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UNEXPLAINING THE MORMON PRIESTHOOD BAN ON BLACKS

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SYNOPSIS

For much of its history, leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had a fairly standard explanation as to why those of African heritage were prohibited from holding any priesthood office in the Church. The ban was officially lifted in June 1978 by the First Presidency, the top leaders of the Church; since then, those former elucidations have quietly faded away. Modern explanations tend to exhibit a kind of “doctrinal amnesia,” causing many to wonder why a Church that claims to be led by prophets and apostles could have enforced such a ban when the reasons given pre-1978 are being repudiated today.

According to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormon), “priesthood is the eternal power and authority of God. Through the priesthood He created and governs the heavens and the earth,” thereby enabling worthy male members of the church to “preach the gospel, administer the ordinances of salvation, and govern God’s kingdom on earth.”¹ If a Mormon hopes to achieve exaltation or godhood in the highest degree of glory known as the celestial kingdom, priesthood is absolutely essential. According to twelfth Mormon President Spencer W. Kimball, “No

man will ever reach godhood who does not hold the priesthood.”² Though females are not ordained as priests in the LDS church, women who are sealed in marriage to a worthy priesthood holder are said to share in the blessings of that priesthood.

A foundational premise of Mormonism teaches that, following the death of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church fell into a state of complete apostasy. As a result, priesthood authority was lost. To remedy this situation, Mormons are led to believe that God chose an obscure farm boy named Joseph Smith as His instrument to bring priesthood authority and, ultimately, true Christian belief and practices back to the Earth.

Priesthood authority works in a top-down fashion. Though all worthy males are eligible to hold this priesthood, only the prophet/president of the LDS Church has all authority to speak for the entire Church. Priesthood holders who have lesser positions in the church are certainly allowed to have personal thoughts and ideas, but never do they trump the position of the living prophet. While the LDS Church does have written scripture, there is no concept of a closed canon. Mormons are taught that in addition to the written “standard works” (the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price), “the inspired words” of their living prophets are also to be accepted as scripture.³

Doctrine comes via “modern-day revelation” through prophets and apostles called by God. One of the venues where leaders give “inspired” instruction is in general conference, held twice a year in Salt Lake City. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, a member of the First Presidency, wrote, “Listen to general conference with an ear willing to hear the voice of God through his latter-day prophets.”⁴

THE PREEXISTENCE AND PERSONAL BEHAVIOR

Mormonism teaches that all humans are the literal offspring of a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother. All of humankind lived in their presence in what is called the “first estate.” In this preexistent state, personalities and talents were developed; it was those attributes and qualities that helped Heavenly Father determine the “time and place for each of us to be born.”⁵ Speaking in general conference in 1993, Mormon Apostle Dallin H. Oaks noted, “In ways that have not been revealed, our actions in the spirit world influence us in mortality.”⁶

Since we could only progress so far in this preexistent environment, it was necessary that we leave our heavenly parents and enter into mortality, or what is called the “second estate.” Eighth Mormon President George Albert Smith insisted that “we are here because we kept our first estate and earned the privilege of coming to this earth.” He went on to say, “We believe that our very existence is a reward for our

faithfulness before we came here, and that we are enjoying on earth the fruits of our efforts in the spirit world.”⁷

Speaking at a Brigham Young University devotional in 2008, Terry Ball, the dean of religious education, told his Mormon students:

*Have you ever wondered why you were born where and when you were born? Why you were not born 500 years ago in some primitive, aboriginal culture in some isolated corner of the world? Is the timing and placing of your birth capricious? For Latter-day Saints the answer is no. Fundamental to our faith is the understanding that before we came to this earth we lived in a premortal existence with a loving Heavenly Father. We further understand that in that premortal state we had agency. And that we grew and developed as we used that agency. Some, as Abraham learned, became noble and great ones. We believe that when it came time for us to experience mortality, a loving Heavenly Father who knows each of us well sent us to earth at the time and place and circumstances that would best help us reach our divine potential and help Him maximize his harvest of redeemed souls.*⁸

Coming to Earth and being given a mortal, physical body is necessary for the eternal progression of an individual. Mortality is to be a time of personal testing. It is a “mortal probation” to determine which of God’s children would use their brief time on Earth wisely and prove themselves worthy of exaltation, become like God, and “become heavenly parents and have spirit children just as He does.”⁹ The concept of premortal worthiness is as much a foundational teaching of Mormonism as priesthood itself. However, not all of God’s spirit children were granted such a privilege. In fact, one third of God’s spirit children were prevented from having a chance at mortality and thus prevented from receiving exaltation.

THE WAR IN HEAVEN

Knowing that His offspring would be tempted and sin when they were sent to Earth, Heavenly Father planned for a savior that would pay for the sins of His children and teach them how they could return to Him. Two sons of God volunteered for the position: Jehovah (the preincarnate Jesus Christ) and Lucifer. A “Grand Council” was called to determine who should be given the position. Jesus offered a plan that included personal free agency to choose either obedience or disobedience to God’s commands. Lucifer, on the other hand, “wanted to force us all to do his will. Under his plan, we would not be able to choose.”¹⁰ “After hearing both sons speak, Heavenly Father said, ‘I will send the first.’”¹¹ This decision infuriated Lucifer:

*When our Father in Heaven chose Jesus, Satan became very angry. He persuaded one-third of the spirits in heaven to follow him. Together they fought against Jesus and His followers. They wanted to force our Father in Heaven to accept Satan's plan. Our Father in Heaven made Satan and his followers leave heaven. Satan and his followers will not receive bodies of flesh and bones. They will not be able to return and live with our Father in Heaven. Only those who accepted Jesus to be their Savior can have bodies of flesh and bones.*¹²

This rebellion is known as the war in heaven. For their bad decisions, Lucifer would come to be known as Satan, and God's spirit children who followed Satan would become the demons. All of them are destined to spend eternity in outer darkness.

Understanding the Mormon doctrine of priesthood, pre-existence, and eternal progression is paramount if one is to understand why leaders, prior to 1978, felt that those of African heritage should be banned from holding the priesthood.

THE LESS VALIANT?

According to several LDS general authorities, the war in heaven had other casualties; though they would not be prevented from entering mortality, some would come to Earth with a mark that would distinguish them from other children of God. Early Mormons connected those of African heritage to the biblical Cain, who murdered his brother Abel. Speaking in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1859, Brigham Young said, "Cain slew his brother. Cain might have been killed, and that would have put a termination to that line of human beings. This was not to be, and the Lord put a mark upon him, which is the flat nose and black skin. Trace mankind down to after the flood, and then another curse is pronounced upon the same race—that they should be the 'servant of servants;' and they will be, until that curse is removed."¹³

Tenth Mormon President Joseph Fielding Smith echoed the belief of Brigham Young when he declared that during the war in heaven, none of God's spirit children were neutral: "There were no neutrals in the war in heaven. *All took sides either with Christ or with Satan.* Every man had his agency there, and men receive rewards here based upon their actions there, just as they will receive rewards hereafter for deeds done in the body. The Negro, evidently, is receiving the reward he merits" (emphasis in original).¹⁴

It was this same Mormon president who also said:

*Not only was Cain called upon to suffer, but because of his wickedness he became the father of an inferior race. A curse was placed upon him and that curse has been continued through his lineage and must do so while time endures. Millions of souls have come into this world cursed with a black skin and have been denied the privilege of Priesthood and the fulness of the blessings of the Gospel. These are the descendants of Cain. Moreover, they have been made to feel their inferiority and have been separated from the rest of mankind from the beginning.*¹⁵

In his 1954 speech titled "Race Problems: As They Affect the Church," Mormon Apostle Mark E. Petersen also connected preexistent performance to a person's mortal status on Earth: "We cannot escape the conclusion that because of performance in the pre-existence some of us are born as Chinese, some as Japanese, some as Indians, some as Negroes, some as Americans, some as Latter-day Saints. These are rewards and punishments, fully in harmony with His established policy in dealing with sinners and saints, rewarding all according to their deeds."¹⁶

In that same message, Petersen warned against intermarrying those who were victims of such a curse. He told listeners that this "curse" could be transferred to offspring through interracial marriage: "If I were to marry a Negro woman and have children by her, my children would all be cursed as to the priesthood. Do I want my children cursed as to the priesthood? If there is one drop of Negro blood in my children, as I read to you, they receive the curse. There isn't any argument, therefore, as to intermarriage with the Negro, is there?"¹⁷

Speaking in general conference in 1941, Apostle George F. Richards said, "The Negro race have been forbidden the priesthood, and the higher temple blessings, presumably because of their not having been valiant while in the spirit. It does not pay to be anything but valiant."¹⁸

The idea that some were less valiant in the preexistence was a common understanding held by LDS leaders prior to 1978. Joseph Fielding Smith's son-in-law, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie, wrote, "Those who were less valiant in preexistence and who thereby had certain spiritual restrictions imposed upon them during mortality are known to us as the Negroes."¹⁹ McConkie further elaborated this position by saying, "Such spirits are sent to earth through the lineage of Cain, the mark put upon him for his rebellion against God and his murder of Abel being a black skin."²⁰

BRIGHAM'S FAULT?

In December 2013, the LDS Church released one of several Gospel Topics Essays that were meant to address some of the more controversial aspects of the Mormon faith. In

the essay titled "Race and the Priesthood," the anonymous author (or authors) gave the impression that the prohibition placed on black members was a result of the prevailing prejudiced views held by many in the mid-1800s, including those of Brigham Young.

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. 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. 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. Those who accepted this view believed that God's "curse" on Cain was the mark of a dark skin.²¹

This admission shows that a significant shift has taken place since the lifting of the priesthood ban. Prior to 1978, leaders were insisting that Joseph Smith, not Brigham Young, was behind the priesthood restriction. For example, in his book *The Way to Perfection*, Joseph Fielding Smith stated, "This doctrine did not originate with President Brigham Young but was taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith." The tenth Mormon president defended this position by pointing to the minutes of a meeting attended by LDS general authorities that was held on August 22, 1895. In this meeting, President George Q. Cannon was credited with saying, "The prophet taught this doctrine: That the seed of Cain could not receive the Priesthood nor act in any of the offices of the Priesthood until the seed of Abel should come forward and take precedence over Cain's offspring."²²

In his commentary on the *Pearl of Great Price*, First Council of the Seventy member Milton R. Hunter also mentioned this 1895 meeting as proof that Smith was a source for this teaching. Hunter also credited Mormon scripture, saying that "it is due to the teachings of the *Pearl of Great Price* and the Prophet Joseph Smith and the other early leaders of the Church that the negro today is barred from the Priesthood."²³ Lest there be any doubt, Hunter went on to insist that "Brigham Young did not originate the doctrine that Negroes could not hold the Priesthood in this life but some day some of them may be granted that privilege, but he was taught it by the Prophet Joseph."²⁴

OFFICIAL DECLARATION TWO

Following the 138 revelations that make up the Doctrine and Covenants is a statement known as Official Declaration 2. This statement contains a letter from President Spencer W. Kimball officially announcing the lifting of the priesthood ban. In that declaration, it is noted that past leaders spoke of a day when, in God's eternal plan, "all of our brethren who are worthy may receive the priesthood." While it is true that past leaders predicted that a day would come when the ban would be lifted, it was not expected to happen until all the rest of God's children "have received their blessings in the Holy Priesthood."²⁵ Brigham Young stated, "That curse will remain upon them, and they never can hold the Priesthood or share in it until all the other descendants of Adam have received the promises and enjoyed the blessings of the Priesthood and the keys thereof."²⁶

In the 1958 edition of his book *Answers to Gospel Questions*, Joseph Fielding Smith taught that the "children of Cain should not have the privilege of bearing the priesthood until Abel had posterity who could have the priesthood and that will have to be in far distant future" and "on some other world."²⁷ This has been removed from post-1978 reprints.

NOT A DOCTRINE?

The "Race and the Priesthood" essay states that "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."²⁸ Just prior to the Church celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the lifting of the ban, Seventy Sheldon F. Child not only called the explanations "folklore" but also claimed, "It's never really been official doctrine."²⁹ While this explanation may seem like a convenient clarification, it ignores the fact that an August 17, 1949, First Presidency statement definitely called it a doctrine. Signed by President George Albert Smith and his two counselors, the statement read, "The position of the Church regarding the Negro may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind, namely, that the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality."

Darius Gray, the president of *Genesis*, a group of black LDS members, went so far as to insist that "the prohibition was not put in place by God, but it was removed by God."³⁰ Such an assumption most certainly calls into question the discernment level of more than half of Mormonism's prophets who felt compelled to enforce the priesthood ban on black members. Comments from past leaders tend to contradict Gray's hopeful conclusion. For example, Ezra Taft Benson, at the time an apostle in the LDS Church,

stated in general conference in October 1967 that God was responsible for prohibiting both blacks and women from holding the priesthood. "The arm of flesh may not approve nor understand why God has not bestowed the priesthood on women or the seed of Cain, but God's ways are not man's ways."³¹

According to the "Race and the Priesthood" essay, "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."

The fact is, LDS leaders have advocated all of the above. If nothing else, the evidence we have considered reveals that the Church's past leaders were immersed in a culture of racism. One would think that men who supposedly get direct revelation from God would have also risen above the prejudicial culture in which they lived and set a better example. The fact that these past leaders also attributed their enforcement of this prohibition to divine guidance also calls into question the frequent claim by Mormon leaders that God will not allow the prophet of the Mormon Church to lead the church astray. The evidence demonstrably shows that many of them have.

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NOTES

- 1 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 67.
- 2 *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 51.
- 3 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 45, 48.
- 4 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Why Do We Need Prophets?" *Ensign*, March 2012, 5.
- 5 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 10.
- 6 "The Great Plan of Happiness," *Ensign*, November 1993, 72.
- 7 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 70–71.
- 8 Terry B. Ball, "To Confirm and Inform: A Blessing of Higher Education," devotional address given on March 11, 2008; available at https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/terry-bball_confirm-inform-blessing-higher-education/.

- 9 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 11.
- 10 Ibid., 14–15.
- 11 Ibid., 15.
- 12 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Fundamentals* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), 11.
- 13 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* (October 9, 1859), 7:290.
- 14 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:65–66.
- 15 Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 101.
- 16 Mark E. Petersen, “Race Problems: As They Affect the Church,” (August 27, 1954), 11; available at <http://www.mormonismi.net/mep1954/11.html>.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 George F. Richards, *Conference Reports* (October 1947), 57.
- 19 *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 527.
- 20 Ibid. This comment was removed in the 1979 edition.
- 21 “Race and the Priesthood,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>. Though anonymous, the LDS church has issued a statement that all such essays “have been approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles”; <https://www.lds.org/topics/essays?lang=eng>.
- 22 Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 110.
- 23 Milton R. Hunter, *Pearl of Great Price Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1948), 141.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* (August 19, 1866), 11:272.
- 26 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* (October 9, 1859), 7:290–91.
- 27 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 2:188.
- 28 “Race and the Priesthood,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.
- 29 “LDS Marking 30-Year Milestone,” *Deseret News*, June 7, 2008.
- 30 “Black Mormons Say Life Is Better since 1966,” *Deseret News*, May 25, 2003.
- 31 Ezra Taft Benson, *Conference Reports* (October 1967), 34. Benson would later become Mormonism’s thirteenth president following the death of Spencer W. Kimball.