

Priesthood & Race: The Historical Truth

How the 1978 revelation proves living prophets receive continuing revelation

THE HISTORICAL TIMELINE

1830-1844 (Joseph Smith): Black men WERE ordained to priesthood
1852-1978 (126 years): Ban instituted under Brigham Young
June 8, 1978: God revealed the ban should end (Official Declaration 2)

Joseph Smith Era: NO Ban (1830-1844)

Elijah Abel (1836): Ordained an elder by Zebedee Coltrin; ordained to Seventy (1841); served 3 missions; remained faithful until death (1884)

Walker Lewis (1844): Black man in Massachusetts ordained an elder; noted for faithfulness in Church records

2 Nephi 26:33 (1830): "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"

Critical Point: If the ban were eternal doctrine from God, Joseph Smith would have instituted it. He didn't—he ordained Black men.

Brigham Young Era: Ban Begins (1852)

| What Happened | The Problem |
|---|---|
| 1852: Brigham Young publicly announced priesthood restriction in territorial legislature | 8 years after Joseph's death; contradicts Joseph's practice |
| Theories: "Curse of Cain," "less valiant in pre-mortal life," "curse of Ham" | Church officially disavowed these theories in 2013 |
| Context: Utah petitioning for statehood; slavery debates; 19th-century American racism | Cultural racism, not divine revelation |
| No written revelation exists instituting the ban | Contrast with Official Declaration 2 (1978) ending it |

The Ban Continues (1852-1978): 126 Years

What Changed Over Time:

- President David O. McKay (1954): "Sometime in God's plan, the Negro will be given the right to priesthood"
- Hugh B. Brown (1963): Policy "is not doctrine" and might change
- 1960s-70s: Civil Rights Movement, pressure from within/outside Church
- International growth made ban administratively impossible

JUNE 8, 1978: THE REVELATION

President Spencer W. Kimball spent years in the Salt Lake Temple praying for guidance. God answered with a revelation extending priesthood to all worthy men.

What Happened

President Kimball's Process: "I had a great deal to fight... myself, largely, because I had grown up with this thought that Negroes should not have the priesthood." —Spencer W. Kimball

The Revelation: After persistent prayer in the temple, President Kimball received divine confirmation. He presented it to the Quorum of the Twelve; all received spiritual witness.

Official Declaration 2: "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... without regard for race or color."

June 9, 1978: Announcement made public

October 1978: Unanimously sustained at General Conference

Result: 16+ million members worldwide immediately accepted the change—no schism, no debate, complete unity

ANSWERING THE CRITICISMS

Criticism 1: "The LDS Church Was Racist"

Response: Acknowledge + Provide Context

Church's 2013 Statement: "The Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse... Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form." —"Race and the Priesthood" Gospel Topics Essay

But Consider:

- **Joseph Smith didn't institute it** (he ordained Black men)
- **No revelation exists** commanding the ban
- **2 Nephi 26:33 condemned it** before it started (1830)
- **1978 revelation ended it** = proof it was policy, not eternal doctrine

Criticism 2: "Brigham Young Said 'Thus Saith the Lord'"

Response: He Didn't

What Brigham Young Actually Said (1852): "If no other Prophet ever spake it before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ I know it is true."

→ Notice: "I will say it" (personal), "I know" (conviction)

→ He did NOT say: "Thus saith the Lord" or "The Lord revealed this to me"

Church's Official Position (2013): "The Church is not aware of any revelation received by Joseph Smith or Brigham Young establishing the priesthood and temple restrictions."

Evidence It Wasn't Revelation:

- Never written down as revelation (no D&C section)
- Never presented to Church for sustaining vote
- Contradicted scripture (2 Nephi 26:33: "He denieth none... black and white")
- Modern apostles say "we don't know why the ban existed" (if revelation existed, they'd know)

"In the name of Jesus Christ" = prophetic authority (his conviction), NOT "thus saith the Lord" revelation

Criticism 3: "If Prophets Were Wrong, How Can You Trust Them?"

This Actually PROVES LDS Doctrine

LDS Position: Prophets are inspired but fallible. We need continuing revelation to correct errors. The 1978 revelation proves this system works.

Biblical Examples of Fallible Prophets:

- **Moses:** Struck rock instead of speaking to it (Num 20:11-12)
- **Peter:** Denied Christ 3 times (Matt 26:69-75); separated from Gentiles (Gal 2:11-14)—Paul rebuked him
- **Nathan:** Told David to build temple—God corrected him next day (2 Sam 7:3-5)
- **Jonah:** Fled from God's command (Jonah 1)

Doctrine vs. Policy:

| Doctrine (Eternal) | Policy (Can Change) |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Jesus is the Christ | Priesthood eligibility |
| Baptism required | Mission age |
| Temple ordinances eternal | Meeting schedules |

The priesthood ban was policy, not doctrine. The 1978 revelation proves it.

Criticism 4: "Why Did It Take Until 1978?"

Answer: God works through agency. Spencer W. Kimball had to seek the revelation. (Pattern: Peter's vision about Gentiles took 10+ years after "Go into all the world"). The Church needed to be ready (international growth). We don't fully know God's timing (Isa 55:8).

Criticism 5: "The Church Caved to Social Pressure"

Response: The Timeline Disproves This

- **1960s:** Civil Rights Movement at peak—no change
- **1964:** Civil Rights Act—no change
- **1968:** MLK assassination—no change
- **1970-77:** BYU boycotts, protests—no change
- **1978:** Revelation (pressure actually LESS than 1960s)

If they caved to pressure, why wait until 1978? Why not 1968?

Social pressure can prompt prophets to seek revelation (that's how it often works). But the Church resisted 15+ years of intense pressure before the revelation came.

THE APOLOGETIC: THIS PROVES LDS DOCTRINE

What the Priesthood Ban Actually Proves:

| Claim | Evidence |
|---|--|
| 1. Prophets are fallible | ✓ LDS always taught this; ban was human error |
| 2. We need continuing revelation | ✓ Without it, the error would still exist (like Biblical slavery justifications) |
| 3. Book of Mormon is true | ✓ 2 Ne 26:33 (1830) condemned ban before it started (1852) |
| 4. The LDS system works | ✓ Error occurred → God revealed correction → Church course-corrected |
| 5. God still speaks today | ✓ June 8, 1978 = modern revelation from God |

Comparison: How Do Traditions Correct Errors?

| Tradition | Slavery/Race Error | How "Fixed" |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Catholic | Popes endorsed slavery (1452, 1866) | Quietly stopped; no revelation |
| Protestant | Used Bible to justify slavery (Eph 6:5; Philemon, "Curse of Ham") | Reinterpreted verses; still debated |
| LDS | Priesthood ban (1852-1978) | Official Declaration 2 (1978) - direct revelation from God |

Only the LDS Church can point to a specific date (June 8, 1978) and say: "On this day, God spoke and corrected the error." No other Christian tradition has this.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Question: Did leaders make mistakes? (Yes—all religious traditions have)

The REAL Question: Does God still speak to correct those mistakes?

Without living prophets: The ban would still exist (no mechanism to receive revelation to end it). We'd be stuck reinterpreting 2 Ne 26:33 like Protestants reinterpret slavery verses.

With living prophets: God sent revelation (June 8, 1978), officially corrected the error, and the Church immediately course-corrected with complete unity.

The 1978 revelation is one of the strongest evidences that God still speaks through living prophets today.