the state of Utah was not immune from the tension. One of the most hotly debated topics in the state was the position of African Americans within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the time, the LDS Church did not grant African Americans the same status within church hierarchy as those of other races, and church members were increasingly called to defend that position.

The LDS Church consistently used scriptural evidence to discriminate against African Americans. While the Church’s level of discrimination was not necessarily out of line with society in general, the philosophy behind the discrimination was unique. Use of pamphlets, church records, personal correspondence, newspaper articles and other primary sources illustrate the relationship between African Americans and the LDS Church. Dissenting views from within the Church and society in general are also presented.

These findings illustrate a complex relationship between the African American community and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While African Americans were welcomed as members of the Church during the period of civil rights, they did not share the same privileges as their counterparts of other races. The discrimination was unique to the LDS Church because it was not strictly practice but was rooted in and defended by Church doctrine.
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The late 1940’s and 1950’s was a time of great social change in regard to race relations in the United States. Throughout the country, African Americans and sympathetic Whites struggled to establish integrated and equal communities. At the same time, there was a lot of resistance to this movement and the state of Utah was not immune from the tension. One of the most hotly debated topics in the state, and nation, was the position of African Americans within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the time, the LDS Church did not grant African Americans the same rights within church hierarchy as those of other races and church members were increasingly called to defend their position. The LDS Church consistently used what it referred to as spiritual evidence to discriminate against African Americans. While the Church’s level of discrimination was not necessarily out of line with society in general, the philosophy behind the discrimination was unique. There was at the time and there continues to be a debate as to whether discrimination against African Americans by Mormons was the result of a set of practices that the Church chose not to reverse or whether it was doctrinally mandated. I argue that contemporary evidence published by the Church leadership indicates that discrimination against African-Americans was in fact doctrinal and would not end until the Office of the First Presidency of the Church of Latter-day Saints received a revelation from God, which eventually occurred in 1978, over a decade after the landmark Civil Rights legislation of the mid-1960s.

The Prophet Joseph Smith organized the followers of the Book of Mormon into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 6, 1830 in western New York.¹ At the time slavery was legal in the United States and racism against African Americans would have been commonplace in many communities, including the newly formed church. As the membership in the LDS Church grew, discrimination against African Americans continued and even though they were allowed to become members of the church, they were denied the full privileges given to those of other races.

The leadership of the Church is hierarchical and strictly organized according to the “primitive church” of Christ’s day. As stated on the LDS.org website, “Under the direction of Jesus Christ, the Church is led by 15 apostles, who are also regarded as prophets, seers, and revelators.

¹ “Chapter Two: Establishing the Foundations of the Church,” Our Heritage: A Brief History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 5.
The man who has been an apostle the longest is the President of the Church, and by inspiration he selects two other apostles as counselors. These three function as the First Presidency, which is the highest governing body of the Church."2 The General Leadership of the Church is made up of the First Presidency, followed by the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, and then the Presidency of the Seventy, the First and Second Quorums of Seventy and the Presiding Bishopric. At the most basic level, “worthy adult men in the Church receive the Melchizedek Priesthood, which is authority from God to perform sacred ordinances and to lead in the Church. Men who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood can perform ordinances such as bestowing the gift of the Holy Ghost and giving blessings to the sick by the laying on of hands.”3

African Americans were denied the basic station of the Priesthood and therefore could not take their place among other Latter-day Saints as full members of the Church. They were denied basic privileges such as marriage within the temples. The denial of full membership to African Americans continued from the establishment of the Church in 1830 until 1978.

Like many other communities across the nation, the people of Utah were becoming involved in the civil rights movement during the late 1940’s and 1950’s. During their 1954 fall meeting the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters held a symposium at Weber College in Ogden, Utah on the Negro in Utah that discussed the treatment of African Americans in different aspects of Utah life. From the symposium, one can learn how much about African American life in the state during the early 1950’s. Topics discussed at the symposium included the legal, cultural and moral/religious status of the Negro in Utah.

Following the end of World War II, several attempts were made to pass an equal rights act in the Utah state senate, whose members were overwhelmingly made up of Latter-day Saints; however, none were passed by the time of the symposium. Wallace R. Bennett stated during his presentation that, “in 1945, an equal rights act was introduced in the Senate, which would have expressly prohibited ‘discrimination on account of race in admission to any place of public accommodation.’ The bill died

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in committee, however, as it did again in 1947, 1949, and 1951. No effort was made in 1953.”

Attempts were made again in 1957 to pass a civil rights bill and this time the bill had the support of LDS Church member Adam “Mickey” Duncan. Duncan was not only a state senator but also founder of the Utah affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union and author of the bill. He attempted to gain the Church’s support for the bill by writing to his friend Marion D. Hanks, a member of the First Quorum of Seventy, and through him to the Office of the First Presidency. Hanks stated in reply to Duncan’s request,

“I delivered a copy of the bill to the First Presidency the morning after its receipt, but heard nothing from them at all until this Monday morning when President McKay’s secretary, upon my inquiry, told me that the president had talked with her about it and felt it could conceivably be very embarrassing to some church institutions…”

Independently of the president’s thought, I had come to the conclusion that while I am entirely in sympathy with your purposes in introducing the bill, it could well be a matter of grave concern to the church and of real damage should any crusading “liberals” assail us through our institutional establishments. The thought of a dozen visitors making repeated demands upon the hotel, for instance, leads one to consider some grave possibilities.

Again, my experience and sympathies are consonant with yours in my desire that men of good will and personal worthiness as men should not be denied normal blessings and facilities. However, it seems to me that we would be putting the church into a position where some grave damage might be done locally and nationally if it were made a cause by some crusading group.”

So while there were members of the Church who were sympathetic with the works of the ACLU and certain members of the Utah senate, the LDS Church itself was not prepared to support any legislation. Regardless of any doctrinal beliefs that the Church held, it was also not willing to integrate its institutional establishments like the Hotel Utah. The hotel had a policy of refusing rooms to African Americans and clerks were instructed to inform inquiring Negro patrons: “I am sorry but we are filled to capacity, but I could attempt to obtain a room for you at another

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5 Marion D. Hanks to Adam M. Duncan, 25 February 1957, folder 18, box 2, Linda Sillitoe Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
However, the policies of the Hotel Utah were no different from secular establishments in the area. Wallace R. Bennett recounts in his presentation that, “On September 17, 1952... the Salt Lake Tribune carried a story relating to a denial by the Newhouse Hotel of accommodations to Bishop D. Ormonde Walker of the African Methodist – Episcopal Church.”

Harmond O. Cole, an African American who lived in Utah recounted his experiences during the symposium at Weber College as well:

“We are not free to eat or to sleep where we want, nor in a theater, can we sit where we choose; we are even in some instances, refused the common courtesy of going openly to a hotel to see a Caucasian friend. These instances could be elaborated, but let me cite in detail only two. If we have friends from out of town or if we wish to take the suggestion of some advertisement ‘and eat out tonight,’ we must find some restaurant or café other than the Hotel Utah, Newhouse, Mayflower, and their kind. We will have to eat a third or fourth rate restaurant or café. A few months ago, my wife was asked to come to a hotel in Salt Lake City to call on a Caucasian friend. She was asked at the desk to take the service elevator to her friend’s room, since Negroes were not allowed to use the passenger elevator.”

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ position on the status of African Americans within their institutional establishments was not different from secular establishments, it was in contrast to other churches in the area.

The doctrine that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints preached regarding African Americans was not mirrored in other Utah churches at the time. At the Symposium on the Negro in Utah, Gaylon L. Caldwell of Brigham Young University presented his findings on the moral and religious aspects of the status of the Negro in Utah. He commented in his paper that the “Roman Catholic Church has traditionally refused to draw a color line among its communicants,” and the same treatment was afforded African Americans by the Greek Orthodox and Anglican churches. These churches continued this policy in

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6 Myron Q. Hale to Chris Jorgenson of the Salt Lake Tribune, 29 August 1993, folder 18, box 2, Linda Sillitoe Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
7 Bennett, “The Legal Status…”
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the state of Utah as they had from ancient times. In addition the Unitarian community made no distinction based on race or color and was one of the first religious groups to advocate the abolition of slavery through their historical link with the Society of Friends. Even the Southern Baptist churches in Utah were willing to admit African Americans into their brethren on the basis of equality. However, an overwhelming amount of blacks preferred to attend churches that were predominantly African American such as the Negro Methodist, Negro Baptist and Negro Seventh Day Adventist churches.9

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints differed from all other churches in that it allowed African Americans membership in their church, but they were restricted from sharing in the priesthood. Considering that “ordination to the priesthood is the \textit{sine qua non} of some important activities, Mormon Negroes [had to] accept a restricted role within the church.”10 In addition, African Americans could not create their own congregations of the Mormon Church like those of the Negro Methodist or Negro Baptist churches, owing to their unique position within the church and the limits to their membership.

The discrimination against African Americans imposed by the Church of Latter-day Saints during the long fifties was not a new development. Since the founding of the Church, African Americans had been denied ascension to the Priesthood, with only two known exceptions that occurred during the earliest history of the Church. George Albert Smith, 8th President of the Church, stated, “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.”11 However, it is apparent that during the time of civil rights following the end of World War II, the LDS Church was increasingly called upon to clarify and defend its position on the status of African Americans within the Church and their position in society in general. Chauncy D. Harris, a Mormon and professor at the University of Chicago warned the First Presidency, “Any public official now identified in the press as a Mormon, whether he be a cabinet officer, congressman, college president, or governor, is potentially vulnerable to a barrage on

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10 Caldwell, “Moral and Religious…”
11 The First Presidency to Lowry Nelson, 17 July 1947, folder 1, box 20, Lowry Nelson Papers, University of Utah Library.
this subject [of discrimination toward Negroes] which could become
detrimental to the Church, the individual, or both.”12 The Church was
questioned not only by outsiders, but also from members of its own
brethren.

In order to clarify the Church’s position, there were several publications
issued during the volatile period addressed specifically to other Mormons
that illustrated the scriptural basis for discrimination against African
Americans. One such publication was an official statement by the First
Presidency of the Church, released on August 17, 1951. In the statement,
President David O. McKay prefaces his argument by saying,

“The attitude of the church with reference to negroes remains as it has always
stood. 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 may become
members of the church but that they are not entitled to the priesthood at the
present time.”13

President McKay goes on to discuss further doctrine of the Church that
provides the scriptural reason that African Americans are inferior to
Caucasians and other ethnicities. He cites that the Church believes “that
the conduct of spirits in the pre-mortal existence has some determining
effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits
take on mortality.”14 In order to understand the station of African
Americans in this life, one must understand some of the basic beliefs of
the LDS Church in regard to the pre-mortal life. First, the Church
believes that “not all intelligences reached the same degree of attainment
in the pre-earth life,” the life one’s spirit lives before its arrival on earth.
Second, as outlined in the Articles of Faith, the basic tenets of the
Church,15 “man will be punished for his own sins and not for Adam’s
transgression.” If this is carried further, it would imply that the Negro is
punished or allotted to a certain position on this earth, not because of

12 Chauncy D. Harris to the First Presidency of the Church of Latter Day Saints, 13
November 1953, folder 2, box 20, Lowry Nelson Papers, Marriott Library, University of
Utah.
13 “Statement by the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints
on the Negro Question,” 17 August 1951, quoted in Llewelyn R. McKay, Home Memories of
President David O. McKay (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1959), 226-231.
14 “Statement by the First Presidency…” pp. 226-231.
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Cain’s transgressions [as some have asserted and as evidenced by their dark skin], but that they came to earth through the loins of Cain because of his failure to achieve other stature in the spirit world.” Third, that “all spirits are born innocent into this world” and last that “the negro was a follower of [the Lord] in the pre-earth life.” What the First Presidency is stating in this publication is that in the pre-existence before this life, one’s soul has the ability to attain a certain level of spiritual attainment and that the level they are able to attain determines their position in the mortal life. The First Presidency is also stating that since African Americans were followers of the Lord in pre-existence, they too were able to progress to certain spiritual attainments in the pre-mortal life and that they did not attain the highest level and therefore were born as descendants of Cain for their sins as is shown by the color of their skin.

In addition to publications directly from the Office of the First Presidency, other members of the LDS Church created their own pamphlets. Mormonism and the Negro, written by John J. Stewart was one such publication. In addition to reiterating President McKay’s statements regarding the station of the African American’s spirit in the pre-earth life, he goes on to defend the church’s position in great detail and to deny that it is racially motivated:

“Those who think that the Negroes’ not being allowed the Priesthood and its attendant blessings in this mortal state is due to racial prejudice might consider the fact that there have been millions of people live and die upon this earth who likewise have not had the privilege of bearing the Priesthood here, regardless of what the color of their skin was. For centuries the Priesthood was not upon the earth, except as possessed perhaps by a few key servants of God.

The critic should note, too, that there are hundreds of millions of people upon the earth today who do not enjoy the privilege of even belonging to the Church, to say nothing of the Priesthood, for they have never heard of it, while there are many Negroes, here in the United States and elsewhere, who have had the opportunity to join the Church. This is further evidence of the fallacy of the racial prejudice accusation.”

16 “Statement by the First Presidency…”
17 John J. Stewart, Mormonism and the Negro; An Explanation and Defense of the Doctrine of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Regard to Negroes and others of Negroid Blood (Orem, Utah: Bookmark Division of Community Press Publishing Company, 1960), 35.
Arthur M. Richardson, another member of the church, also published a pamphlet entitled *That Ye May Not Be Deceived: A Discussion of the Racial Problem*. He again reiterates President McKay’s thoughts about the station of African Americans and supports them with quotes from Brigham Young, Joseph Smith’s successor as leader of the church. Richardson quotes Young as asking, “Why are so many of the inhabitants of the earth CURSED [emphasis is the author’s] with a skin of blackness?” and continues,

“It comes in consequence of their fathers rejecting the powers of the Holy Priesthood, and the law of God. They will go down to death. And when all the rest of the children have received their blessings in the Holy Priesthood, then that curse will be removed from the seed of Cain, and they will come up and possess the priesthood, and receive all the blessings which we are now entitled to.”

Richardson believed that one’s choices in the pre-existence determined their “racial assignment here on this earth” and used not only Brigham Young’s statements as evidence, but those of his contemporary Joseph Fielding Smith, Joseph Smith’s grandnephew. He quotes Smith as saying,

“There is a reason why one man is born black and with other disadvantages, while another is born white with great advantages. The reason is that we once had an estate before we came here and were obedient, more or less, to the laws that were given us there. Those who were faithful in all things there received greater blessings here and those who were not faithful received less.”

It is obvious by these publications that the LDS Church and its brethren saw discrimination against African Americans as ordained by God and not a topic to be debated. However, just as there were members of the church that supported the doctrine, there were also very vocal members that dissented with the position.

While the Church hierarchy and others strived to outline the spiritual reasoning for depriving African Americans the priesthood, there were many within the Church community that openly questioned the discrimination. One outspoken critic was John W. Fitzgerald, a chaplain

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19 Richardson, *That Ye May...*, 5.
20 Richardson, *That Ye May...*, 5.
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during World War II and a seminary teacher in the LDS Church. He wrote directly to President McKay on December 22, 1958 in regard to the race issue. In his letter he raised the issue of integration and the effect it has on the church. He states, “Our (the Church’s) policy of discrimination against all negroes is very embarrassing, not to say unjust and unfair. Every other race, color and condition of men are welcomed, indeed invited, but because of the color of skin – and some are quite light – the Negro is barred from the full blessings of the Gospel.” Indeed, by the end of the decade the Church was increasingly asked to defend its position on African Americans to which it consistently used scripture as evidence for its position. In response to Fitzgerald’s letter, Elder Hamer Reiser, Assistant Secretary to the First Presidency wrote:

“I have been directed to say that the information given in the Pearl of Great Price [written by Joseph Smith and considered part of the standard works of the church], Book of Abraham, chapter 1, verses 21-27, is understood to be evidence that the Lord, for reasons of His own, withholds the priesthood from people of the negro race.

Since the priesthood is the authority of the Lord to man to officiate in His name, it is clearly His right to bestow it or to withhold it according to His will, and it is no man’s right or prerogative to complain.

Until He does authorize bestowal of the priesthood upon people of the negro race, men who hold the priesthood are not at liberty to bestow it.”

Clearly the Office of the First Presidency wanted to make clear that only the Lord, through progressive revelation via the President of the Church, held any power to change the status African Americans. The message that Church leadership hoped to impart on the brethren was that it was useless for them to try to change the church’s position themselves. However, Fitzgerald was not the first, nor the last, Mormon to openly question the LDS church’s treatment of Negroes.

One of the most outspoken members of the Church was Lowry Nelson, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. During his studies of rural communities Nelson traveled extensively to Cuba. During his

21 John W. Fitzgerald to President David O. McKay, 22 December 1958, folder 1, box 289, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
22 Hamer Reiser to John W. Fitzgerald, 12 January 1959, folder 1, box 289, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
travels he became increasingly dissatisfied with the LDS church’s position on Negroes, especially since they were considering sending missions to Cuba, an integrated society. Mission President Heber Meeks inquired of Nelson in 1947, “Are there groups of pure white blood in the rural sections, particularly in the small communities? If so, are they maintaining segregation from the Negroes? The best information we received was that in the rural communities there was no segregation of the races and it would probably be difficult to find, with any degree of certainty, groups of pure white people.”

The correspondence that followed between Meeks, Nelson and the Office of the First Presidency drew considerable attention among other Mormons, intellectuals and eventually the national press. Nelson expressed his displeasure with the church’s position in a response to Meeks,

“The attitude of the Church in regard to the Negro makes me very sad. Your letter is the first intimation I have had that there was a fixed doctrine on this point. I had always known that certain statements had been made by authorities regarding the status of the Negro, but I had never assumed that they constituted an irrevocable doctrine… I do not believe that God is a racist. But if the Church has taken an irrevocable stand, I would dislike to see it enter Cuba or any other island where different races live and establish missionary work. The white and colored people get along much better in the Caribbean and most of Latin-America than they do in the United States… For us to go into a situation like that and preach a doctrine of “white supremacy” would, it seems to me, be a tragic disservice.

I am sad to have to write you and say, for what my opinion is worth, that it would be better for the Cubans if we did not enter their island – unless we are willing to revise our racial theory. To teach them the pernicious doctrine of segregation and inequalities among races where it does not exist, or to lend religious sanction to it where it has raised its ugly head would, it seems to me, be tragic.”

Nelson’s thoughtful response to Meeks’s inquiry was not lost on the Office of the First Presidency, which took little time in replying to his

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23 Heber Meeks to Lowry Nelson, 20 June 1947, folder 1, box 220, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
24 Lowry Nelson to Heber Meeks, 26 June 1947, folder 1, box 220, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
opinions. As usual, the church leadership used the gospel as defense for the mistreatment of Negroes. The response stated, “The basic element of your ideas and concepts seems to be that all God’s children stand in equal positions before Him in all things. Your knowledge of the Gospel will indicate to you that this is contrary to the very fundamentals of God’s dealings with Israel dating from the time of His promise to Abraham regarding Abraham’s seed and their position vis-à-vis God Himself.” The letter goes on to say, reinforcing the idea of doctrine versus practice, “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.”

Nelson wrote an impassioned reply to the First Presidency and carefully illustrated his argument against the church doctrine. In it, he refers to things that get written down as becoming “institutionalized” and that they in turn “assume an aura of the sacred.” He worries that the church is “in the position… of accepting a doctrine regarding the Negro which was enunciated by the Hebrews during a very early stage in their development” and that “it does not square with what seems an acceptable standard of justice today; nor with the letter or spirit of the teachings of Jesus Christ.” He uses his education as a social scientist to analyze the church’s position and comes to the conclusion that the doctrine regarding Negros is ethnocentric and states, “A people with a different skin color would be automatically assigned to an inferior status.” His conclusion is that the original prejudice against those of darker skin tone in Biblical times was influenced by ethnocentric ideas and that the church of the late 1940’s was perpetuating those same ideas.

The First Presidency responded to Nelson by saying, “You have too much of a potentiality for doing good and we therefore prayerfully hope that you can reorient your thinking and bring it in line with the revealed world of God.” Clearly, the Church leadership had made up its mind on how to deal with the situation and there was no dissuading them, no matter how educated the argument.

This correspondence with the First Presidency was shared with several of Nelson’s colleagues and eventually became copied and distributed further.

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25 The First Presidency to Lowry Nelson…
26 Lowry Nelson to The First Presidency, 8 October 1947, folder 1, box 220, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
27 The First Presidency to Lowry Nelson, 12 November 1947, folder 1, box 220, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
without Nelson’s permission. Nelson received letters from many members of the LDS Church and other educators from colleges around the country in support of his opinions. The popularity of the correspondence was testament to the growing interest in the African American issue among Latter-day Saints and fellow scholars.

In 1952, Nelson was compelled to write a short article that was critical of the LDS church’s Doctrine on the Negro Issue for The Nation, a national magazine. In his article, he questions whether the church can change its stand on the Negro matter. He acknowledges that the Church has the means to modify its doctrines, “that as God spoke to the people in Bible days, so He continues to do today through the head of the church.” However, he believes that majority of the church members give passive assent to the policy because they do not come in contact with Negros on a regular basis and haven’t had to challenge their own beliefs. However, he states that, “my knowledge of the deep humanitarianism of the Mormon people leads me to think that if the question could be openly discussed they would line up on the side of justice.”

The fact that Nelson took the issue to the national level showed that he felt the issue did not get enough attention and that in order to affect change in the Church, pressure needed to come from both inside and outside the brethren. Indeed, the publication of this article added to the interest that the LDS church was already garnering in regard to the race issue.

Both within and without the country people were becoming more aware of the Mormon position on the status of African Americans within the church. J. A. Rogers of the Pittsburgh Courier wondered if Ezra Taft Benson, Secretary of the Agriculture and member of the Quorum of Twelve, made decisions influenced by the racist position of his church. In his column, he describes the plight of the Negro in the eyes of the church and then likens Benson’s treatment of a provision in the farm program to the Negros’ treatment.

On a trip to South Africa in 1954 President McKay was forced to address the Negro issue in regard to missionaries there. Again, he used scripture to support the church’s position. He even references “modern sociologists” who do not accept the explanation for racial discrimination. He goes on to say that, “Well, until the Lord gives us another revelation

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29 J. A. Rogers, “Roger Says: Was Ezra Benson’s Decision Influenced By His Mormonism?” Pittsburgh Courier, 10 October 1953.
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changing this practice established anciently and adopted in our day we will follow that policy.” He continues, “wherever you find evidence of a Negro strain in an individual, please explain to him that the blessing of membership including partaking of the sacrament and the renewing of His covenant weekly is his.”\(^{30}\) However, full membership in the Church continued to elude the Negro even in South Africa.

Several years later, on a trip to England for the dedication of the London Temple, the President was asked yet another time about the Church’s stance on the Negro issue, this time by a group of reporters. The President responded in the usual fashion using scripture to defend the Church’s discrimination but added, “The time will come when the Negro will have the right to the Priesthood” but that “the Lord is the one who will say when that is.”\(^{30}\) For the first time the President acknowledged publicly that the doctrine regarding African Americans would change. However, a reporter challenges this statement by asking, “Why are you so sure that the time will come, if the time has not come? You feel the time will definitely come and that it has not definitely been revealed yet? You believe that the time will come when the Negro will come – by revelation – why are you so confident that this is true?” President McKay was put in an odd situation because he believed that the Negro will eventually be given full blessings within the church, but he was waiting for the world of the Lord to bestow those blessings. He replies by saying, “We believe, he by righteous living will attain the status, the stature, the character, faithfulness, that will entitle him to the blessings of the Holy Priesthood. When that (time) comes we do not know.”\(^{31}\) This statement illustrates the unique position that the President of the church held. He was confident that eventually the situation would change and could pacify critics with this answer; however it is at his disposal as to when the actual revelation occurs.

Over the following two decades, the church would continue to receive more press regarding the Negro doctrine, especially as civil rights became a more hotly debated topic. However, church leadership continued to wait for the word of God in order to change its position. On June 8, 1978, the First Presidency finally declared that it had received revelation from God.

\(^{30}\) “Instructions given by President David O. McKay in a special meeting with South African missionaries held at ‘Cumorah,’ Capetown, South Africa,” 17 January 1954, Folder 6, Box 8, Lester E. Bush Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

\(^{31}\) “Press Conference for President McKay at Grosvenor House,” Copy of handwritten diary by Elder A. Hamer Reiser, Assistant Secretary to the First Presidency, who accompanied President McKay to England for dedication services of the London Temple, 4 September 1958.
and stated, “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.” As stated in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, “No event in the twentieth-century Church matched the excitement attending President Kimball’s announcement of receiving a revelation on priesthood in 1978, ending more than a century of limitation on admission of church members of black African ancestry to priesthood office and temple ordinances.”

The announcement of the revelation was no doubt a joyous occasion both inside and outside the Church, but why did change take so long to come about? The answer lies in the unique hierarchy of the LDS Church. Because the Church places all its authority in the office of one man, change can come about either very quickly or very slowly. Once a decision is made, all it takes is the announcement of the revelation to change church doctrine. However, considering that all the power lies in the hands of one man, revelation can come very slowly. In regard to the African American situation, the Church did not have to cave to outside pressure because it could stand behind the word of God as its reason for holding the position that it did. In addition, the Presidency could easily silence dissention from within its brethren by excommunicating them. Once the First President decided it was time to change church doctrine, he could announce a new revelation from God. The power of the Church lies in the hands of the First President who is privy to progressive revelation from above. If the decision was merely up to mortals, then one could say that it was Church policy to withhold the priesthood from Negroes, but since it was the Lord’s decision, it was instead church doctrine.

One could also argue that the position of the church in American society lends itself to a position of isolationism and disregard for general public opinion. The church was forced to flee from the eastern United States due to discrimination from outside and they founded their own society in a new territory far away from the central government. Even after joining the union, the state of Utah continued to practice according to its own desires without concern for other states’ opinions. Today, the state of

32 The First Presidency to All General and Local Priesthood Officers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Throughout the World, 8 June 1978, folder 1, box 289, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
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Utah still differs from most other states when it comes to legislation regarding liquor and teen marriage. The unique position of this society owes much to the hierarchy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the control it has over its brethren. One is taught that they should not question the authority of the First Presidency.

The faith that the members of the LDS Church put in their leadership is what allowed the doctrine regarding the African American to last so long. If the First President did not receive progressive revelation directly from God, then the doctrine regarding African Americans would have been considered a practice and perhaps easier to change from within. However, the unique position of the First President allowed for the position to be doctrinal and to remain a part of church policy much longer than was called for.
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