

“THERE IS NO EQUALITY”:
WILLIAM E. BERRETT, BYU, AND
HEALING THE WOUNDS OF RACISM
IN THE LATTER-DAY SAINT
PAST AND PRESENT

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Shortly before The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’s 2018 “Be One” event, celebrating forty years since the LDS Church removed racial restrictions on temple and priesthood participation, Black Latter-day Saint podcaster and author Zandra Vranes asked white members to consider “what you or your Mormon ancestors were doing between 1852 and June 7, 1978.”¹ It’s an important question that forces us to, in Eugene England’s words, “face our unbearable Mormon loss of innocence.”² It forces us to deeply consider, and to apply to Mormonism, the late Reverend James Cone’s observation that “*the white church* is not God’s redemptive agent but, rather, an agent of the old society. . . . [I]t maliciously contributed to the doctrine of white supremacy. . . . Racism has been a part of the life of the Church so long that it is

1. Zandra Vranes, Facebook, May 21, 2018.

2. Eugene England, “Playing in the Dark: Mormons Writing about Blacks and Blackness,” in *Colloquium Essays in Literature and Belief*, edited by Richard H. Cracroft, Jane D. Brady, and Linda Hunter Adams (Provo: Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, Brigham Young University, 2001), 434, 444.

virtually impossible for even ‘good’ members to recognize the bigotry perpetuated by the Church.”³

In his essay that appeared on the Church’s blog, “Healing the Wounds of Racism,” Darius Gray offers valuable instructions for coming to terms with and overcoming the racism that has been and still is a part of the LDS Church.⁴ They include: acknowledging racism, recognizing it in ourselves, learning a new approach to addressing racism, and listening to those who are and have been most affected by the racial bigotry within and perpetuated by the Church.

Black members and scholars of Mormonism have done a lot, especially in the last decade, to acknowledge and to help us recognize racism in ourselves—as individuals and as an institution—but there is more to be done.⁵ Because of my position as a professor of history at Brigham Young University, the Church’s flagship educational institution, I’ve been especially interested in understanding BYU’s role as an “agent of the old society,” and how and why it is that for the last thirteen years that I’ve been teaching there—including now, more than forty years after Official Declaration 2—BYU students are still encountering racist justifications for the priesthood/temple restrictions in their religion classes, on their

3. James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 71.

4. This essay first appeared on the Church’s blog as Darius Gray, “Healing the Wounds of Racism,” Apr. 5, 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/healing-the-wounds-of-racism>. A shortened version was subsequently published in the June 2018 *Ensign* with the title “Moving Forward Together,” available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/06/commemorating-the-1978-revelation/moving-forward-together?lang=eng>.

5. The articles and essays in the fall 2018 issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* provide a good example of recent academic work along these lines. Paul Reeve’s *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford, 2015) represented an important scholarly milestone on this topic as well.

missions, in Gospel Doctrine classes, from peers, in sacrament meeting talks, and in Church books.

William E. Berrett, most famous among scholars of race in the history of the LDS Church for his contribution to John Stewart's 1960 *Mormonism and the Negro*, joined the religion faculty at BYU in 1948 as its first "expert" on LDS Church history after a brief stint as an Assistant United States Attorney in my hometown of Fairbanks, Alaska. Berrett was not new to Church education: he had started the LDS seminary in Roosevelt, Utah; taught seminary in Blackfoot, Idaho; and wrote numerous textbooks and other core curriculum for the Church Educational System (CES) and various Church auxiliaries beginning in 1932. The Church published his most popular book, *The Restored Church*, in multiple languages. It went through more than a dozen editions between 1936 and its most recent reprinting in 2017. Berrett's work has been used throughout the CES, including at Church universities, seminaries, and institutes, in Sunday School classes, and in other auxiliary organizations. As a "scholar" of Church history and doctrine (he received graduate training in law, not religious history or theology), what he said mattered. This likely gave *Mormonism and the Negro* more standing and traction than it otherwise might have enjoyed and legitimized everything else Berrett said about race. In 1954, Ernest L. Wilkinson appointed Berrett vice president of BYU during a period in which the university oversaw the Unified Church School System. Berrett served in a dual capacity, teaching and heading religious education at BYU and serving as vice administrator (i.e., director) of the Unified Church School System, which meant he headed all LDS seminaries and institutes. He also recruited and approved BYU faculty hires and, not insignificantly, brought Boyd K. Packer (later a member of the Quorum of the Twelve) and A. Theodore Tuttle (who would become a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy and serve in its presidency) into CES leadership and the orbit of the Church hierarchy. When BYU no longer oversaw all Church education beginning in 1964, Berrett continued as

Commissioner of Church Education until Neal A. Maxwell assumed that position in 1970, after which he remained on the teaching faculty at BYU for a few additional years. Berrett was celebrated for his work expanding Church religious education across the nation and the globe. And in 1986, *Dialogue* reviewed one of his books, noting that he had influenced “thousands of seminary and institute teachers . . . encouraging kindness, moderation, and faith.”⁶ He also used that influence, however, to validate and spread a racialized Mormon theology that reflected, embraced, normalized, and sanctified white supremacy.⁷

Berrett’s published work, his curricular materials, memos, letters, teaching notes, and BYU devotionals reveal that his views about race in general, and the priesthood/temple ban in particular, echoed the ideas of white Southerners who protested integration, along with the “powerfully influential . . . racialized theology” of Joseph Fielding Smith, Mark E. Petersen, and other Church officials.⁸

For Berrett, like for many other Church leaders, “the seeming discrimination by the Church toward the Negro” did not originate with man but went “back to the beginning with God.” He supported the belief that, acting under divine mandate, Joseph Smith initiated the

6. Kenneth W. Godfrey, “Balance and Faith,” review of *The Latter-day Saints: A Contemporary History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, by William E. Berrett, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 192.

7. William E. Berrett Papers, 20th Century Western and Mormon Manuscripts, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as Berrett Papers); William E. Berrett oral history interview, Jan. 27, 1982, Manuscripts Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. On *Mormonism and the Negro*, see Russell Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015): 313–36.

8. England, “Playing in the Dark,” 434. Berrett’s beliefs and teachings as described throughout the article were culled from various documents in boxes 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, and 12 of the Berrett Papers.

priesthood/temple ban. Especially since they had been reaffirmed by modern prophets, he argued that the race-based restrictions should not be questioned by man. To do so meant questioning the trustworthiness of multiple Church presidents. Even to suggest that the ban was a matter of policy and not revelation signified an act of supreme disloyalty to the Church and its leaders. Aware of early Black Latter-day Saint Elijah Abel's priesthood ordination and Church service, Berrett emphasized Abel's mixed-race status, labeling his ordination a reasonable mistake that had been rightly corrected by later Church authorities. He explained Abel's subsequent missionary work as understandable since women could also serve missions without the priesthood. (He did not note that sisters were not called to serve proselytizing missions until more than a decade after Abel's death.⁹)

At the same time he rejected the idea of the ban as evidence of discrimination and asserted its heavenly and deep historical origins, Berrett also argued against the whole notion of human equality. He defended the Church's racial restrictions, insisting: "There is no equality." "Men are not equal when entering this life. . . . We were not equal in the pre-earth life," and will not be equal in the eternities. "A Negro child," he declared, may be "born into the world innocent . . . [but] this does not mean that he had achieved the same status or progress in the eyes of the Lord prior to coming into the earth that some others may have achieved." In *Teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants*, Berrett even offered corrections to some of Joseph Smith's writings to buttress his point—suggesting that Smith meant to describe spirits as "co-eternal" rather than co-equal with our Father in Heaven.¹⁰

9. See William E. Berrett, "Church History and Philosophy 245 Advanced Theology Address," July 10, 1956, box 3, folder 4, Berrett Papers.

10. Ibid.; Berrett's handwritten notes in box 3, folder 3, Berrett Papers; William E. Berrett, *Teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1961): 243.

Berrett further insisted that the Church's racial restrictions were evidence of God's respect for human agency and compassion for all mankind. Berrett taught: "The Lord is withholding the priesthood from the Negro because of his love for them, so that they won't be under condemnation." Poor pre-earth choices and behavior meant that some souls were less virtuous than others as they entered mortality. Restricting priesthood/temple access kept otherwise unprepared people from entering into covenants they would fail to uphold. Careful to square the restrictions with Mormonism's second article of faith, which precludes the possibility of penalizing individuals for other's transgressions, he claimed: "We do not believe that the Negro is punished or cursed because of the act of Cain, but that Cain was cursed by having a certain group of pre-earth spirits come to earth through his lineage who, because of their own lack of preparation, may not yet have been ready to serve in the Priesthood." For Berrett, differences in race, wealth, and national origin could be explained by, and were all determined by, pre-earth behavior. The most righteous of God's children entered the world in white bodies, in Christian nations, and with greater economic resources. Drawing on his own experience living in "the polar north" with "dark-skinned" "Eskimos" as evidence, Berrett dismissed scientific explanations for differences in skin pigmentation.¹¹ He also pointed out that God had historically limited priesthood ordination, so the current racial restrictions were in keeping with ancient patterns. He further suggested that contemporary Mormons were unusual in the purity of their bloodline, which accounted "for the freedom [outside of the race restrictions] which the Lord has allowed our prophet in this day to call people to the Priesthood."¹²

11. In addition to everything else wrong with Berrett's statements, the Fairbanks, Alaska region is home to Athabascan, not, traditionally, Eskimo peoples.

12. Berrett, "Church History and Philosophy"; William E. Berrett to Allan Taggart, Apr. 24, 1967, box 4, folder 1, Berrett Papers.

Berrett called on scripture, history, unique LDS theologies, and what he labeled “practical good sense” to support the Church’s racial restrictions and taboos against interracial marriage.¹³ His justifications and ideas about race were hardly unique in Latter-day Saint thought. Other, even more prominent, LDS Church leaders believed and promulgated the same ideas. Yet, there has been little direct engagement with these ideas or acknowledgment that they represent an especially insidious and influential expression of white supremacy in modern Latter-day Saint and American history.¹⁴ As Cone says, “there has been no sharp confrontation of the gospel with white racism.”¹⁵ Moreover, it matters that at a time of heightened activism by civil rights organizations and African Americans across the South and the nation, and at a time of notable changes to the legal structure and moral framework of white supremacy in the United States, Berrett was heralded as an expert on Church history and doctrine and was the man in charge of Church religious education. Scholars have noted the central role that religion and religious groups played in challenging segregation and the unequal status of Black Americans. Civil rights organizers, and many religious denominations, called on constitutional principles as well as on religious beliefs—their understandings of God, Jesus Christ, humankind, and the gospel—to contest the racial status quo. Scholars have also shown that religious beliefs undergirded segregationist defenses. As Jane Dailey argues, religion “played a central role in articulating not only the challenge that

13. Berrett, “Church History and Philosophy.”

14. Again, the articles and essays in the fall 2018 volume of *Dialogue* stand out for their direct engagement with this history and what it means. Joanna Brooks’s “The Possessive Investment in Rightness: White Supremacy and the Mormon Movement,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 45–82, in particular, uses terms like “white supremacy” to describe Mormon beliefs and structures, and shows how white supremacy was an integral part of Mormon theology and institution and community building.

15. Cone, *Black Theology*, 31.

the civil rights movement offered Jim Crow but the *resistance* to that challenge.”¹⁶ Ultimately, Martin Luther King Jr. and others in the civil rights movement won “the titanic struggle waged by participants on both sides of the conflict to harness the immense power of the divine to their cause.”¹⁷ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints supported the theology of segregation and racial inequality in that struggle. Berrett’s ideas and teachings were not only like those of other Latter-day Saint Church leaders, they were also like those of white Southerners who staged a massive resistance to the Black freedom movement.

William E. Berrett, as BYU’s vice president and head of Church education, played a key role in affirming, institutionalizing, and repackaging previously expressed and officially sanctioned white supremacist ideas for continued and broad dissemination among Latter-day Saints in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. He used his positions at BYU and in Church leadership to support and normalize racist ideas that were quickly losing legitimacy across America and the world.

Indeed, it is indicative of Berrett’s conscious opposition to the growing consensus about racial equality and of his role in facilitating the spread of an increasingly (on both the national and international scenes) contested white supremacist interpretation of racial difference that shortly after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, he invited apostle Mark E. Petersen to address religion faculty and CES employees at BYU. (Berrett had recently reintroduced the practice of having General Authorities speak at training sessions of religious education personnel at the university.) Petersen’s now notorious talk at that event repeated a number of racist theological ideas, including some unique to the faith; warned LDS religious educators against “the philosophies of men” being peddled by civil rights advocates; and otherwise

16. Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 22.

17. *Ibid.*

defended the Church's racial restrictions. It seems unlikely that Berrett would have been unaware of Petersen's intended topic or his views on that topic. Moreover, Berrett conducted a discussion among Church authorities and religious educators following the address. During that meeting, he, along with President Wilkinson, apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, and BYU religion faculty members Sidney B. Sperry and Archibald Bennett, was among those in attendance who voiced dismay at the outcome of the *Brown* ruling, articulated theological ideas grounded in white supremacy, and worried about how to teach the rising generation of LDS youth to respect their racial heritage and the Church's position on racial exclusion given the new law of the land and the overall more racially-inclusive direction of the country. That so many in attendance, and in positions of authority within the Church and its education system, unambiguously supported Petersen's remarks suggests the salience of segregationist thought in mid-century Mormonism.¹⁸

Berrett was also largely responsible for BYU's disingenuous approach to Black student admissions in the 1960s. Indeed, he seems to have played a key advisory role for President Wilkinson on this issue (and everything having to do with race), warning Wilkinson that there would "always be some problem with Negroes on our campus" but arguing that barring Black applicants "would be far more detrimental to us and the Church than the danger of a chance intermarriage which now exists." Instead of outright exclusion, he recommended a number of steps that BYU and other Church schools could take to effectively limit Black attendance and save "our fine white girls." Those steps included:

Do no proselytizing of Negro athletes.

Discourage undue publicity of the Negro who is on campus.

18. Mark E. Petersen, "Race Problems As They Affect the Church" (address given at the Convention of Teachers of Religion on the College Level, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Aug. 27, 1954, available at <https://archive.org/details/RaceProblemsAsTheyAffectTheChurchMarkEPetersen/page/n1>). A transcript of the Oct. 7, 1954 discussion can be found in box 4, folder 7, Berrett Papers.

Watch moral standards carefully.

Quietly counsel students against dating a known Negro. (Call in any boy or girl seen with a Negro.)

Send a prepared letter in answer to inquiries of Negroes regarding admittance to BYU to other church schools.¹⁹

Berrett's sample letter for Black students interested in attending BYU, which the university appears to have adopted, stressed that BYU "is open to all who meet our academic and moral standards" but, "in fairness," also warned of the "social difficulties and disappointments [Blacks] might encounter on entering an institution where all of the students are of the white race, save a mere dozen or so. . . . They are treated courteously and as equals in the classroom—but invariably are lost socially. . . . This situation, right or wrong as it may be considered in your thinking or mine, does exist, and could be a constant source of irritation and hurt." The letter also explained that "the community in which our University is located contains no families of your race," and that "despite our best efforts . . . students of your race . . . rarely return to us after one year."²⁰

Here Berrett, like many other white segregationists of his generation, cast racism as an interpersonal problem—a problem with and between individuals, about hearts and minds, that laws or university policies or Church practices could not change—rather than as a structural, institutional problem, for which the university (and its sponsor) was directly responsible and could alleviate through a different set of teachings, policies, and practices. Scholars like Charles Payne have called for attention to the "mystification" of the nature of racial oppression. By

19. See, "How Can the Door of the University Be Left Open and Still Attract Few Negroes?," box 3, folder 2, Berrett Papers; "Church Schools and Students of Color" (1961); and "Memo, RE: The Negro Problem," Dec. 8, 1960, box 3, folder 3, Berrett Papers.

20. Ibid.

making the racial situation at BYU about “how white and Black people feel about each other,” and about the sensitivity of Black students, rather than connecting it to a theology and set of practices that systematically privileged whites, Berrett was adopting a distinctly Southern paradigm for thinking about race. It was a paradigm rooted in racism that tried to hide its racism even as it aimed to perpetuate structures of inequality.²¹

This is a little of what BYU and one of its chief administrators were doing between the time the school’s namesake, Brigham Young, instituted the ban and June 7, 1978. Moreover, although Berrett retired in the early 1970s, he continued to speak to CES groups and to write Church-published and distributed titles that spread his white supremacist interpretations of the restrictions long after 1978. At a 1980 devotional at the University of Utah’s LDS Institute of Religion, for instance, Berrett expressed his “shock when in June 1977 [*sic*] the announcement came that every worthy male member of the Church could hold the Priesthood of God.” His description suggests he found the inclusion of Black members into full fellowship more difficult than he had found their marginalization. It is significant that he never used any positive modifiers to talk about the 1978 revelation, that he reaffirmed that the racial ban originated with Joseph Smith, and that he used it as an example of how “that which is wrong at one time, under one set of circumstances, may in another set of circumstances be right.” Official Declaration 2 did not alter Berrett’s belief in the infallibility of Church leaders or the supremacy of the white race. In his view, the 1978 revelation left ample space for racist beliefs about pre-earthly grades of righteousness, priority races and nations, and divinely sanctioned race-based inequalities.²²

21. See Charles M. Payne, “‘The Whole United States Is Southern!’: *Brown v. Board* and the Mystification of Race,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 83–91.

22. See William E. Berrett, “Change,” devotional address given at University of Utah Institute, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1980, typescript in Berrett Papers. Bruce R. McConkie’s oft-quoted 1978 “All Are Alike unto God” speech likewise leaves

Indeed, in his 421-page *The Latter-day Saints: A Contemporary History of the Church of Jesus Christ* published in 1985, Berrett spends only two pages on the 1978 revelation, most of that explaining how a loving and just God has, at times, withheld power and light from men in order to save them from condemnation, and in another section likewise maintains that “out of love for his children” God has sometimes withheld his power (i.e., priesthood) “because they were not prepared to receive it.”²³ The latest edition of Berrett’s *The Restored Church*, published in 2017, includes similar ideas. In it he posits that “pre-earth man” exercises “his own will or free agency” and is therefore “subject to laws of progression” and can only advance “in varying degrees of capacity and intelligence.” All of these entries are thinly veiled code for racist concepts about lineage, pre-earth valiance, and the supposedly God-sanctioned inequality of humankind and past racist LDS practices. In addition, the 2017 edition of Berrett’s book (Berrett himself died in 1993) still refers readers who want to know more about the topic of race and the priesthood to sections about the “curse of Cain” and other blatantly white supremacist teachings in Joseph Fielding Smith’s *The Way to Perfection*, which the Church-owned publisher Deseret Book distributed until May 2018, when an independent scholar successfully lobbied for its removal.²⁴

ample room for theological beliefs grounded in white supremacy, including the Church’s unique teachings about racial difference. See Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” devotional address given at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Aug. 18, 1978, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/alike-unto-god/>.

23. William E. Berrett, *The Latter-day Saints: A Contemporary History of the Church of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 351–53, 382–85.

24. See William E. Berrett, *The Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), chap. 44, section 144 and the “Supplementary Readings” for chap. 45 (e-book edition). Joseph Fielding Smith’s *The Way to Perfection* is referenced in nine different chapters of *The Restored Church* and in its bibliography. Stirling Adams correspondence with Deseret Book, May 2018, shared with the author.

Perhaps just as significantly, and in the absence of any specific repudiations from Church headquarters, the generations of religious educators and students Berrett trained, and the religious education department he played a key role in developing, continued to pass along the racist teachings he helped to legitimize. One former Black student recently explained: “I don’t remember exactly when and how I first heard about the ban but I assumed it was in the Church’s past and it was over with, so I didn’t think much of it. Attending a Church school and being in Utah changed that. I realized its effects still lingered in its organization, books, materials, and members.”²⁵ Many other students, Black and white, have shared similar sentiments with me and other BYU faculty.

As Matthew Harris has argued, despite Jeffrey R. Holland’s and others’ fairly recent dismissal of these ideas as mere “folklore,” the racist theories that BYU religion professor Randy Bott reported in 2012 to the *Washington Post*, the ones that Berrett believed, validated, and promulgated, and that my students have been asking me about over the last thirteen years, came—and still come—from authoritative, official sources. They come from Church leaders and Church publications, and from the Church Educational System.²⁶ That “people who espouse white supremacy feel comfortable sitting in LDS pews on Sundays and using [LDS] scriptures to support racism” can be directly attributed to the ways that the institutional Church has supported and, even in the twenty-first century, continues to give space to white supremacist ideas.²⁷

25. Daylin Farias, email correspondence with author, May 21, 2018.

26. See Matthew L. Harris, “Mormonism’s Problematic Racial Past and the Evolution of the Divine-Curse Doctrine,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 33, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2013): 90–114; Jason Horowitz, “The Genesis of a Church’s Stand on Race,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZXyfr_story.html.

27. “Commentary: Putting Our Shoulders to the Wheel to End Racism and White Supremacy in Mormonism,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 17, 2017, <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2017/08/17/commentary-putting-our-shoulders->

In his Church blog post and *Ensign* essay, Darius Gray not only talks about the importance of acknowledging racism and recognizing it in ourselves, he also advises that we “take a new approach” to the topic. As a historian, I can identify old approaches, patterns the Church and its leaders and members have generally followed as they address issues of race. Pointing out such patterns can help the Church stop acting as “an agent of the old society.” It can help point the way to something new that can move the Latter-day Saint community toward the type of healing that Gray imagines, and for which many of my students yearn.²⁸

On this, Berrett again is a useful example. He, like many others in Church leadership throughout the twentieth century, tended to historicize the issue of race, distancing the contemporary Church from any direct engagement with it and effectively placing the racial restrictions beyond current leaders’ control. Berrett did this by insisting that the Church’s temple/priesthood policy originated with God and Mormonism’s founding prophet and by locating the reasons for it as far back as possible in LDS theology, that is, in pre-earth life—a time for which there is little (or no) record, and certainly no memory. Attributing the race restrictions to Black people’s own actions, completely outside the realm of earthly existence, was one way the LDS Church further “mystified” the nature of race and racial oppression.

More recently, the Church’s official “Race and the Priesthood” essay claims, in the present tense, that “in theology and practice” the Church “embraces the universal human family,” that its “structure and organization” and lay ministry “encourage racial integration.” The document puts racists ideas and practices associated with the faith squarely in the

to-the-wheel-to-end-racism-and-white-supremacy-in-mormonismbr/, last updated Aug. 28, 2017. See also Zandra Vranes, “Op-ed: Speaking to the Pain of a Black Mormon Woman,” *Deseret News*, Aug. 17, 2017, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865686989/Op-ed-Speaking-to-the-pain-of-a-black-Mormon-woman.html>.

28. Gray, “Healing the Wounds of Racism”; Cone, *Black Theology*, 71.

past, dismissing them as irrelevant to the modern Church. Moreover, it admits Brigham Young's role in creating past racial restrictions, and that these were clearly inspired by human prejudice, but effectively skips over nearly a century of official racist theology and practice, framing the mid-twentieth century in particular as chiefly a period of softening racial lines that steadily led to the 1978 revelation rather than as a period in which many Church leaders and educators, very much like white Southern politicians of the era, drew a line in the sand and staged a massive resistance in defense of strict racial boundaries. The Church's progressive narrative contradicts the theologizing and actions of LDS leaders like Berrett. That the 1950s and 1960s saw the escalation and normalizing of white supremacist defenses of its restrictions coming from the center of the Church Educational System surely played no small role in keeping those restrictions in place for more than two decades after the *Brown* ruling and more than a decade after the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The work of Berrett and other Church leaders in reinforcing racist beliefs (along with the notion of prophetic infallibility) at mid-century and beyond also helps explain the persistence, into the present, of white supremacist explanations for the temple/priesthood ban.²⁹

In his much-heralded 2006 general conference talk, President Gordon B. Hinckley insisted that "we all rejoiced in the 1978 revelation." "Racial strife," in his estimation, was supposed to be a relic of the past, its continued presence worthy of condemnation but not of substantial, sustained institutional attention. In that same year apostle Jeffrey R. Holland talked to the media about the Church's "racial folklore," relegating those teachings to the margins of the Latter-day Saint past and discounting their actual and unremitting status in LDS thought. The Church's 2012 responses to BYU religion professor Randy Bott's *Washington Post*

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

comments likewise emphasized a sharp divide between historical teachings and practices and the modern-day Church that was in some ways more theoretical—more aspirational—than real, and which certainly belied the continued prominence of Mormonism’s racial mythology.³⁰

Another old approach has been to deny any direct relationship between LDS teachings and practice and racism. Berrett, like other Church officials during his lifetime, repeatedly argued that, “Our treatment of the Negro has been the best of any segment of the American people,” highlighting Joseph Smith’s pre-Civil War statements against slavery, Black people’s unhampered access to the franchise in Utah, the absence of officially segregated LDS congregations, and the history of integration in Utah public schools (including BYU’s overtly inclusive admission policy) as evidence of Latter-day Saint racial liberalism. He attributed the practice of missionaries “not going deliberately among the Negro” to practical considerations born of local conditions rather than “prejudice on the part of Church leaders.” The low number of Black students at BYU was not the result of institutional racism, including backhanded deterrents, but a matter of the personal preference of individuals. Sounding like so many other white supremacists of his generation, Berrett personally maintained that “I always had close friendships with Negro families, and my parents went to school with Negro children.” He defended the institutional Church he represented in similar terms. “We accept [the Negro] as a brother, perhaps as no other people in the world accept him,” he insisted. “There is no people more anxious that the Negro shall have their full civil rights.” Mormons could not be blamed; after all, “the prejudice didn’t start with us. White people

30. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Need for Greater Kindness,” Apr. 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/04/the-need-for-greater-kindness?lang=eng>; Holland interview transcribed at “Interview: Jeffrey R. Holland,” *The Mormons*, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/holland.html>; “Church Statement Regarding *Washington Post* Article on Race and the Church,” *Newsroom*, Feb. 29, 2012, available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/racial-remarks-in-washington-post-article>.

everywhere are prejudiced. . . . [T]his is an international prejudice. . . . All races are prejudiced against the Negro.” “Integration hasn’t been effective,” he further argued. “But it isn’t the fault of the Mormons. It is not peculiar to us, and we are not as bad as most.” Averting a strict distinction between civil rights and religious practice, he, like many other Church officials, also vociferously asserted: “Mormons defend civil rights” and “there is no evidence that the priesthood doctrine interferes with the civil rights of any person.”³¹

More recent Church statements and resources follow similar patterns. They emphasize Joseph Smith’s abolitionist stance; the fundamental LDS doctrine that “all are alike unto God” (even if LDS practices might not have always matched that principle); that past Church leaders’ prejudices reflected the racism of the period in which they lived; that the LDS Church does not have, and has never officially countenanced, race-segregated congregations; and that people of color sometimes serve as leaders over white members. Official Church sources and leaders disconnect the teachings of the past from present theological beliefs. They also stress both historical and contemporary distinctions between the Church’s support for civil rights and its insistence on religious freedom, as well as between doctrines identified in LDS scripture and policies practiced, for a time, by the Church. Resource materials linked on the “Race and Priesthood” topic page of the Church’s website include talks that do not address race directly but instead reference more general ideas about “inclusion” and “the global Church.”³²

A third old approach has been to insist that Black people in the Church are content with the status quo. Berrett, for example, liked to quote Abner Howey, “a prominent Negro leader who says the Negro is not ready for the priesthood.” He also kept copies of, and sometimes

31. William E. Berrett, “The Negro Situation,” address given at Coordinators Convention, Mar. 6, 1969, BYU, Provo, typescript in box 3, folder 4, Berrett Papers.

32. “Race and the Priesthood.”

referenced, Corey C. Bowles's autobiographical booklet *Experiences of a Negro Convert*. This publication contrasted Bowles's supposed expectations that upon joining a church with race-based priesthood restrictions he could "relax" (his "slaving days were over") with the multiple ways he was called on to serve in the Church after baptism. In addition to minimizing the impact of the restrictions, Berrett repeatedly insisted that "the Negro convert to the Church has no difficulty in separating the will of God from the prejudices of men. . . . [They] have been happy in their faith." "Black members of the Church do not object [to the priesthood ban]. The objection is raised by Blacks who are not members of the Church," who do not even know what priesthood is.³³

The same pattern has dominated official post-1978 discussions of the topic. For the thirtieth anniversary of Official Declaration 2 in 2008, for instance, the Church solicited and shared comments that affirmed the institution's innocence on racial matters from select Black men who had advanced to significant leadership positions.³⁴ Church sources quoted Ahmad Corbitt (then a stake president in New Jersey), who maintained: "Anyone who says the Church is racist isn't speaking from experience and has no idea of the racial harmony we enjoy as a Church family." They also quoted Tony Parker (who served as the first Black stake president in Atlanta) saying: "Anyone who thinks the Church is racist just needs to come and see. They can sit in our church on the sidelines and watch, or talk to members." Without denying the validity of these men's individual experiences or the sincerity of their views, the Church's focus on these kinds of Black member narratives has worked to discount others and to draw attention away from the still overwhelming whiteness of Church leadership. Parker's description of

33. Berrett, "The Negro Situation"; Letter from William E. Berrett to George Allan Taggart, Apr. 24, 1967, Box 4 Folder 1; Corey C. Bowles, *Experiences of a Negro Convert* (Newark, N.J.: April 1970), in box 3, folder 2, Berrett Papers.

34. "Race Relations," *Newsroom*, available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/topic/race-relations>.

himself as “a better person now than I was back then [before becoming a member]” and his years of Church membership as “years of personal growth and enrichment” have, like Bowles’s and Howey’s stories, been used as a way to silence critics and other voices, including other Saints of color with different experiences and perspectives, and to excuse the Church from more thoroughly and systematically attending to past and present racism. One former BYU student explains: “Black members are not a monolith. Some need an ‘apology,’ some don’t. . . . The Church needs to actually listen to the concerns of its Black members.” She also worries that her daughter’s sense of self is being harmed by all the white faces she sees in Church materials.³⁵

When addressing the history of its racial restrictions, another traditional approach employed by the Church and its leaders has been to talk about it in terms of the functioning and expansion of the bureaucratic institution rather than in terms of the people targeted and most affected by the restrictions and the 1978 repeal.³⁶ For Berrett, the Church’s “race problem” was about how to protect and advance the Church, including how to shield its overwhelmingly white membership from racial stain and discomfort and how to promote their spiritual progress and redemption. In an Advanced Theology class address, for instance, Berrett cautioned against getting “carried away by some of the enthusiasm of some sociologists of our time” and pushing to take the gospel to all peoples. We “have to be practical,” he explained. “When missionaries go to the Southern states they find tremendous prejudice

35. Tony Parker and Ahmad Corbitt, quoted in “Race Relations”; Daylin Farias, email correspondence with author, May 21, 2018. See also Darron T. Smith’s important analysis of Black member identity and internalized oppression in “Negotiating Black Self-Hate Within the LDS Church,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 29–44.

36. Gina Colvin, ed., with Elise Boxer, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Melissa Inouye, and Janan Graham-Russell, “Roundtable Discussion: Challenging Mormon Race Scholarship,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 277–78.

against the Negroes, and it becomes pretty much the choice of whether to spend the time with the Negroes or with the whites.”³⁷ Memos and other documents repeatedly show that Berrett’s concerns centered on “the adverse publicity” that racial issues brought the Church rather than on the exclusion of Blacks from Church proselytizing efforts, from BYU, or from the priesthood.³⁸ Moreover, after June 1978, he repeatedly framed the lifting of restrictions in terms of its relationship to the global expansion of Mormonism. Rescinding the ban mattered not because it opened opportunities for salvation to Black people or corrected a grave injustice, but because it facilitated Church growth around the world.³⁹

Modern leaders have likewise overwhelmingly centered their narratives of the 1978 revelation, the history leading up to it, and its aftermath on the expansion of the institutional Church, especially in Brazil, the Caribbean, and African nations. The 1978 declaration allowed the Church to expand its membership, to “accomplish the commission to teach all nations,” and erased bureaucratic impediments and headaches.⁴⁰ Church narratives that celebrate the 1978 revelation have also fixated on the emotional and spiritual relief it brought the white LDS Church hierarchy. For instance, Elder Dallin H. Oaks, in a 2007 account currently highlighted on the Church website, shared that his heart “ached for my church,” and that “nobody was more relieved or more pleased

37. Berrett, “Church History and Philosophy.”

38. Berrett, “Memo, RE: The Negro Problem.”

39. Berrett, *The Latter-day Saints*.

40. See, for instance, Howard W. Hunter, “All Are Alike unto God,” address delivered at a fourteen-stake fireside, Marriott Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Feb. 4, 1979, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1979/06/all-are-alike-unto-god?lang=eng>; Gordon B. Hinckley, “Priesthood Restoration,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1988, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1988/10/priesthood-restoration?lang=eng>. Note: The website currently refers to this as “an edited version of a talk given 15 May 1988 at the Churchwide fireside commemorating the 159th anniversary of the restoration of the priesthood.”

when the word came.”⁴¹ The emphasis was on Oaks’s feelings and on the predicament of the institutional church. His comments at the June 2018 “Be One” event included a similar story about his personal struggle with the restrictions and the strain they created for the Church in the larger society. While one can appreciate the deeply-felt sentiments Oaks expresses in the video and allow that acknowledgements of shared distress can help in healing processes, such accounts still signify a tendency to focus on the perspectives of the Church as an organization and its white male leaders. They do not convey a willingness to fully grapple with the pain and suffering of those directly hurt by past policies and their legacies. Moreover, while other elements of the “Be One” event, and the inclusion of a greater variety of Black voices in the planning and media coverage of Official Declaration 2’s fortieth anniversary, marked an important step forward in decentering Church narratives about race and history, Oaks’s assertion that “institutionally the Church reacted swiftly to the revelation” even if “the hearts and practices of individual members did not come suddenly and universally” and his plea for Church members to look forward as a unified body suggest an enduring narrow, institutionally oriented frame of reference. Again, while one can agree that the 1978 revelation brought with it significant changes, alongside the leaders’ hopes for a unified, inclusive Church organization, such comments denote a lack of understanding of (or willingness to be accountable for) the Church’s role in the reluctance of some of its members to fully abandon “attitudes and practices of prejudice.” The statements of contemporary Church leaders continue to “mystify” the problem of race—making it solely about how individuals think and feel outside of their religious background rather than directly

41. “Elder Dallin H. Oaks’ Reaction to Priesthood Revelation,” *Newsroom*, July 20, 2007, available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/additional-resource/elder-dallin-h-oaks-reaction-to-priesthood-revelation>, emphasis mine.

related to more than a century of “systemic racial domination” within the LDS Church.⁴²

Another example along this same theme, and one that suggests BYU Religious Education continues to hold some responsibility for the obstinacy of racist justifications for the temple/priesthood ban, as well as the need for the university and the Church to deliberately take action to fully “emancipate the gospel from ‘whiteness,’” is that during winter semester 2018 a professor asked at least one section of Foundations of the Restoration (a required religion class) to defend Brigham Young’s 1852 decision to establish the restrictions. His study guide invited students to: “Explain why you think the Prophet felt this was a necessary course of action during this time period.” At least one student was subsequently marked down for attributing the restrictions to racism and told by the class teaching assistant to make allowances for Brigham Young because he had to make choices for the good of the Church during a time of persecution for the Saints. “Life in nineteenth-century America demanded institutional racism and the Church needed to be in the government’s good graces,” the TA wrote. A question on the final exam later asked: “What was the primary motivating factor behind the priesthood ban?” The correct answer? “Utah statehood.”⁴³

Another “old approach” has been to insist that members ignore or not draw attention to racial issues in the Church and its history. In the 1960s, Berrett cautioned seminary and institute teachers: “You have difficult problems in this area, but I think sometimes you make them greater than they are.” He counseled, “Let’s not raise this problem unnecessarily,” and summarily dismissed suggestions to create lesson

42. “President Oaks Remarks at Worldwide Priesthood Celebration,” *Newsroom*, June 1, 2018, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-oaks-remarks-worldwide-priesthood-celebration>; Payne, “*Brown v. Board* and the Mystification of Race,” 85.

43. Cone, *Black Theology*, 32; Twitter correspondence (Apr. 16, 2018) documenting this incident in possession of the author.

plans “on the Negro question” for seminary and institute teachers in the late 1960s because to do so—to talk about the issue—might cause more harm than good.⁴⁴

Oaks’s directives at the “Be One” event to concentrate “on the opportunities of the future rather than the disappointments of the past” and to not “concern ourselves . . . with past explanations by those who were operating with limited understanding” are perhaps the best recent example of this approach. Church curriculum materials of the recent past have also encouraged members to brush off the topic. The *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* manual, for instance, includes a chapter on the doctrinal principle of revelation that highlights the 1978 announcement as the “most well-known of all” of President Kimball’s revelations. The lesson, however, does not address the actual content of that revelation and instead focuses on questions such as: “what aspects of [Kimball’s] experience are common to all our efforts to receive revelation?”⁴⁵

A number of students, white and Black, presently report that many of their BYU religion professors do not talk about race or the history of race in the Church even when the subject is clearly relevant to the course, or they talk about it only superficially. These students relate some change over the span of the last few years, but not as much as they had expected to see. Students tell me that they are often both surprised and disappointed by the unwillingness of some religious education faculty to engage in serious discussions about race and the Church’s racial history. One former Black student recently related: “In religion classes at BYU the topic [is] briefly explored, usually without substance or acknowledgement of the

44. See Berrett, “Church History and Philosophy,” and letters between William E. Berrett and Henry Draper (1963) in box 12, folder 12, Berrett Papers.

45. “Revelation: ‘A Continuous Melody and a Thunderous Appeal,’” chap. 22 in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2006), available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-spencer-w-kimball/chapter-22?lang=eng>.

harm it has caused black people.”⁴⁶ Another reported that they still hear things like: “Let’s not pretend that God hasn’t made racial restrictions for the priesthood and gospel before. He didn’t want the gospel being taught to the Gentiles at one point. I don’t know why God makes these restrictions, but he let both go on for a long time.”⁴⁷ One spoke directly about Church leaders’ responsibility, saying, “I just want them to own the history and make sure everyone is aware the best they can in order to dispel the inaccuracies, racism, and myths of the past.”⁴⁸ And another recounted: “I learned about the racial restrictions the Church made over a stretch of time because no one would give me a straight answer until college. . . . People would just say that we don’t know why it happened but it did and things are better now. That was obviously unsatisfactory.”⁴⁹ One of these former students explained the current problem saying:

I wish there were more talks against racism in Church lesson manuals [and] devotionals (both BYU and Church-wide) and that these topics were addressed in greater length and depth than the few sentences they are given now. Conversing about an issue normalizes it as an issue, and not just something related to someone’s personal opinions. The statement issued after the Charlottesville protest is a clear example that the Church has not made it clear enough in the past that it doesn’t support white supremacist ideals or racism. Why should that have to be clarified by the Church?! Because the leadership never addresses it!⁵⁰

These Black Church members, whose sentiments have been repeated by many others I’ve encountered at BYU, suggest that resisting or limiting opportunities for conversations about the topic of race in Church

46. Julian Harper, “Racism at BYU,” May 14, 2018, typescript in possession of the author.

47. Kirstie Stanger Weyland, “Racism at BYU,” April 2018, typescript in possession of the author.

48. Justin Tyree, email correspondence with author, May 15, 2018.

49. Harper, “Racism at BYU.”

50. Stanger Weyland, “Racism at BYU.”

history has resulted in its further mystification. Moreover, when placed beyond the pale of human explication, Church members, teachers, and leaders continue to ascribe the origins of the priesthood/temple ban to God and to believe the racist ideas that undergirded the ban.

Even as these old approaches—and old, white supremacist ideas—have persisted, Black Latter-day Saints have increasingly encouraged (to channel Ta-Nehisi Coates) the creation of a “new story, a new history told through the lens of [Black Mormon] struggle.”⁵¹ And indeed, the last point of Gray’s essay on healing the wounds of racism in the Church is to listen. While I have studied race in American history for more than two decades, and dedicated some of that time to exploring the topic in my own faith tradition, listening to Black students at BYU has fundamentally changed the way I think about race and the history and legacies of America’s and the Church’s racial past. It has also strengthened my resolve to support them as they create a “new story,” told through the lens of their struggles, their hope, and their faith. I am privileged to have included as part of this essay a small sampling of comments from several current and recently graduated Black BYU students and invite you to hear more of what they have to say at the *Dialogue* website. Their voices suggest, among other things, the importance of continued, direct engagement with this history and of listening to those most affected by it and most in need of a new story. For, as one student relates, “Mormon myths are still prevalent, making it difficult for black members of the Church to form positive self-fact for themselves in the gospel context.”⁵²

51. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Random House, 2015), 44.

52. Melodie Jackson, “African American History Since Emancipation” final exam, Apr. 2019, typescript in possession of the author. Used with permission.