

Chapter 8

The LDS Church in the United States since 1945

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On June 9, 1978, LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball announced a revelation that allowed black men to receive the Church's lay priesthood and black men and women to receive ordinances only performed in the temples. At a symposium on the tenth anniversary of this revelation, Dallin H. Oaks, one of the Church's Quorum of Twelve Apostles, explained the impact of the announcement on members of the Church: "There are some events that claim a place in almost everyone's memory. If you were an adult at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, you remember where you were and what you were doing when you heard the announcement. The same is true of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. For most adult Latter-day Saints the revelation on the priesthood ten years ago was an event of such magnitude that it is also etched in memory."¹

The impact of Kimball's announcement was felt throughout the United States. Presses stopped to include the story. *Time Magazine* initially planned to run a cover story. Journalists rushed to collect the reactions of black Mormons, scholars of Mormonism, leaders of other religious groups, and black leaders. Sterling McMurrin, a University of Utah professor who had publicly spoken against the policy, called "it the most important day for the Church of the century."²

The timing of Kimball's announcement shocked Mormons and non-Mormons alike. The change in policy did not come during the 1960s when the civil rights leaders, universities, and some Latter-day Saints tried to pressure the Mormon Church into changing its policy. Yet as non-Mormon historian Jan Shipps interpreted the event, the revelation's timing had more to do with the Church than with outside pressure. In an interview with the *Christian Century*, she explained, "The June 9 revelation will never be fully understood if it is regarded simply as a pragmatic doctrinal shift ultimately designed to bring Latter-day Saints into congruence with mainstream America. . . . This revelation came in the context of worldwide evangelism rather than . . . American social and cultural circumstances."³

1. Dallin H. Oaks, "For the Blessings of All of His Children," keynote address, LDS Afro-American Symposium, June 8, 1988, videotape, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Manuscript Division, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

2. *Deseret News*, June 10, 1978, A-3.

3. Jan Shipps, "The Mormons: Looking Forward and Outward," *Christian Century*, August 16-23, 1978, 762.