

Should The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Apologize for Racism? Other Churches Have

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints isn't the only major Christian denomination to have a history of racism. But it is the largest in the United States to have had a codified form of racial discrimination as late as June 1978, when church leaders announced that they had received a revelation ending the practice of not conferring the all-male priesthood on Blacks of African descent. The change also authorized Black women of African descent who met the church's worthiness standards to enter temples where the church's most sacred rites are held.

Since then a variety of churches, including the two largest American Protestant denominations, have issued formal apologies for past and current racism and sought forgiveness from Black persons who had been harmed. But no such apology has been forthcoming from Latter-day Saints as a denomination, and one of its top leaders, then-apostle Dallin H. Oaks, said in a 2015 interview that the church doesn't "seek apologies, and we don't give them."¹

The church did publish an official online essay² in 2013 that explained the history of the priesthood and temple ban and that disavowed all theories that had been used to justify the ban. But it fell short of declaring that the practice was not inspired by God.

Since then, there have been calls by some members, particularly bloggers and social-media influencers, for the church to formally apologize. For many of us, including me, there is no question that the church *should* apologize; after all, failure to do so is inconsistent with the church's teachings about repentance, and an apology would reinforce the church's teachings that God "denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female" and that "all are alike unto God."³

The question then is *how* the church should apologize, what an apology should say and what it would look like. Fortunately, we have examples to look to of major church denominations that have apologized for racist teachings or practices. In this paper, I briefly examine the words used by the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church, which both apologized for their own institutional racism; and the Roman Catholic Church, which apologized for its mistreatment of indigenous Canadian students. I'll also look at how a Latter-day Saints leader gave an apology of sorts for murderous actions of some members 150 years earlier; this too had a racial component, as Native Americans were falsely blamed.

I present them in chronological order:

Southern Baptist Convention

The Southern Baptist Convention was created as Baptists divided over the issue of slavery in 1845, with the Southern faction supporting the practice. Delegates (known as messengers) to the SBC's Annual Meeting in 1995 chose the denomination's 150th anniversary to repudiate slavery and issue a sweeping denunciation of all kinds of racism.

The apology ratified by messengers by an overwhelming show of hands was thorough, apologizing not only for slavery but also denouncing ongoing racism and the lack of support by individual Southern Baptists for “legitimate initiatives to secure the civil rights of African-Americans.”

Specifically, the resolution⁴:

- Established a Biblical basis for racial equality.
- Acknowledged that racism “has led to discrimination, oppression, injustice, and violence, both in the Civil War and throughout the history of our nation” and “has divided the body of Christ and Southern Baptists in particular, and separated us from our African-American brothers and sisters.”
- Acknowledged that racism “profoundly distorts our understanding of Christian morality, leading some Southern Baptists to believe that racial prejudice and discrimination are compatible with the Gospel.”
- Declared that Southern Baptists “unwaveringly denounce racism, in all its forms, as deplorable sin.”
- Declared that “we lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest, and we recognize that the racism which yet plagues our culture today is inextricably tied to the past” and “that we apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic⁵ racism in our lifetime.”
- Asked for “forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters, acknowledging that our own healing is at stake.”
- Committed Southern Baptists to “hereby commit ourselves to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry.”

Immediate reaction to the resolution was generally positive. One prominent Black Southern Baptist preacher, Gary Frost, addressed messengers to accept the apology: “On behalf of my black brothers and sisters, we accept your apology and we extend to you our forgiveness in the name of our lord and savior, Jesus Christ. ... We pray that the genuineness of your repentance will be reflected in your attitudes and in your actions. We forgive you, for Christ's sake, amen.”⁶

Understandably, there also was some skepticism from those who wanted to see action that went beyond passing a resolution. The New York Times reported⁷ that the Rev. Arlee Griffin Jr., a historian for a separate Baptist denomination, commented that “it is only when one's request for forgiveness is reflected in a change of attitude and actions that the victim can then believe that the request for forgiveness is authentic.”

The resolution did seem to bear fruit, however. Although the SBC is overwhelmingly white, its messengers elected Fred Luter, a descendant of slaves, as its Black first president in 2012.⁸ And in 2022, Willie McLaurin, a Black pastor from Tennessee, was named interim president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee, which acts on the behalf of the denomination between its annual conventions.⁹

Racial issues continue to frustrate the denomination, however. Some of the denomination's Black pastors have criticized moves into religious-right cultural and political issues, and a few threatened to leave the denomination in 2021 if one of the hard-right candidates were chosen as president¹⁰; delegates chose an establishment conservative instead. Critical race theory has been a contentious issue at recent

annual meetings, although racial issues took a back seat to a controversy over sexual harassment and abuse at the 2022 gathering.¹¹

United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church was created in 1968 from the merger of two predominantly White Methodist denominations; various Black Methodist denominations, the largest being the African Methodist Episcopal Church formed in 1816, have long been part of America's religious landscape. Although the UMC itself has never been officially divided by race, some of its predecessor Methodist denominations were. Most notably, the 1844 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church divided itself into Northern and Southern factions based on whether they were in slave or free states.

United Methodists made their apology in the form of a three-hour ceremony at their 2000 General Conference¹², a gathering for delegates representing both laity and clergy. Delegates wore ashes on their wrists and strips of sackcloth as symbols of contrition.

Sermons and prayers focused on the prevalence of racism in the church both past and present. Representatives of Black Methodist denominations attended and were reported to be moved by the ceremony as they accepted the apology.

A note of skepticism came from at least one Black Methodist leader: "For us, the true measure of repentance will come when the lights are down and everyone has gone home," said Bishop McKinley Young of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. "There must not just be words, but there must also be action."

Shortly after the public call for repentance, the United Methodist Church began talks with smaller Black Methodist denominations. The talks culminated in 2012 with a full communion agreement, allowing United Methodists and five historically Black denominations to share and recognize each others' sacraments and ordinations.¹³

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

One of the most notorious mass murders in American history took place in Sept. 7-11, 1857, when local leaders and other members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints killed at least 120 members of the Baker-Fancher wagon train in what is now the southwestern corner of Utah. Although the church for decades placed at least part of the blame on Paiute Native Americans, in the early 2000s the church undertook an extensive investigation of the slaughter. The investigation was led by three historians who had access to church archives and were allowed to publish the results independently of church supervision; their report was published by Oxford University Press in 2008. That investigation led to the church sending a representative, apostle Henry B. Eyring, to a 150-year anniversary memorial observance in 2007 in order to deliver what is sometimes described as an apology.¹⁴

The slaughter took place during heightened tensions among the church, emigrant settlers and the federal government. According to the church's own official explanation, "defiant sermons" given by church president Brigham Young, who was also governor of the Utah Territory, were a factor in creating "an environment of fear and suspicion in Utah." The one person convicted and executed for his

role in the slaughter, John D. Lee, was a member of the church. He was excommunicated, although in 1961 top church officials authorized his “reinstatement to membership and former blessings.”¹⁵

In his speech at the memorial, Eyring acknowledged the role played by church members: “What was done here long ago by members of our Church represents a terrible and inexcusable departure from Christian teaching and conduct,” he said. “... We express profound regret for the massacre carried out in this valley 150 years ago today and for the undue and untold suffering experienced by the victims then and by their relatives to the present time. A separate expression of regret is owed to the Paiute people who have unjustly borne for too long the principal blame for what occurred during the massacre. Although the extent of their involvement is disputed, it is believed they would not have participated without the direction and stimulus provided by local Church leaders and members.”¹⁶

Since then, the church has included lessons about the massacre in the curriculum it publishes for high school and college students.¹⁷

Catholic Church

Beginning in 1831, many children from indigenous families in Canada were forced to attend residential schools away from their families under a program administrated by Canada’s Department of Indian Affairs and various Christian churches, particularly the Catholic Church, which operated about three-fourths of the schools. About 150,000 children were affected for well over a century, with the last school in the program closing in 1998. Children were often subject to physical, mental and sexual abuse. The severity of the problems didn’t become widely known until 2015, until a Truth and Reconciliation Commission detailed the problems, which included the deaths of about 4,000 children.¹⁸

The first papal apology came in 2019 from Pope Benedict XVI after he met with First Nations representatives at the Vatican. But it was a weak apology; a communique¹⁹ issued by the Vatican said: “Given the sufferings that some indigenous children experienced in the Canadian Residential School system, the Holy Father expressed his sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the Church and he offered his sympathy and prayerful solidarity. His Holiness emphasized that acts of abuse cannot be tolerated in society. He prayed that all those affected would experience healing, and he encouraged First Nations Peoples to continue to move forward with renewed hope.”

Indigenous organizations and allies sought a stronger apology, but as late as 2018 it did not appear to be forthcoming. Bishop Lionel Gendron, then president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, wrote an open letter to indigenous groups saying that the pope takes the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission seriously, but that “[a]fter carefully considering the request and extensive dialogue with the Bishops of Canada, he felt that he could not personally respond.”²⁰

The bishops then took it upon themselves to apologize without equivocation on Sept. 24, 2021: “We, the Catholic Bishops of Canada, gathered in Plenary this week, take this opportunity to affirm to you, the Indigenous Peoples of this land, that we acknowledge the suffering experienced in Canada’s Indian Residential Schools. Many Catholic religious communities and dioceses participated in this system, which led to the suppression of Indigenous languages, culture and spirituality, failing to respect the rich history, traditions and wisdom of Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge the grave abuses that were

committed by some members of our Catholic community; physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, cultural, and sexual. We also sorrowfully acknowledge the historical and ongoing trauma and the legacy of suffering and challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples that continue to this day. Along with those Catholic entities which were directly involved in the operation of the schools and which have already offered their own heartfelt apologies, we, the Catholic Bishops of Canada, express our profound remorse and apologize unequivocally.”²¹

The bishops said they would seek a papal visit, and that came on July 25, 2022, when Pope Francis visited the site of a former residential school in Alberta. “I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples,” he told a crowd. He also said that “begging pardon is not the end of the matter” and that he wanted to seek “concrete ways” to pursue healing and reconciliation.²²

Canadian government officials said later that they would like to see stronger support from the Catholic Church for acts of reconciliation. As of 2022, the Catholic Church had also paid about \$50 million Canadian (about \$40 million in U.S. dollars at the time) and was planning to pay another \$30 million over the following five years. The payments are part of a settlement of a massive lawsuit in which the Canadian government agreed to transfer billions to indigenous communities.²³

Examples Toward a Way Forward

Before they formally apologized, the Baptists and Methodists had long abandoned any teachings involving white supremacy or racial superiority. But they found that doing the right thing in their teachings was not enough. The Southern Baptist church was founded out of support for slavery, and support for slavery had also been part of the Methodists’ predecessor denominations’ stormy past – and the past still hampered the missionary efforts of the Baptists and the desire of the larger Methodist group to work their Black Methodist brothers and sisters.

The apology of the Canadian Catholic bishops seems to have been motivated mostly by the desire to acknowledge and atone for the mistakes of the past. And the same might be said of Eyring’s statement; although the Latter-day Saint church doesn’t operate with the transparency needed to determine why leaders approved giving historians carte blanche to look into the events leading to the massacre, that action suggests a willingness to understand the past so it would not be repeated. We’ll never know how the church would have responded if historians had found evidence of direct involvement by Young or a clearer institutional failure; it is to Eyring’s credit that he acknowledged the indirect role that Young played.

The strongly worded apologies of the Southern Baptists and the Catholic bishops have at least three features in common:

- Acknowledgment of wrongdoing.
- Recognition of the suffering that resulted.
- Recognition of the problems that past events continue to cause in the present.

The current position statement of The Church of Jesus Christ, found in the “Race and the Priesthood” essay, does none of those things. It doesn’t acknowledge that church leaders were wrong; while it does disavow various racist teachings, it never links those teachings directly to church leaders. It ignores the

fact that the church's First Presidency in 1949 declared the racial ban to be unchangeable doctrine. It says nothing about the suffering of those excluded from priesthood or the temple, even though there were those who petitioned time after time to receive full church privileges. It does nothing to suggest that racist attitudes continue to be a problem, giving the impression that the 1978 revelation resolved all concerns.

The result is that many members of the church continue to find ways to justify the church's past racial exclusion.²⁴

The way forward is to learn from what these other churches have done: Acknowledge that the church's past practices and teachings were wrong. Acknowledge that God's children have suffered as a result. Acknowledge that racism continues to be a problem in the church in part because of institutional failures.

These other churches faced questions after their apologies from those who were skeptical that they would be followed by action. The good news for The Church of Jesus Christ is that it has already begun taking some of the actions that an apology might lead to: It has forged a relationship with the NAACP (also known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). It has expanded its family history efforts to better serve the needs of those whose ancestors were enslaved. It has called on its members to repent of personal racism. It has donated to the International African American Museum. One of its leaders has referred to "black lives matter" as "an eternal truth."²⁵

But those actions can't have the positive impact they would otherwise have without recognition that not only does racism conflict with Christian principles today, it conflicted during the Brigham Young era through 1978 as well. A direct apology is the most effective way for church leaders to show they seriously believe that; failure to apologize suggests they don't.

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