

Ban on black priests had racist roots, say Mormons

by [Peggy Fletcher Stack](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue

In the past, the Mormon Church has said history isn't clear on why blacks were banned from its all-male priesthood for more than a century. Now it is.

The reason, according to a newly released explanation from the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is rooted in racism rather than revelation.

"Race and the Priesthood," posted December 6 on the church's website, also jettisons any beliefs developed through the years to defend the prohibition. The findings are drawing praise from black Mormons and historians.

"Hallelujah," said Catherine Stokes, a black Mormon who joined the LDS Church in Chicago and now lives in Utah. "I view this as a Christmas gift to each and every member of the church—black, white or whatever ethnicity."

The ban began under Brigham Young, second LDS president, who was influenced by common beliefs of the time, reports the article. It did not exist during the tenure of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, who opposed slavery and personally ordained several African Americans.

The essay is part of an ongoing series of "gospel topics pages" published by the LDS Church to give Mormons resources for understanding complex issues such as whether Mormons are Christians and differing, sometimes contradictory, accounts of Smith's early visionary experiences.

The church-produced article on race argues that "there is no evidence that any black men were denied the priesthood during Joseph Smith's lifetime."

But the record clearly shows that, in 1852, Young—Smith's immediate successor—"publicly announced that men of black African descent could no longer be ordained to the priesthood, though thereafter blacks continued to join the church."

More than 125 years later, in 1978, the LDS Church, under then president Spencer W. Kimball, lifted the ban, but some Mormons have continued to promote theories used to defend the former exclusion—“that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects actions in a pre-mortal 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.”

The new statement says the LDS Church “disavows the theories advanced in the past . . . [and that] church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.”

Margaret Young, who teaches English at LDS Church-owned Brigham Young University, believes all Mormons should carry a copy of the statement with them. “Make three-by-five cards of Friday’s church statement on race. Edit carefully if you need to. Laminate it, and keep it handy—in a purse or wallet,” Young wrote to her Facebook friends.

What is most important about the statement on race to Mormon historian Richard Bushman is its perspective. “It is written as a historian might tell the story,” Bushman says from his home in New York, “not as a theological piece, trying to justify the practice.” —*Salt Lake Tribune*

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