



**Forty Years After the 40<sup>th</sup> Year:  
Expectations for the Future of Black  
Members in the Church of Jesus Christ  
of Latter-day Saints<sup>1</sup>  
Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D.**

---

A few months ago, at a conference sponsored by the University of Utah's Tanner Humanities Center also marking

the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the 1978 Revelation, I spoke of a few of my past experiences with the priesthood ban, and also some of my views and expectations for the present and the near future of individual members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with Black African ancestry. Among the points I stressed in my speech at that time, I would highlight the following:

- The great Revelation on the Priesthood received on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1978, attests that at its heart the religion we profess is primarily a religion of blessings, not curses. A religion not based on prejudice and segregation, but one of divinely-established principles of righteousness, ordinances, and covenants available to all humankind.
- The 1978 Revelation also provided a hidden lesson for the future: One cannot pay respects to the past using as currency the dignity of others in the present.
- Just like the converted Lamanites in the Book of Mormon strengthened the Nephites (Helaman 6:4-5), my hope for the future is that not long from now we'll see more and more Black members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and members from other races, ethnicities, and language groups, being people whose presence refines and blesses other members' discipleship in Christ.

Today, this particular session of this conference sponsored by the Maxwell Institute and BYU's Department of History asks us to explore international dimensions of the 1978 Revelation. It is a great honor for me to participate, and from the outset I should make clear that my inclusion in this program must be far more due to historical reasons than for any professional expertise on my part. I joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with my parents, Helvecio and Ruda Martins in 1972, and so we lived the last six years of the so-called priesthood ban. And although I am Black, I do not study the experiences of fellow Black members of the Church. This has never been a topic of interest to me in my research. Because I was born and raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a very mixed and cosmopolitan place, even though I have now lived almost half of my life in the United States, I don't fit the customary profile of an "African American". But although at this point in time I'm still very much a Brazilian, I have incorporated many aspects of American culture, but not specifically African American aspects.

---

<sup>1</sup> Remarks presented at the conference "40 Years: Commemorating the 1978 Priesthood and Temple Revelation", sponsored by Brigham Young University's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Department of History, and The Kennedy Center, in Provo, Utah, on October 12, 2018.

With those caveats in mind, as I pondered on what to say in this conference I felt strongly impressed to follow up on that speech I gave in Salt Lake City on June 30<sup>th</sup> of this year, and explore a few additional personal perspectives and expectations for Black members of the Church of Jesus Christ, but this time looking into a more distant future.

So, I have been asking myself: Now that we have lived 40 years since the 1978 Revelation, what would be my expectations for the next 40 years?

What else could I possibly want to see in my own experiences in my remaining years—which President Gordon B. Hinckley used to call “golden years laced with lead”—and in the experiences of other Black members of the Church internationally?

Other than to know that during those four decades my grandchildren will render service in the Church, and my great-grandchildren will serve full-time missions, I want ... not much, really. But that little that I want for the future is indeed very significant. However, as a Sociologist and Disciple of Jesus Christ I see that on the international arena we have far bigger “fishes to fry” ahead of us.

The conditions of the world are deteriorating at an astounding rate. We still face not only persistent chronic poverty, but also endless regional skirmishes that threaten to escalate into a new world war, vast flows of refugees, and changes in the delicate balance of nature that seem to affect our climate in dangerous ways. But the challenge I have been thinking about the most in recent years is the resurgence of racism.

Once again we see around the world despicable racist ideologies being used to justify and reinforce feelings of racial pride and superiority, and we see populist national leaders using those despicable ideologies for self-serving purposes. Extremism in various forms is gaining ground rapidly, changing the fabric which binds many societies together and allows for peace and progress to thrive.

This threat is so pervasive that it can disrupt—and in a few places might be already disrupting—the fabric that binds that subset of the larger society composed of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Only a concerted effort to bring millions of people around the world to Jesus Christ and the truths, ordinances and covenants of his restored gospel may save individuals and families from a destructive whirlwind fueled by partisanship, tribalism, and jingoism, laced with sexism and outright racism.

During World War II, allied soldiers from various races and ethnic backgrounds banded together to fight Nazism, and the current conditions of the world require that we likewise leave aside other considerations and focus on the major task at hand: to resist evil, cleanse ourselves, provide ministering to others, and help prepare the world for the glorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Since the scope of this theme would require a far more extensive analysis than the available time we have in this conference would allow, from this point on I will limit my

analysis solely to the sphere of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, rather than larger societies internationally.

So, how can we prevent racist views and actions from once again becoming widespread and (heavens forbid) becoming again institutionalized in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in this 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Personally, in my own actions, I consider that it would do little good to me to continue speaking of the past—bemoaning the priesthood ban and its associated pseudo-doctrines. In fact, I have started to decline invitations to speak about that topic. Just a couple of months ago, stakes in England and Portugal honored me with opportunities to speak. Initially they suggested the priesthood ban as the topic, but politely I offered to speak of the results of my research for my forthcoming book titled “The Priesthood: Earthly Symbols and Heavenly Realities”. Incidentally, I tried the same strategy with the Church History Department, but it didn’t work. Historians wanted my personal story, not my views on doctrine, and as the saying goes, “the customer is always right.”

And that pretty much summarizes my personal stance about this nowadays. The priesthood ban happened. It is and will always be part of our collective history as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But the ban should not be a major concern nor have any significant effect on our present.

I acknowledge that there may be isolated incidents involving racial prejudice in wards and stakes in which one could point to a possible residual influence of those pseudo-doctrines used for almost a century to justify the priesthood ban. I myself have had unfortunate experiences in a few rare occasions. And allow me to pause for a moment and remind you again of the possibility of a significant difference in the frequency and magnitude of my experiences compared with those of African-American members of the Church.

Now returning to my analysis, I wonder, would there still be a potential residual influence of those pseudo-doctrines associated with the priesthood ban, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? And if so, how pervasive and effective would that residual influence be?

Let’s face it ... most of us often cannot remember the specifics of what we discussed in a particular Sunday lesson just one week later. Are people really quoting those old ideas about the Curse of Cain today? And if so, would there be entire congregations hearing that and still thinking “Black people are doomed”? Let’s say that one finds twelve people who believe that. Honestly, as far as I am concerned, as long as those hypothetical twelve individuals are not sustained to serve in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, I wouldn’t lose my sleep over it.

For over a decade I have been arguing that this is a time for activity, and not activism. I believe that it is by active engagement with and service to the larger society of members of the Church of Jesus Christ that we will demonstrate that as the Apostle Peter stated, indeed “... God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and

worketh righteousness, is accepted with him<sup>2</sup>”and also that as Nephi stated, indeed “... all are alike unto God ...<sup>3</sup>”

My faith is that in the next 40 years God will continue to impress the minds of this and future generations of local Church leaders to have more and more members of different races, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds called to serve in leadership positions in their wards and stakes. Not merely as singers and dancers in social activities, but as equal partners in teaching, service, and ministering.

Like the ancient Lamanites, as these members serve and “exhort [their fellow members] to faith and repentance ... [preaching] with exceedingly great power ...” (Helaman 6:4-5) the Holy Ghost will touch hearts, and any potential residual influence of those pseudo-doctrines associated with the priesthood ban will diminish more and more until it becomes practically extinct. Those ideas of the past will always be in our collective memory, but they don’t need to exist in in our hearts.

So, that’s what I personally have been all about in recent years. Offering my faithful service in the Church and in my community, and offering my now four decades of professional experience to organizations that need my leadership, regardless of my skin color. In the process of doing this I hope others have seen and will continue to see that race is not a significant factor in our relationship nor in service and leadership, and they will slowly abandon the notions of curses and divine disfavor that were institutionalized the past.

And my faith is that by doing so the good Lord will renew and extend the following words and promises to me and to all other faithful disciples of Jesus Christ from all nations, races, and ethnicities:

“[Hold] on thy way, and the priesthood shall remain with thee ... Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever.<sup>4</sup>”

“Therefore, fear not ... do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail.<sup>5</sup>”

---

*Marcus Helvécio Martins is a former Dean of Religious Education, and Professor of Religion and Leadership at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. A native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, he holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race & Ethnic Relations, a Master’s (now MBA) in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor’s in Business Management. He wrote the book “Setting the Record Straight: Blacks and the Mormon Priesthood” (Millennial Press, 2007) and in 2017 he wrote the manuscript “The Priesthood: Earthly Symbols and Heavenly Realities”. He previously taught at BYU (Provo) and Ricks College (now BYU-Idaho). He has served twice as Bishop, seven times as stake high councilor, and as president of the Brazil Sao Paulo North Mission (2011-2014).*

---

<sup>2</sup> New Testament - Acts 10:34-35

<sup>3</sup> Book of Mormon - 2 Nephi 26:33

<sup>4</sup> Doctrine & Covenants 122:9

<sup>5</sup> Doctrine & Covenants 6:34