

FAITH

The tug-of-war over the priesthood/temple ban against Black Latter-day Saints involved top church leaders, including, below from left, President Joseph Fielding Smith; his son-in-law apostle Bruce R. McConkie; apostle Hugh B. Brown; and President Spencer W. Kimball.



A reckoning on racism

Before Spencer Kimball lifted the LDS Church's ban on Blacks in the priesthood, new book details how the faith's leaders had to overcome opposition within their own ranks.

By DAVID NOYCE and
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Forty-six years ago this month was a historic moment in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Then President Spencer W. Kimball lifted the faith's prohibition preventing Black men from entering the all-male priesthood and Black women and men from participating in temple rites.

The move abruptly ended the century-old racist ban, but it hardly ended racism within the church. After all, 126 years of theological justifications for the ban remained, including those spelled out in influential works such as "Mormon Doctrine" by apostle Bruce R. McConkie.

It turns out that cleanup still needed—and needs—to be done. In his new book, "Second-Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality," historian Matthew Harris, who had unprecedented access to the papers of Kimball, McConkie, Hugh B. Brown and Joseph Fielding Smith, explores the background of the priesthood, temple ban, from its racist roots under Brigham Young to its removal and its aftermath.

In these excerpts (edited lightly for clarity and style) from The Salt Lake Tribune's latest "Mormon Land" podcast, Harris, a history professor at Colorado State University-Pueblo, offers an insider view of the decision-making process among the church hierarchy that led to this momentous move.



Matthew Harris and his new book, "Second-Class Saints"



Kimball was ready to lift the priesthood/temple ban months or even years before he did. Why did he wait?

One reason would be that he needed to have consensus in the Quorum of the Twelve (Apostles). The church teaches that new doctrinal or policy changes need to be unanimous among the highest leaders. It took some time to work with apostles who had reservations. Secondly, when Kimball was ordained the church president [in late 1973], he recognized that [the exclusion of Black members] collided with his globalist vision to move the church into the world. Plans were already underway from his predecessor, Harold B. Lee, to build a temple in Brazil. It gnawed at him that so many of the Black and biracial Portuguese Saints—who were donating their money and their time to build a temple—would not be permitted to enter. Kimball realized that he had to change the view of some of the holdouts on his one. And that wasn't an easy thing.



President David O. McKay is shown seated with President John F. Kennedy in the Tabernacle in September 1963. By 1963, records show, McKay appeared eager to remove the church's priesthood/temple ban against Black members.

Who was the biggest proponent of change among the apostles? And what did he do?

Hugh B. Brown, who was called into the First Presidency in the early 1900s, Brown didn't think that the ban was compatible with the scriptures. He's coming up against this well-established doctrinal figure in Joseph Fielding Smith [now in line for church president] and [another future president] Harold R. Lee, who supported the ban. So Brown does something that would be completely unthinkable to today's standards. He talks to the press and says, "This is what's going on behind closed doors." In 1962, he reaches out to Wallace Turner of The New York Times and says, "We're thinking about lifting the ban." Brown will meet with Turner at least three more times over the course of his life, using [the reports] to put pressure on his colleagues to change the ban.

In the fall of 1969, Brown has absolutely had it with [the leaders'] inability to change their views. Not with [church President] David O. McKay. McKay would lift the ban if he had consensus among the Twelve, but he doesn't. So Brown meets in secret with McKay's sons. He says, "We've got to change the policy before your dad dies. Will you help me?" The two sons, David Lawrence and Llewellyn McKay, agreed to it. So they go to the Hotel Utah. The president, McKay, who's now very old and in poor health. He's got moments of lucidity.

The other counselor in the First Presidency, a guy by the name of Alvin R. Dyer, gets word that something sinister is about to take place. So he accompanies Brown and the two McKay sons to the Hotel Utah. The president hears from his sons that the ban needs to go. It's not a doctrine. It's a policy. Dyer is furious because he thinks it is a doctrine. And so he mounts a big resistance.

What Dyer doesn't know is that President McKay had already made plans to ordain a Black man to the priesthood by the name of Monroe Fleming. When word [about Fleming's possible ordination] got to Dyer, it sent off alarm bells. He contacted Harold R. Lee. Lee nudged or coerced, if you will, McKay into changing his support. Brown was absolutely crushed. He was depressed. He told a confidant that "this was our last chance to end the ban, because if President McKay doesn't do it, his successor won't do it and his successor's successor won't do it."

In December of 1973, Kimball, who was now church president, paid this elderly apostle a visit. Brown, [who was dying] looked [the new president] in the eyes and said, "Promise me you'll lift this ban," and Kimball made the pledge, but said it would take time.

The church announced the end of the racist policy on June 9, 1978. What did Kimball think of how apostle Bruce McConkie exaggerated the revelatory experience to the public?

After the revelation, Kimball will praise McConkie in private for his support. Then McConkie and [apostle] Boyd K. Packer, a close ally, start to give firesides in the church in which they embellish some of the experiences that happened. They say stuff like, "[the past church presidents]

appeared to the Twelve on June 1st." Jesus himself, Packer said, "appeared and told us that we needed to lift the ban." When those otherworldly reports filtered back to Kimball, he was furious because that's not what he said happened. And he didn't think that it needed to be embellished. ... He said that "we want people to know, including the media, that the ban was changed because we listened to the Holy Ghost. It was the Holy Spirit that told us this is what needed to happen. There was no audible voice. There were no manifestations."

After the ban was lifted, Latter-day Saint leaders were still concerned about interracial marriage. Has that dissipated?

When apostle Mark E. Petersen learned that the ban had been lifted, he insisted that an interracial disclaimer would be published next to the priesthood revelation in the [church-owned] Deseret News. It sent mixed messages to Black Latter-day Saints. ... They can now enjoy the privileges of the temple, but they're still being told that they cannot marry interracially.

Some of these views [against interracial marriage] show up in church manuals even as late as 2010 and 2011, when the youth of the church are still being taught to marry within their own race. ... [Eventually], a number of Black and biracial and, frankly, white and brown Latter-day Saints pushed back on these manuals and some of the other leaders who were teaching it. By 2013, the church will officially repudiate this idea that it's a sin to engage in interracial marriage.

In 2010, the church rather unceremoniously stopped publishing McConkie's "Mormon Doctrine," which was a staple next to the scriptures in many Mormon homes. Do you think most members are aware that those teachings on race have been rejected?

Well, I hope so. — "Mormon

Doctrine" had been giving the church fits for a very long time from Black members who were reading... those offensive passages. And they were both-

ered by it, that this is a church that's supposed to be racially inclusive. ... It reached a crescendo in 2010. And without going into all the details, they decided to pull "Mormon Doctrine" from print after numerous Latter-day Saints had complained. And when they move it from print... There's no fanfare. You guys [The Tribune] were the only ones to do the story.

Faithful Black Latter-day Saints like Darius Gray now believe the church needs to formally apologize for the past ban. What do you say to that?

When I first started talking with Darius about my research on Black Latter-day Saints, this is my second book on the topic, so I've done dozens of articles. So I've interviewed him many times over the years. We've met for different lunches when I'm in Salt Lake. At first I asked Darius about that. I said, "Do you want the church to apologize?" And he said, "No, I don't think an apology is necessary." This would have been six or seven years ago or maybe even longer, actually longer. But, anyway, the last time I interviewed Darius would have been maybe a year and a half ago. And he was emphatic that the church needed to apologize. And one of the things that he said was that the church can't heal unless there's an apology.

How is church members' racism different from the past?

The racism that circulates today is less theological and more political. There's nobody or a few people at church who are talking about biblical curses or about Black members being less valiant [in a pre-Earth existence]. That's the beauty of the 2013, "Race and the Priesthood" essay, where the church denounced all of these things. A good brother or a good sister can hold this document up and say, "the church no longer teaches these things; we shouldn't teach them." So the issue today is less about the theological racism that was once so prevalent. It's more about politics and people being insensitive to racial equality and to Black Lives Matter and all of that stuff.

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Darius Gray speaks at the 50th anniversary of the General's Group in the Tabernacle on Temple Square in 2021. He now says the church should apologize for the former priesthood/temple ban.