

Black Mormons and the Priesthood: A Retrospective Perspective

Robert A. Rees

Typical of far too many youths of my generation, I grew up in a racist home, a racist community, and in racist Latter-day Saint congregations. As a young man, I harbored deep racist sentiments and attitudes toward Black people (as well as other racial minorities).¹ I thought of that childhood recently when a friend sent me a copy of a letter from the First Presidency dated November 4, 1949, written in response to a letter from a convert to the Church asking, “What is the Church’s attitude (both in theory and in practice) toward Negroes in social life?” The following response was signed by both J. Reuben Clark Jr. and David O. McKay of the Church’s First Presidency:

The church’s attitude today is as it always has been, namely, that intermarriage between our members and negroes is forbidden because negroes cannot have the priesthood, and the progeny of marriages between our people and negroes could not hold the priesthood. Since the church’s membership is charged by the Lord with carrying on his work, which is done through his priesthood, it is the obligation of every Latter-day Saint to see to it that his progeny, so far as blood and race are concerned, is of a character that can carry on the priesthood. Anything therefore that tends to encourage marriage between negroes and whites is not sanctioned by the Church. Social intercourse with the negroes has this tendency, and for equivalent reasons, it is not sanctioned by the Church. This does not mean that the Church would deny the negro any civil rights nor that it would deny to him any progress which he himself,

1. For more on this distressing subject, see my article, Robert A. Rees, “Truth and Reconciliation: Reflections on the Fortieth Anniversary of the LDS Church’s Lifting the Priesthood and Temple Restrictions for Black Mormons of African Descent,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2023): 55–83.

as to individuals or groups, might be able to achieve in whatever line or endeavor they are able to excel.²

Note the exclusionary language: “our members,” “our people,” and “every Latter-day Saint [apparently, excluding Black Church members].” Though starker in its expression, the following statement by apostle Joseph Fielding Smith in 1963 reflects both the tone and the substance the First Presidency’s letter: “I would not want you to believe that we bear any animosity toward the Negro. ‘Darkies’ are wonderful people, and they have a place in our church.”³

That was the Church in which I came of age. When I went to Brigham Young University in the early 1950s, there was not a single Black student or faculty member on campus. While little at BYU challenged orthodoxy on this subject, serving a mission in Chicago and, shortly afterward, serving in the army in Georgia, I saw firsthand the realities of Jim Crow and blatant racism, which led me to begin questioning the Church’s teaching on this matter. In graduate school at the University of Wisconsin—a dramatically more progressive environment than I had experienced at BYU—I grew increasingly uncomfortable with the doctrine and the official justifications for it. Nevertheless, like many Latter-day Saints at the time, I continued to defend the Church’s position. As time went by, however, I began to feel a tension between the words I was saying and the misgivings of my heart.

Although I parroted what I had been taught about Black people being less valiant in the premortal existence and the curse of Cain,

2. First Presidency Letter to Waldo H. Anderson, president of the Northern States Mission, Nov. 4, 1949. Permission to publish granted by Waldo Anderson’s grandsons, James and Neil Anderson.

3. *Look Magazine*, Oct. 1963, as cited in Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, *Mormonism 101: Examining the Religion of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 233, as cited in FAIR, “Do critics of Mormonism apply a double standard when attacking the Church on race issues?” https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Mormonism_and_racial_issues/Blacks_and_the_priesthood/Double_standard#cite_note-1.

eventually I developed my own more rational, if still uncomfortable, explanation: “Given the liberating doctrines of the Restoration and the political realities of mid-nineteenth-century racial culture, had the Church given the priesthood and temple blessings to Black members, they likely would have been attracted to the Church in such great numbers that Mormonism would have become essentially a Black-dominated church and therefore lost its ability to proselytize the predominate white (if racist) nations.”

It wasn’t until the height of the civil rights movement when I began teaching at UCLA, including teaching Black American writers in my English classes, that I became increasingly aware that my attitudes and beliefs were disharmonious with those of the Church. It was during this time when, as editor of *Dialogue*, I opened an envelope and found Lester Bush Jr.’s “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview” with its arresting opening sentence: “There once was a time, albeit brief, when a ‘Negro problem’ did not exist for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”⁴ Immediately, the significance of what I was reading became apparent. My feeling was similar to what Herman Melville expressed upon first reading Nathaniel Hawthorne’s collection of short stories—“a shock of recognition,” which I have described elsewhere as “an immediate and indelible communication of truth to my soul.”⁵

Bush’s article put me in a moral quandary, especially when I learned that he had sent his article and all the documentation for it to Church leadership—to Elder Boyd K. Packer, to be precise, who expressed his wish that the article not be published, although, according to Bush, he didn’t actually forbid it. Other General Authorities also voiced objections. According to Bush, Mormon scholar Edward Ashment was present when Elder Bruce R. McConkie, upon studying Bush’s article,

4. Lester E. Bush Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11.

5. Bob Rees, “A Perfect Brightness of Hope,” *Wayfare*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/a-perfect-brightness-of-hope>.

“slammed the [issue of] *Dialogue* with my essay down on his desk and pronounced it ‘CRAP!’”⁶

Although I was warned by Robert K. Thomas, vice president of BYU and a friend and mentor, that there could be grave consequences for me personally if we did publish the article, after much prayer and consultation with my wife and editorial staff, as well as with Gene England and other trusted advisors, we concluded that what Bush had written was so important that morally we had no choice but to publish it. As I wrote to Lester, “It is, of course, a potentially explosive issue, and undoubtedly there will be many people displeased at our efforts, but the time is long overdue, it seems to me, for us to publish some significant work on this subject.”⁷ If publishing Bush’s article was the right decision, publishing it with responses from three trusted Latter-day Saint scholars was an even better one. Together, Gordon Thomasson, Hugh Nibley, and Eugene England created an expanded context in which Bush’s words could be more fully understood. I was especially impressed by what England, who called the teaching “The Mormon Cross,” said: “We can get ready for living the higher law, first by working to root out racism in ourselves through getting to know blacks and something of black aspirations and culture. And we can help get Americans ready, black and white, by working honestly and vigorously to overcome the burden of our racist past.”⁸ Unfortunately, it took a long time following the publication of Bush’s article for us to do either.

6. Lester Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview’ (1973): Context and Reflections, 1998,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 266–67.

7. Devery S. Anderson, “A History of Dialogue, Part Two: Struggle toward Maturity, 1971–1982,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 23.

8. Eugene England, “The Mormon Cross,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 85.

What none of us could have anticipated was that, according to members of President Spencer W. Kimball's family, Bush's article was not only read by President Kimball but underlined in red throughout. As Greg Prince informs us in his article in this special section, people close to the prophet speculate that Bush's article had a strong influence on his 1978 announcement of the change in policy. In fact, Prince quotes general authority Marion D. Hanks as confirming this: "[Lester's] article had had far more influence than the Brethren would ever acknowledge. . . . It 'started to foment the pot.'"⁹

It is sobering to contemplate where the Church would be today had Brigham Young never authorized nor insisted on his false teaching. Or where we would be if the Church had taken Bush's research to its ultimate conclusion in 1978 and altogether abandoned the historical rationale for the doctrine rather than continuing it for more than three more decades. Imagine the Church over that extended period unburdened by its heavy racial history!

There is no way to calculate the personal harm suffered by Black people over the more than a century and a half between Brigham Young's teaching and the 2013 "Race and Priesthood" essay.¹⁰ How many more Black people would have joined the Church had they been taught today's liberating policy? How many Black Mormons would have served missions and how many converts might they have brought into the Church had they been allowed to serve during the century between Brigham Young's ban and the lifting of the ban in 1978? How many more Church members, Black and white, would there currently be in Brazil, throughout Africa, and in the United States and Europe?

9. Gregory A. Prince, "A Tribute to Lester Bush on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Article that Changed the Church," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 57, no. 3 (2024).

10. "Race and the Priesthood," *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

How many Black brothers and sisters would have enjoyed the blessings of temple marriage and eternally sealed families? How many ancestors of Black members would have received saving ordinances through their descendants' temple work? And how many individual Black members would have been spared the pain and humiliation of prejudicial discrimination, rejection, and violence?

It is sobering to acknowledge that over a period of 129 years (from 1849 to 1978), ten prophets and hundreds of apostles were wrong in teaching and defending a doctrine and practice regarding priesthood ordination that was counter to what the prophet Joseph Smith taught and counter to the very clear language of the Book of Mormon. It is equally sobering that it took another thirty-four years for the Church to acknowledge the wrongness of earlier justifications when it published "Race and Priesthood" in 2013.

My wife, Gloria, and I were privileged to attend the impressive "Be One" celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the 1978 lifting of the priesthood ban held in the Conference Center in June 2018. We saw and talked with Lester immediately afterward, along with our mutual friend, Greg Prince. We all lamented the fact that those responsible for planning and speaking at the celebration failed to use it to permanently dispel the mythology that had persisted and done so much damage both within and without the Church for nearly two centuries (and, unfortunately, the remnants of which remain with us). Those leaving the conference center that night, their hearts filled with the evening's celebratory spirit, were left with the impression that Brigham Young, Spencer W. Kimball, and Russell M. Nelson were all part of a revelatory process and history. Few had any idea that anonymously sitting in the Conference Center that night was a courageous, humble, and devoted Latter-day Saint scholar whose brilliant and respectful service to the kingdom may be of greater import than that of any lay member in the brief history of the Church. I say, "Praise to the man!"

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YVONNE BUSH was born and raised in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 1967 she met and married Lester Bush while he was attending UVA School of Medicine. World adventures and life ensued, and the two covered all seven continents while they raised three remarkable children. She received a BS degree in political science from the University of Utah and an MSW from Catholic University of America.

F. ROSS PETERSON {ross.peterson@usu.edu} is an emeritus professor and a native of Montpelier, Idaho. He graduated from Utah State University and obtained a PhD from Washington State University. During his career, he has taught at the University of Texas-Arlington, Utah State University, Victoria University in New Zealand (Fulbright fellow), and Deep Springs College in California, where he also served as president. He and his wife Kay edited *Dialogue* from 1987 to 1992. He chaired the Utah Humanities Council, founded the Mountain West Center at Utah State University, and was also vice president for advancement. Peterson has published many books on Western history as well as numerous essays. Twice a bishop in the LDS Church, he is now focused on autobiography and public service.

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