

# Official Declaration 2

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I was seven years old in June 1978 when the Lord revealed to President Spencer W. Kimball that all worthy men, regardless of race, should be ordained to the priesthood, and all worthy people could receive all the temple ordinances. I vaguely recollect the announcement. I didn't know that black people could not receive temple ordinances before that or that worthy black men were not ordained to the priesthood. If I had known, I would have assumed it was God's will and not thought about it. Everything I knew was black and white, and everyone I knew was white.

Things got more complex as I grew up—math, science, history, and the restored gospel. I learned that Europeans who enslaved Africans found justification in Genesis 9, where Noah cursed his grandson Canaan to be a servant, though it says nothing about race. Anti-slavery advocates argued from the Bible too.<sup>1</sup>

The Savior's restored Church came of age in the midst of this controversy. Nothing was more frequently in the news or engaged the passions of Americans more than the race-based antagonisms that led finally to Civil War, as Joseph had prophesied (see section 87). Early Latter-day Saints had various opinions, assumptions, and prejudices. They did not always align with the Lord's revelations. "It is not right that any man should be in bondage to another," the Lord revealed, because everyone should be free to act "according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment” (D&C 101:78). The Book of Mormon says the Lord “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, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 16:33). With Joseph’s knowledge and consent, a few black men, including Elijah Abel, received the priesthood in the 1830s and 1840s, served missions, and remained faithful.<sup>2</sup> The First Presidency declared in 1840 that “persons of all languages, and of every tongue, and of every color ... shall with us worship the Lord of Hosts in his holy temple.”<sup>3</sup>

Early in 1852 Brigham Young declared black men should not be ordained to the priesthood, at least not yet. He reasoned that Cain had killed Abel, and until there was compensation for that, Cain’s descendants shouldn’t have priesthood. He was assuming, as many people did, that black people were Cain’s descendants, and therefore heirs of the curse.<sup>4</sup>

In the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price, Enoch prophesied that Noah’s grandson Canaan and his descendants were destined to live in a land cursed with excessive heat and therefore barrenness. Enoch also saw that their skin became black and they were hated (Moses 7:7–8). The prophecy does not say that was cause and effect. Prophecies that are descriptive (things as they will be) are often misread as prescriptive (things as they should be), but it seems unlikely that God, who commands us to love one another, willed for Noah’s descendants to be “despised among all people” (Moses 7:8).

The Book of Abraham suggests that the first pharaoh of Egypt was a son of Canaan and Egyptus and thus a grandson of Ham and a great-grandson of Noah. According to the Book of Abraham, “Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate” the order of the priesthood (Abraham 1:26). Noah blessed him with wealth and wisdom “but cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood” for unspecified reasons (Abraham 1:27–28). The Canaanites’ race is not mentioned, but some readers interpreted the Moses passage

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<sup>2</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 214–16.

<sup>3</sup> “Report from the Presidency,” *Times and Seasons* 1 (October 1840): 188.

<sup>4</sup> Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 212–30.

about black skin to apply to the Abraham passage about the righteous Pharaoh who was cursed “pertaining to the priesthood” (Abraham 1:20–21).

How should those passages to be interpreted? Is there a genealogical link between the ancient Canaanites and modern Africans, or is that an unfounded assumption advanced by slavery proponents and accepted by Latter-day Saints? Were blacks denied the priesthood because of an inherited curse or because people misinterpreted the Pearl of Great Price or for some other reasons? In the face of unanswered questions, the restriction created tension between these truths:

- The Lord invites all to come to him, black and white, and all of us are alike to God, beloved children (2 Ne 26:33).
- Apostles are commissioned to take the gospel to everyone.
- A race-based restriction existed.

Those co-existing facts created a theological problem. “A contradictory and confusing legacy of racist religious folklore” grew up to address the problem. People are black, this way of thinking went, because they chose to be less valiant in the premortal world.<sup>5</sup> That satisfied some people, but mainly it complicated the problem. There was no evidence for it. It was simply a rationale to make sense of a restriction that didn’t otherwise make gospel sense.

The problem that had troubled a few people all along became acute for many, including the apostles, as they confronted the tension between the restrictions and their commission to take the gospel global. As an apostle in 1963, Spencer W. Kimball said, “I have wished the Lord had given us a little more clarity in the matter.” He did not know whether to characterize the restriction as “doctrine or policy” but acknowledged that it “has not varied in my memory.” He continued, “I know it could. I know the Lord could change his policy.”<sup>6</sup> Little did Elder Kimball know then how the Lord would implement change through him.

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<sup>5</sup> Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 212; “Race and Priesthood.”

<sup>6</sup> Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 448–49. President David O. McKay also called the priesthood ban a *policy* rather than a *doctrine*. See Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 200–201.

Revelation came to Church president Spencer W. Kimball in 1978. By then thousands of West Africans had accepted the gospel and waited for baptism with great faith. Black Latter-day Saints all over the world hoped and prayed for the long-promised day when temple doors would be opened to them. President Kimball had a commission from Christ to get the gospel blessings to them, and he needed to know how to accomplish it.

Following the pattern for revelation established by Doctrine and Covenants 9:8–9, he thoroughly studied the history of the policy. He sought the views of others and asked his brethren to study the scriptures for understanding. At President Kimball's request, some of the apostles wrote analyses of the policy. They concluded that there was no scriptural reason it couldn't change. President Kimball spoke privately with the apostles and held council meetings to discuss the issue freely.<sup>7</sup>

On March 9, 1978, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles unanimously voted that a change would have to come by revelation to the Prophet. "President Kimball agreed but also wanted them to learn the will of the Lord for themselves. He urged them to fast and pray individually over the question." Two weeks later President Kimball confided to his counselors that he felt impressed to lift the restriction. They agreed to sustain him and to discuss the issue again with the apostles before making a final decision. Concerned that his brethren know for themselves that he intended to do the Lord's will and not his own, President Kimball pled with the Lord to reveal it to the apostles. "After everybody had gone out of the temple, I knelt and prayed. And I prayed with such fervency," he said. "I tell you! I knew that something was before us that was extremely important to many of the children of God. And I knew that we could receive the revelations of the Lord only by being worthy and ready for them and ready to accept them and to put them into place."<sup>8</sup>

In late May, after more council meetings, the First Presidency and the apostles planned to come to their next meeting, on June 1, fasting and praying to learn the

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<sup>7</sup> Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 216–17.

<sup>8</sup> Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 218–19.

Lord's will. President Kimball canceled their lunch that day and suggested that they keep fasting.<sup>9</sup>

President Kimball described his tentative conclusion to lift the ban and the revelatory process that led him to it. He asked for the views of his brethren. Each of them favored ending the restriction. "Do you mind if I lead you in prayer?" President Kimball asked. They circled the temple altar and joined their faith. President Kimball prayed that they would be "cleansed and made free from sin so that we might receive the Lord's word."<sup>10</sup> He asked for a manifestation that they had arrived at the right decision to do the will of the Lord. The Lord answered "so clearly that there was no doubt about it,"<sup>11</sup> President Kimball later testified. So did others who were there that day.<sup>12</sup>

A week later the First Presidency announced the revelation to the general authorities in the temple and received their sustaining vote. Then President Kimball put his hand on his counselor's knee and said, "Go tell the world."<sup>13</sup> President Tanner released the statement, part of which is Official Declaration 2, to the press.

Official Declaration 2 is not a dictation of the words of Jesus Christ. There were no words in the revelation. Official Declaration 2 declares officially that the Lord had revealed his will. The First Presidency described the context of the revelation as expanding missionary work and their great desire to extend the blessings of the priesthood and temple to "every worthy member of the Church." They explained that, in light of prophecies made by their predecessors that the priesthood would someday be extended to those who had been denied, they had "pleaded long and earnestly" for that day to come. God had heard their prayers, they testified,

and by revelation ... 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

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<sup>9</sup> Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 220–21.

<sup>10</sup> Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 159.

<sup>11</sup> Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 222–24.

<sup>12</sup> Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 228; Gordon B. Hinckley, "Priesthood Restoration," *Ensign* 18 (October 1988): 69–72

<sup>13</sup> Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 228–29.

with his loved ones every blessing that flows therefrom, including the blessings of the temple. (Official Declaration 2)

The First Presidency emphasized the revelation's theological consistency with Nephi's teachings "that all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden," and that the Lord "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" (2 Nephi 26:28, 33). "We declare with soberness," they wrote, "that the Lord has now made known his will for the blessing of *all* his children throughout the earth who will hearken to the voice of his authorized servants" (Official Declaration 2, emphasis added).

Soon thereafter Elder Bruce R. McConkie spoke to nearly a thousand seminary teachers on 2 Nephi 26:33. "These words have taken on a new meaning," he said.

We have caught a new vision of their true significance. This also applies to a great number of other passages in the revelations. Since the Lord gave this revelation on the priesthood, our understanding of many passages has expanded. Many of us never imagined or supposed that they had the extensive and broad meaning that they do have.

What about statements by earlier authorities to the contrary? "We spoke with a limited understanding," Elder McConkie explained, "and without the light and knowledge that has now come into the world."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration*, 162–66.