

Priesthood Ban on Blacks Proves False Prophets

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Among the most painful chapters in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the restriction that, for over a century, denied Black members of African descent ordination to the priesthood and access to temple ordinances. Critics argue that this restriction is decisive proof that Latter-day Saint prophets are not inspired — that they are either racists masquerading as prophets or, at best, fallible men whose claims to divine guidance are fatally undermined by this episode. The restriction was lifted in 1978 through Official Declaration 2, but the historical reality and the theological justifications once offered for the ban remain subjects of serious scrutiny. This document engages the strongest version of the criticism, examines the historical and scriptural record, and articulates the Latter-day Saint doctrinal position with honesty and scholarly rigor.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The critic's case is formidable and must be stated at full strength:

- 1. Duration and scope:** The priesthood and temple restriction on Black members of African descent persisted from the presidency of Brigham Young (approximately 1852) until 1978 — over 125 years. This was not a brief aberration but a sustained, institutionally enforced policy spanning the tenures of multiple prophets, seers, and revelators.
- 2. Theological justifications offered:** Church leaders did not merely enforce the restriction as unexplained policy. Many offered theological rationales — including the "curse of Cain," the "curse of Ham," and the idea that Black individuals were "less valiant" in a premortal existence. These explanations mirrored broader racist ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries, suggesting cultural prejudice rather than divine revelation.
- 3. Contrast with the revelatory claim:** Latter-day Saint prophets claim direct communication with God. If God truly directs His church through living prophets, it is difficult to explain why He would allow a racist restriction — and especially racist theological justifications — to persist for over a century while the broader world was making moral progress on racial equality.
- 4. The Civil Rights context:** The restriction was lifted in 1978, after decades of civil rights progress, growing social pressure, and the Church's international expansion into nations with large Black populations (notably Brazil and West Africa). Critics argue the timing suggests capitulation to social pressure rather than genuine revelation.
- 5. Other churches acted sooner:** Many Christian denominations confronted and corrected their racist practices decades before 1978. If Latter-day Saint prophets were truly receiving divine guidance, they should have led on this moral issue rather than lagging behind.

6. **The damage done:** The restriction caused real, measurable harm to Black Latter-day Saints and potential converts. A loving God guided by inspired prophets would not permit such prolonged institutional harm to His children.

This is, by any honest assessment, one of the most challenging issues in Latter-day Saint history. It demands candor, humility, and careful reasoning — not dismissiveness.

3. Biblical Response

Biblical Prophets Were Flawed and Sometimes Wrong

The Bible consistently depicts prophets as imperfect instruments who sometimes act from cultural prejudice, personal weakness, or incomplete understanding — without thereby ceasing to be prophets:

- **Moses** — Killed an Egyptian (Exodus 2:12), was denied entry to the Promised Land for disobedience (Numbers 20:12), yet remained God's prophet.
- **Jonah** — Refused God's command, fled from his calling, and even after obeying, expressed racist contempt for the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1-3). God rebuked Jonah but did not revoke his prophetic calling.
- **Peter** — After receiving a vision declaring all foods clean and explicitly commanding him not to call any person "common or unclean" (Acts 10:9-28), Peter still withdrew from Gentile fellowship under social pressure. Paul "withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter was wrong on a racial/ethnic issue. He was rebuked by a fellow apostle. He remained an apostle.
- **Nathan** — Told David to build the temple, then had to retract the counsel after God corrected him (2 Samuel 7:1-17).
- **Abraham and Isaac** — Both deceived foreign kings about their wives (Genesis 12:11-13; 26:7). Their moral failures did not disqualify them from the covenant.

The critical principle: In biblical theology, prophetic calling does not require prophetic infallibility. The standard the critic is applying — that a true prophet must never err, especially on moral questions — is not the biblical standard. It is a standard no biblical prophet meets.

The Bible Records God Working Through Imperfect Dispensations

Scripture repeatedly shows God working within existing cultural limitations rather than overturning every social injustice instantaneously:

- **Slavery:** The Old Testament regulates slavery rather than abolishing it (Exodus 21:1-11; Leviticus 25:44-46). The New Testament instructs slaves to obey masters (Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; 1 Peter 2:18). Paul returned the escaped slave Onesimus to Philemon. By the critic's logic, every biblical author who failed to condemn slavery outright was a false prophet.
- **Women's roles:** The Old Testament and much of the New Testament reflect patriarchal norms. Paul's instructions about women's silence (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12) are not typically taken as proof that Paul was a false apostle.

- **Gentile exclusion:** Jesus himself initially limited his ministry to Israel: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). He instructed his apostles, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles" (Matthew 10:5). The full inclusion of Gentiles came only gradually, and not without significant controversy in the early church (Acts 15).

The pattern is clear: God works through progressive revelation within imperfect human contexts. The existence of a temporary restriction, even one rooted in cultural prejudice, does not by itself disprove prophetic calling.

Galatians 3:28 and the Universality of the Gospel

Paul declared: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This verse articulates the ultimate trajectory of the gospel — full equality and inclusion. The Latter-day Saint position is that Official Declaration 2 brought the Church into alignment with this New Testament ideal, just as Peter's vision in Acts 10 brought the early church into alignment with Christ's universal commission.

4. Early Christian/Historical Evidence

The Early Church's Own Struggles with Racial and Ethnic Exclusion

The earliest Christian community faced an almost identical crisis over whether Gentiles could fully participate in the covenant without first becoming Jews:

- **Acts 10-11:** It took a dramatic vision, repeated three times, to convince Peter that Gentiles were not "common or unclean." Even after this experience, Peter had to defend himself before the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:1-18).
- **Acts 15 (the Jerusalem Council):** The question of Gentile inclusion required a formal council and produced significant controversy. Some Jewish Christians continued to insist on circumcision and Torah observance for Gentile converts (the Judaizers).
- **The delay:** Christ gave the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) to go to "all nations" before his ascension. Yet the apostles did not begin to include Gentiles for approximately a decade. This delay was not due to divine instruction to exclude Gentiles — it was due to cultural prejudice among the apostles themselves.

The parallel is instructive: the apostles of Jesus Christ, personally called and taught by the Lord, maintained an ethnically exclusive policy for years based on cultural assumptions rather than divine command. When God was ready to change the practice, He did so through revelation — a vision to Peter, just as He gave revelation to President Spencer W. Kimball.

Church Fathers on Progressive Understanding

Several early Christian writers acknowledged that God's people do not always understand His will perfectly from the outset:

- **Irenaeus** (*Against Heresies* 4.38.1-2): Argued that humanity was created in a state of growth and that understanding unfolds progressively. God accommodates human weakness and develops His people over time.
- **Origen** (*De Principiis* 3.1.17): Maintained that God educates humanity gradually, adapting His pedagogy to the capacity of the learners.

These principles suggest that a period of imperfect understanding within a prophetic community is consistent with, not contradictory to, authentic divine guidance.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

The Church's Official Statements

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has addressed this history with increasing directness:

1. **Official Declaration 2 (1978)**: President Spencer W. Kimball, after "extended meditation and prayer in the sacred rooms of the holy temple," received a revelation extending the priesthood to "every faithful, worthy man in the Church." The declaration describes "a revelation and assurance" that came to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, "confirming that the long-promised day had come" ([Official Declaration 2](#)).
2. **"Race and the Priesthood" Gospel Topics Essay (2013)**: The Church officially disavowed the racial theories advanced by past leaders: "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" ([Race and the Priesthood](#)).
3. **The essay's historical analysis**: The Church's own essay acknowledges that the ban "was not a direct revelation to Brigham Young" but rather developed within the context of "the racial attitudes of the mid-19th century." This is a significant admission: the Church itself distinguishes between the ban (which may have been influenced by cultural factors) and the revelation lifting it (which is affirmed as genuinely divine).

Progressive Revelation as a Core Doctrine

Latter-day Saint theology is uniquely equipped to handle this challenge because it explicitly affirms that prophets receive truth "line upon line, precept upon precept" (2 Nephi 28:30; D&C 98:12; Isaiah 28:10). The ninth Article of Faith states: "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God." This framework anticipates both past limitations and future corrections.

Prophetic Fallibility Is Doctrine, Not a Weakness

Latter-day Saint scripture itself warns that prophets can err:

- **D&C 1:24-28** — God states He gave commandments to His servants "in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding." God works through imperfect mortal instruments.
- **D&C 3:6-7** — Joseph Smith himself was rebuked for fearing man more than God, and the lost 116 manuscript pages stand as a permanent reminder of prophetic fallibility.
- **The Book of Mormon title page** — Declares that "if there are faults they are the mistakes of men."

The Latter-day Saint position has never been that prophets are infallible. The critic's argument depends on a standard that Latter-day Saint theology itself explicitly rejects.

The Universality of the Gospel in LDS Scripture

Latter-day Saint scripture contains strong universalist statements that cut against racial restriction:

- **2 Nephi 26:33** — "He inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God."
- **Acts 10:34-35** — "God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."
- **D&C 38:24-27** — "Let every man esteem his brother as himself... I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine."

The tension between these scriptures and the historical restriction is real. The Church's position is that Official Declaration 2 resolved this tension by bringing practice into alignment with doctrine.

6. Key Scriptures

- **Acts 10:9-35** — Peter's vision abolishing Jewish-Gentile distinctions; paradigm for priesthood extension through revelation
- **Galatians 2:11-14** — Paul rebuking Peter for racial/ethnic prejudice; apostles can err on racial matters
- **2 Nephi 26:33** — "All are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile"
- **D&C 1:24-28** — God works through imperfect servants "in their weakness"
- **Isaiah 28:10** — "Line upon line, precept upon precept"
- **Acts 15:1-29** — The Jerusalem Council; precedent for the church changing restrictive practices through revelation
- **Galatians 3:28** — "Neither Jew nor Greek... all one in Christ Jesus"
- **Matthew 15:24** — Jesus initially restricted his ministry to Israel
- **D&C 3:6-7** — Joseph Smith rebuked; prophetic fallibility acknowledged
- **Numbers 20:12** — Moses punished for error but not disqualified as prophet

7. Responses to Common Objections

"A true prophet would never allow racism in God's church."

No biblical prophet meets this standard. Peter was publicly rebuked for racial/ethnic prejudice (Galatians 2:11-14). Moses tolerated slavery. The entire Old Testament operates within patriarchal and ethnocentric frameworks. The standard being applied would disqualify every prophet in scripture. Furthermore, the question assumes God operates on the critic's preferred timeline. The biblical record shows God working within cultural contexts and revealing change progressively, not instantaneously.

"The ban lasted over 125 years — that is too long for a mere 'mistake.'"

The Gentile exclusion in ancient Israel lasted roughly 2,000 years — from Abraham's covenant to Peter's vision in Acts 10. The Old Testament priesthood was restricted to a single tribe (Levi) and a single family (Aaron's descendants) for the entire Mosaic dispensation. Duration alone does not determine whether a restriction was divinely mandated, culturally conditioned, or some combination.

"The 1978 change was just capitulation to social pressure."

This argument proves too much. Peter's inclusion of Gentiles also coincided with the practical needs of the expanding early church. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was prompted by real-world disputes about Gentile converts. If divine revelation that coincides with practical necessity is automatically suspect, then most biblical revelation is suspect. The accounts of those present when the 1978 revelation was received — including Elder Bruce R. McConkie and Elder David B. Haight — describe a powerful, unmistakable spiritual confirmation. The coincidence of timing does not disprove the reality of the revelation.

"The racist justifications offered by past leaders prove they were not inspired."

The Church has officially disavowed those justifications: "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" ([Race and the Priesthood essay](#)). Prophets sometimes offer personal explanations for practices they did not originate and do not fully understand. Peter likely had theological rationalizations for why Gentiles were excluded (rooted in Torah interpretation) that God later corrected. The existence of incorrect explanations does not mean the prophetic office itself is illegitimate.

"If prophets can be this wrong, how can anyone trust them?"

The Latter-day Saint answer is that trust is placed in God and the pattern of continuing revelation, not in the infallibility of individual leaders. D&C 1:38 states that God's word will be fulfilled "whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same." But the same section acknowledges that those servants act "in their weakness" (D&C 1:24). The appropriate response to prophetic fallibility is not the rejection of prophets but engagement with the continuing revelatory process — including personal revelation and the witness of the Holy Ghost.

"Other churches corrected their racism sooner."

Many churches did. Many also have no claim to ongoing prophetic revelation. The comparison is not straightforward. Additionally, many mainstream Protestant denominations used biblical texts to defend slavery and segregation for centuries, and some denominations split precisely over these issues (the Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 in explicit defense of slavery). The moral record of Christianity broadly on racial issues is deeply imperfect, and singling out the Latter-day Saint tradition requires selective comparison.

8. Conclusion

The priesthood and temple restriction on Black members of African descent is a genuine moral failure in Latter-day Saint history, and the theological rationalizations offered for it have been officially disavowed by the Church. This document does not minimize that reality. However, the argument that this history disproves Latter-day Saint prophetic claims depends on a standard of prophetic infallibility that no biblical prophet meets and that Latter-day Saint theology explicitly rejects. The Bible records prophets who held ethnic prejudices (Peter), tolerated slavery (Paul), disobeyed God (Jonah, Moses), and offered incorrect counsel (Nathan) — without thereby forfeiting their prophetic calling. The pattern of progressive revelation, in which God works within cultural limitations and extends understanding over time, is deeply embedded in scripture. The lifting of the restriction in 1978 follows the biblical pattern of God correcting His people through revelation when they are ready to receive it — just as Peter's vision in Acts 10 corrected the early church's ethnic exclusivism. The strongest Latter-day Saint response to this challenge is not defensiveness but the honest acknowledgment that prophets are mortal, that God's purposes unfold progressively, and that the trajectory of the gospel is toward the full inclusion affirmed in 2 Nephi 26:33: "All are alike unto God."

Further Reading:

- [Race and the Priesthood — Gospel Topics Essay](#)
- [Official Declaration 2](#)
- [FairLatterdaySaints: Blacks and the Priesthood](#)
- [FairLatterdaySaints: Racial Theories](#)