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Revelation and Black Mormons
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In 1967, during America's Civil Rights protests, fourteen Black members of Wyoming's football team decided to wear black arm bands during their game against Brigham Young University, protesting what they characterized as racist policies of Mormonism. Wyoming's coach summarily dismissed them from the team.

In 2002, the BYU student body elected Robert Foster as its first black student association president.

What changed to bring about such a radical shift?

Nothing short of a divine revelation. In June of 1978, LDS President Spencer Kimball had a revelation that reversed a revelation by Brigham Young in 1848. The earlier revelation held that Black men of African descent could be admitted to the church should be not admitted to the Mormon priesthood, a position into which nearly all Mormon men enter during their teenage years.

The prophecies and their accompanying controversies are prime examples of how revelation operates in a social situation, both for those who believe and those who do not.

First, for those who believe, divine instructions delivered by prophecy must be obeyed. They cannot go against revelation, even when the beliefs of the surrounding human society change. So when the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s dramatically altered the position of Blacks in American society as a whole, it did not affect the standing of Brigham Young's prophetic revelation.

Second, prophetic revelation is not necessarily permanent, but lasts only until another revelation concerning the same matter. The biblical prophet Jonah provides a good example, for God sent him to Nineveh to prophesy the city's destruction. When the Ninevites repented, God sent Jonah with a new revelation saying the city would be spared. President Kimball's revelation functioned similarly; it revealed God's new will.

Third, prophetic revelation comes not in calm times, but at periods of social conflict and unrest. The prophet Micaiah gave a revelation to the Kings of Judah and Israel at a time of war (1 Kings 22), for example, telling them not to fight or they would be defeated. They fought, and lost their lives.

With regard to the priesthood ban, the links to social circumstances can be seen most clearly in Brigham Young's 1848 revelation. It came at a controversial time for the USA as well as for the Mormon Church, for the nation was embroiled in a heated political debate over slavery. In the

early years of Mormonism, Joseph Smith had ignored this issue. He and his followers were undergoing almost constant persecution and had to flee first from upstate New York to Ohio, then to Missouri, to Illinois (where Smith was killed in 1844), and finally to Utah.

It was not until they reached Missouri, a "slave state," that Mormonism confronted the abolition question. The Mormons attempted to maintain a neutral position, neither anti-slavery nor pro-slavery, which the Missourians found unacceptable. The free blacks living among the Mormons, Missourians thought, gave slaves ideas about liberty, while the Mormon proselytizing, they feared, would incite rebellion. The governor expelled the Mormons from the state in 1838.

The Missouri experience produced many reactions among the Mormons. When Joseph Smith ran for President of the USA in 1843, his platform had an anti-slavery plank. Other Mormons, like many Americans, held beliefs closer to those of the Missourians.

Brigham Young's revelation in Utah in 1848 can be seen as providing a way for Mormons to remain neutral on the question of slavery; it permitted Utah territory to have both slave-holding converts from the South and free Black converts from the North. Even in 1863 during the height of the Civil War, Young stated that he was neither for nor against slavery. Like most whites he did not believe in interracial marriage, but he also thought that Congress should rule "that negroes should be used like human beings, and not worse than dumb brutes. For the abuse of that race, the whites will be cursed." Although these words may have a dogmatic tone to modern ears, they were at the time rather progressive.

It was ongoing adherence to Young's revelation as Mormon doctrine after the triumph of the civil rights movement that has caused the LDS Church much bad press. Their once-liberal position had become quite conservative. For the Church, it was up to the 1978 revelation to set Mormonism on a different track.

The complex issue of Blacks and Mormonism cannot be broadly addressed in a short column like this. UW's Religious Studies Program is hosting two-part program on Friday, September 26th for further exploration. At 3:00 pm, the film, "Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons" will be shown. At 7:00, Professor Armand Mauss will speak on "From Galatia to Ghana: The Racial Dynamic in Mormon History" in UW's Agriculture Auditorium. For more information, go to www.uwyo.edu/RelStds.