

Teaching Official Declaration 2

An Article and Lesson Supplement for Teaching on Official Declaration 2

Introduction

In 2025, Sunday School teachers may choose to teach on Official Declaration 2. This presents an opportunity to discuss a portion of our church's challenging history and approach it faithfully. ⁽¹⁾ The current *Come, Follow Me* manual states that “we don't know why” the Priesthood ban and Temple restriction came about. Our approach is to discuss how the Priesthood ban and Temple restriction happened and explore ways we can move forward.

Historian W. Paul Reeve, in his book “Let's Talk about Race and Priesthood” (published by Deseret Book,) presents historical evidence that shows us how the restrictions began, how they were perpetuated, and how Saints—then and now—have responded. Paul Reeve notes that to say “we don't know” may leave Latter-Day Saints perplexed, feeling like we are hiding from the difficult aspects of our history. It can also leave Black Latter-day Saints emotionally frayed and feeling like “we don't belong.”

President Dallin H Oaks said as a young man living in Chicago and Washington DC, “I observed the pain and frustration experienced by those who suffered these restrictions and those who criticized the restrictions and sought for reasons. I studied the reasons then being given and could not feel confirmation of the truth of any of them.” ⁽⁶⁾

In the gospel topics essay: Race and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints “Brigham Young's explanation for the restriction drew on then-common ideas that identified Black people as descendants of the biblical figures Cain and Ham. The Church has since disavowed this justification for the restriction as well as later justifications that suggested it originated in the pre-earth life.”

With this knowledge it shows our caring (Mosiah 18:9). Telling the truth is part of correcting for the sins of our fathers' which we have allowed to matriculate into the culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Our goal is to help Black members feel God's infinite love, and strengthen testimonies for all Latter-Day Saints. The *Black Lives Bless Foundation* offers two resources:

1. An **article** with historical and spiritual framing.
2. A **supplemental lesson outline** designed to accompany *Come, Follow Me*.

These resources are meant to help teachers and members build faith and prepare for the Savior's return.

Article: Reconciling Our Past

— A Call to Truth, Wisdom and Understanding.

As Latter-day Saints, we take great pride in the inclusivity of our congregations, yet we must also acknowledge that for over a century, Black members of our faith were denied full participation in the Priesthood and Temple blessings. This despite early Black saints being given the priesthood and contributing significantly to the Restoration. The Church in the beginning was focused on the principle and practice of universality, the inclusion of everyone from every tribe of Israel back to the Abrahamic Covenant.

Some members feel that dwelling on the past makes it harder to move forward, believing that unity and progress should be our focus. However, true unity is only achieved when it is built on truth. The Restoration itself teaches us the importance of continuing revelation-of refining and purifying our understanding so we can draw closer to God. Moving forward without acknowledging the past does not heal wounds; it leaves them unhealed. Many members and church leaders today struggle to reconcile their testimonies with the historical legacy of The Church's racial restrictions, and that struggle deserves recognition and understanding. Rather than dismissing these concerns, we can view them as an invitation to seek greater knowledge, empathy, and spiritual growth. As we strive to become a Zion people, we must ask: How do we ensure all members feel truly seen, valued, and safe within our LDS faith community?

One very important way is to see our heritage through a wider lens -- seeing racial injustices not as a footnote, but integral to our understanding of mercy and justice.

Understanding Our History

The story of race in the restored Church can be seen in three phases.

First, openness. In the early days, Priesthood and Temple blessings were open to all. Elijah Abel a Black member, was ordained to the priesthood and served missions. Jane Manning James, a faithful Black pioneer, lived with Joseph and Emma Smith and remained devoted to the gospel her whole life, even petitioning to receive Temple ordinances. These Saints remind us that the Restoration began with an inclusive vision.

Second, restriction. Over time, things changed. Beginning in 1852, and reinforced by Church leaders and members, by the late 1800s, Black members were denied Priesthood ordination and Temple blessings. Leaders and members gave explanations that seemed to make sense to them at the time, but they were not founded in revelation. And it wasn't just the culture of the time —because even then, there were voices such as Orson Pratt, inside and outside the Church, calling for affirmation of universality, a foundational principle in the restored gospel. That means Saints had the Spirit and the scriptures but still missed what God had already made clear: “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33).

Third, restoration. In 1978, President Spencer W. Kimball and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles received a revelation that restored Priesthood and Temple blessings to all of God's children, returning the Church to the inclusivity it had at the beginning.

This history calls us not just to look backward, but *inward*. If early Saints, with the faith of pioneers and the guidance of the Spirit, could still be blinded by the prejudices around them, then we too must ask, “*Lord, is it I?*” (Matt. 26:22). Are there ways that popular opinion, political

tribalism, or unkind traditions are shaping us more than the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are there neighbors we are overlooking, members who feel invisible, or biases we haven't yet rooted out?

The scriptures remind us of what God sees: "The Lord is no respecter of persons" (D&C 1:35). His gospel is to go "unto every creature" (D&C 36:4–5). "All flesh is mine" (D&C 38:16). The story of the Restoration, including its painful chapters, is an invitation to see more clearly and love more universally today.

A Scriptural Call to Remember and Reconcile

Scripture repeatedly teaches us the importance of remembering the past as a means of growth and protection against future missteps (Alma 36:29). The Lord commanded ancient Israel to remember its captivity so that future generations would not repeat the sins of their ancestors (Deuteronomy 8:2). The Book of Mormon reminds us that "it is by small and simple things that great things are brought to pass" (Alma 37:6) and that reflecting on history can bring wisdom and prevent future suffering (Alma 37:8–9). Even Christ Himself lamented injustice, mourning for Jerusalem's failures (Matthew 23:37).

Acknowledging the past is not a distraction from faith --- it is a sacred responsibility that strengthens our testimony and commitment to Christlike love.

A Word of Caution:

As we tell the stories of early Black Saints like Elijah Abel ⁽²⁾, Jane Manning James ⁽³⁾, and Green Flake ⁽⁴⁾ and many others, we must take care not to tokenize them. Their faithfulness is inspiring, but their mere presence does not prove the Church's moral credibility. Nor does the presence of Black Saints in our pews today. Representation alone is not the fruit of Zion; love and justice are.

President Nelson has urged us to "lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice." (President Russell M. Nelson "Let God Prevail" ⁽⁵⁾) That means more than celebrating diversity. It requires rooting out bias wherever it lives—in our own hearts, in the culture of our wards, and in the pastoral care our leaders offer.

The test of the Church is not whether people of color show up; it is whether they find in members a covenant community where they can *flourish* in the moral fortitude of their ancestors who stood for justice. A safe harbor is not one that excuses injustice, but one that affirms belonging, is vigilant, and seeks healing. Leaders and members alike must labor to ensure that every Saint can fully live their covenants without carrying the weight of prejudice alone – standing together as moral leaders on the promises of those who went before us.

This kind of moral leadership and care is not optional. It is the sign that we are truly becoming one. It is the fruit that shows our divine commitment to our premortal promise is real and our Church is a place where God's children can be "of one heart and one mind" (Moses 7:18).

Supplemental Lesson Outline

Black Lives Bless — Official Declaration 2 Teaching Supplement

Purpose:

- Understand the history of priesthood and temple restrictions
- Practice truth-telling with love
- Root out prejudice and build Zion in our wards

1. Opening Scripture & Question

Scripture: 2 Nephi 26:33 — “All are alike unto God.”

Prompt: What does this verse teach us about God’s vision for His children? How can we measure ourselves against this standard?

2. Historical Overview (5–7 min)

- **Openness:** Early Restoration—priesthood and temple blessings open to all.
- **Restriction:** Mid to Late 1800s—Black members denied blessings; explanations were of the natural man, not divine or revealed.
- **Restoration:** 1978 revelation restores priesthood and temple blessings to all.

Teaching Tip: Emphasize that restriction was a natural man error, not God’s decree.

3. A Word of Caution (5 min)

- Teach: Representation does not equal righteousness.
- Scripture: Moses 7:18 — Zion is “of one heart and one mind.”
- Reflection question: Do we assume that the presence of Black Saints means we are doing enough? What does real belonging look like?

4. Personal Introspection (10 min)

- Scripture: Matthew 26:22 — “Lord, is it I?”
- Silent reflection: Are there biases of unkind traditions or political leanings influencing me more than the gospel?
- Group discussion: What does rooting out prejudice look like in our ward culture?
 - How do we identify biases/prejudices when everyone we worship with looks like us?

5. Pastoral Care & Community (5–7 min)

- Teach: Discuss how leaders and members can ensure wards are safe harbors of belonging.

- Reflection: What concrete steps can we take so all Saints, especially those who feel unseen, can flourish?

6. Closing Testimony & Hope (2–3 min)

- Remembering history is sacred, not distracting.
- President Nelson quote: *Lead out in abandoning prejudice.*
- Testify: Truth leads to healing and an awareness and a desire to be an Ensign, which leads members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to becoming Zion.
- "To reckon with truth, Sister Browning recommends asking, "What am I doing that I should stop doing and what am I not doing that I should start doing?"⁽⁷⁾

Suggested Resources for Teachers

- Paul Reeve, *Let's Talk About Race and Priesthood* --
https://www.deseretbook.com/product/P6012982.html?srsId=AfmBOoqJXs3nmGMNyKVvEzzooiuD6SL_C6bBy5QjrvDLKLa7Qj9595Rm
- *Century of Black Mormons* project
-- <https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/welcome>
- Alice Burch, *My Lord He Calls Me* --
https://www.deseretbook.com/product/P6001723.html?srsId=AfmBOoqwnLA4k_lm5-qtdER7_N7EW6gR0M1bkdVybIbkySuYQNEOXJW0
- Mathew L. Harris, *Second Class Saints* --
<https://www.amazon.com/Second-Class-Saints-Mormons-Struggle-Equality/dp/019769571X>
- Russell W. Stevenson, *For The Cause of Righteousness* --
<https://www.amazon.com/Cause-Righteousness-History-Mormonism-1830-2013/dp/1589585291>
- Official Church Essay: "Race and the Priesthood"
-- <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>
- Gospel Topics Essay: "Race and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints"
-- <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/race-and-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints?lang=eng>
- Black Lives Bless curated resources -- <https://blacklivesbless.org/resources/>

Citations

- ⁽¹⁾ **The Abrahamic Covenant** -- Our covenant binds us to one another so we can come to know Christ through every nation, kindred, and tongue. To say, “I don’t know their story or their faith,” is to miss the covenant’s purpose — that we are meant to know God through His work in each other’s lives.
- ⁽²⁾ Elijah Able --
<https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/able-elijah#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-903%2C-74%2C3282%2C1461>
- ⁽³⁾ Jane Manning James --
<https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/james-jane-elizabeth-manning#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1969924%2C-183%2C3941908%2C3656>
- ⁽⁴⁾ Green Flake --
<https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/flake-green#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-671822%2C-63%2C1344665%2C1247>
- ⁽⁵⁾ Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail.” October 2020 General Conference
- ⁽⁶⁾ Be One Celebration https://youtu.be/hVr0x23rYJA?si=tCOi-5jXCB_8_m4I
- ⁽⁷⁾ Latter-day Saint Women podcast Inclusion, Unity and Loving Better:
<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/podcast/tracy-browning-inclusion-unity-and-loving-better-dee924f?lang=eng&collectionId=a68911cb996f493080d68b6f8ce5b675>