

GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

TOWARD A CORE THEOLOGY:
THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
DURING TIMES OF CHANGE

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
INTRODUCTION TO LDS THEOLOGY	3
PLURAL MARRIAGE (POLYGAMY)	8
Beginnings of Polygamy	8
Polygamy and the church--1844 - 1890	10
Abandoning Polygamy: Wilford Woodruff	16
Woodruff Manifesto (Official Declaration 1) - Toward a Core Theology?	17
Polygamy and the Church- 1890-1905	20
Summary: Emergence of a core theology through the polygamy debate	25
PRIESTHOOD	27
History Behind the Priesthood Ban	27
Internal pressures facing the ban	31
External pressures facing the ban	34
Official Declaration Two	36
CORE THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT	40
The Future of the Church	41
Priesthood	42
Scripture and Revelation	44
CONCLUSION	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY	48

One of the fastest growing churches today is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [LDS], more commonly known as the Mormon Church. Joseph Smith founded the church in 1830, but since then the church has changed drastically. These changes are partly due to the belief that the president of the church is believed to be a modern day prophet who can receive revelations from God that have the authority to change the direction and practices of the church. This power is perhaps best exemplified in the revelations received during two key moments in the church history. First, when the church received a revelation changing its doctrine concerning polygamy in 1890, and second, concerning race within the priesthood in 1978. Some critics of the church contend that the church authorities made these changes as a convenient way to help the LDS church assimilate into American society. This essay argues that even while the church's doctrine conformed to American societal pressures, its articulation of what could be called a "core theology" effectively prevented full assimilation, and maintained the LDS's sense of continuity and identity in the face of major changes.

It is necessary to clarify some terms, starting with core theology. The church's belief in on-going revelation has allowed for major doctrinal changes throughout its history. Revelations have the authority to change a doctrine that was started by a previous president and thus can drastically change the church, its beliefs, and practices. The revelations regarding plural marriage and the priesthood were two times the LDS church was faced with abandoning a belief and risked losing its sense of group identity. I propose that the church maintained its identity by articulating what I am calling a "core theology." Core theology refers to a possible set of interrelated theological commitments that have provided the LDS continuity and group identity, while allowing for some assimilation to American culture. The events and pressures before the two revelations concerning polygamy and the priesthood, as well as the official declarations from

the church, can help illustrate if the LDS has a core theology, how it may have developed, and what it may consist of. I will argue that the elements of the church's core theology have been present in the church since its beginning in the 19th century, but their relationship and function was articulated during these two times of change. The core theology, unlike its other theology, helped the church navigate new revelations and helped the church retain a sense of group identity.

“American culture” or “society” refers to the dominant society, one that has, for much of the United States' history, been Christian and has thus paved the way for Christianity to be seen as the insider group and any other religion as an outsider.¹ The LDS church posed a complex problem because of their claim to be the restored church that Jesus started on this earth.

American Christianity cannot fully exclude the LDS because of their shared claim to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament; however, America cannot fully include them either because of their additional beliefs, such as the authority of the Book of Mormon. These additional beliefs that have prevented the LDS from full assimilation might form a core theology. This could explain why the church was and continues to be caught between the religious insiders and the outsiders of the country. If the LDS church has been unwilling to give up certain theological commitments (or a core theology) that are in tension with the more mainstream Christianity in America, this could help explain why the LDS church has not yet fully assimilated into the Christian mainstream of America.

Revelations are believed by the LDS to be directly from God and the LDS do not consider them reactions by the church authorities to the outside pressures on the church; however, these certainly pressures influenced what the authorities prayed about and discussed

¹ R. Laurence Moore, “Insiders and Outsiders in American Historical Narrative and American History,” *American Historical Review*, 87 no. 2 (April 1982): 398.

together. Whether or not the revelation was from God is inconsequential for the purposes of this paper, but the declarations are believed by the LDS to be revelations from God, and so carry the weight of the word of God. The status of the revelations within the church was a major contributor to the formation of the core theology.

This paper will examine the pressures and events from both inside and outside the church that influenced the changes in policy concerning polygamy and the priesthood. Following an understanding of the forces that surrounded these changes, the written documents produced by the church concerning the new doctrines will be reviewed to demonstrate that the LDS church articulated a core theology and what it consists of. Finally, in comparing the LDS core theology to a more mainstream Christian theology, key tensions are identified that have played a role in keeping the LDS from full acceptance into American culture.

Introduction to LDS Theology

In order to understand the impact of the changes in regards to both polygamy and the priesthood within the LDS Church, it is important to first understand its basic theology. Focusing on five aspects of religion (Nature of God, role of Jesus Christ, Human Nature, Salvation, and Scripture) will give a good basic outline of the LDS beliefs. The LDS believe that God the Father is an actual being with flesh and bones and is the father of everyone's spirits. They believe that the God of this world was at one point not a god, but a human being. Former church president Lorenzo Snow stated, "As man is, God was once; as God is now, man may become," portraying God the Father as an exalted being.² Through devotion and adhering to spiritual laws he became God.³ It is believed that if men on earth follow the faith diligently, they too can become Gods and populate their own planet. They believe that God the Father, the Son,

² LDS website

³ Francis Beckwith, "Mormon Theism," *Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 4 (2001): 676.

and Holy Spirit are three separate beings. The Father and Son each have their own corporal bodies, while the Holy Spirit doesn't have a body, and instead dwells within each believer. These three distinct beings are "one in purpose, one in mind, one in glory, [and] one in attributes and powers."⁴ This teaching of the LDS church has been a major tension between the Mormon Church and other Christian denominations.

The role of Jesus Christ is also an important aspect of the LDS theology. For the LDS, Jesus Christ was and is literally the "Son of God," conceived by God the Father and the Virgin Mary. From this union, Christ received his mortality from Mary and his immortality from God. He is considered to be the creator of this world, albeit under the direction of God the Father. He came to earth, led a perfect life, and taught by word and example. He suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, bearing "the weight of the sins of the whole world."⁵ According to the Book of Mormon, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to a group of people in the Americas, and set up a Christian community and Church.⁶ The LDS believe that after the original apostles were killed, the members of the Church changed the teachings that Jesus had established. Mormons claim that Jesus started restoring his church (as predicted in Acts 3:19-21) to its original form through the prophet Joseph Smith in 1820.⁷

The LDS outlook on human nature is much more positive than other Christian faiths. The LDS believe that Adam and Eve were real people, who went into the garden to fall as part of God's plan. They do not believe in Original Sin or Total Depravity because Adam was forgiven by God. People will be judged for their own sins. What came from the fall was human beings' mortality. The LDS views conception as a vehicle in which our fallen nature (physical and

⁴ Robert Millet, *The Mormon Faith: A new Look at Christianity* (Salt Lake City, UT: Shadow Mountain, 1998), 29.

⁵ James Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co, 1984), 69.

⁶ Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 21.

⁷ "Introduction to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" <<http://www.mormon.org/learn/0,8672,955-1,00.html>> (22 September 2008).

spiritual mortality) is handed down to the next generation.⁸ The capacity to sin is considered in us from day one, but babies are not sinful when born and are covered by Christ until they come of age (8 years old). Baptism therefore is only for those “of age” (8 years or older) who are morally accountable for their sins.

Salvation is perhaps the most important aspect of LDS theology to understand, especially with regard to polygamy and the priesthood. People are saved by having faith in Christ, repenting for sins, being baptized, receiving the Holy Ghost, obeying God’s commandments, and striving to be like Christ.⁹ Through his atoning sacrifice in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross, Christ conquered death and made it possible for everyone (believer or not) to be resurrected. Without the work of Christ, resurrection and eternal life would not be possible. This state of eternal life is an exalted state where a man can work toward perfection to become a God of his own planet.

The LDS believe that every person will enter one of three levels of heaven based on their obedience to the laws found in scripture during their life. The third degree of glory is called the Telestial Kingdom. This kingdom is reserved for those who did not receive the Gospel, Jesus Christ, the Prophets, or the Covenants. Due to their lack of faith and immoral lives, these people will have to wait until the last resurrection for redemption.¹⁰ The second Degree of Glory is the Terrestrial Kingdom. This is for those who chose to not receive or believe in Jesus during their life on Earth, but still led an upright life. These people are considered to have been “blinded by the craftiness of men.”¹¹ The first degree or Kingdom is called the Celestial Kingdom. This is reserved for those who received, believed, lived out the Gospel and overcame evil by godly

⁸ Millet, *Mormon Faith*, 33.

⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰ Talmage, *Articles*, 83-84.

¹¹ Doctrine and Covenants 76:75.

works.¹² The Celestial Kingdom is considered a “material world” since believers obtain a celestial body and are united with family.¹³ The highest level in this kingdom is believed to only be obtained by those who are married in the temple and bonded with their families for eternity. To acquire this level of heaven, men must be part of the priesthood and receive the saving ordinances. These links between marriage, holding the priesthood and salvation were extremely important in the discussions surrounding polygamy and the priesthood ban because the church was dealing with people’s salvation.

Scripture also relates to polygamy and the priesthood within the LDS church. The LDS church recognizes The Bible, The Book of Mormon, The Doctrine and Covenants, and The Pearl of Great Price as authoritative scripture. The Church does not consider reading scripture a sacramental act. It is rather for education so that a believer may lead a life in harmony with God.¹⁴

Mormons believe that the Bible is not complete because important books were left out and mistranslations occurred during the canonization process. Joseph Smith wanted to restore the church and scripture to the original form put forth by Jesus and so, guided by the Spirit, he re-translated the Bible and restored it to its original form. Smith changed 3,410 verses in the Bible, focusing mainly on Genesis and the Gospel according to Luke and Matthew.¹⁵ This re-translation, as well as the King James Version, is the authoritative version of the Bible in the LDS church.

The Book of Mormon is believed to be “another testament of Jesus Christ” that was compiled by the prophet Mormon and his son Moroni. It follows a group of Hebrews who left

¹² Talmage, *Articles*, 83

¹³ Millet, *Mormon Faith*, 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

Jerusalem around 600 BCE and sailed to America to follow the prophet Nephi. Jesus (after his crucifixion and resurrection) appeared to the group in America and set up a Christian community and Church. After about 200 years, this community fell because of pride and class distinctions.¹⁶ Mormons claim this community has been restored through Joseph Smith and the revelations given to him.

The Doctrine and Covenants is a compilation of revelations from various prophets and leaders of the Church. It contains revelations from people such as Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and various presidents of the Church including Spencer W. Kimball, the president of the LDS church until 1985. Along with canonized scripture, revelation plays an important role in the LDS Church. The LDS church believes that revelation began with Joseph Smith's first revelation and continues through the current president of the church. The President is seen as a modern day prophet (much like those in Old Testament) who is the only one "who can receive revelation for the Church."¹⁷ Through these revelations, the church believes they will "receive lasting strength to stay true to the gospel and help others do the same."¹⁸

The Pearl of Great Price is a collection of translations and narrations from Joseph Smith that was put together by Franklin D. Richards in 1851. It contains doctrinal details on Adam and Eve, Enoch, Noah, Moses, and other books in the Bible. God's dealings with Abraham, excerpts from Joseph Smith's "History of the Church", and the Church's Thirteen Articles of Faith written by Joseph Smith are also found in this book.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁷ LDS website

¹⁸ LDS website

¹⁹ Millet, *Mormon Faith*, 23.

PLURAL MARRIAGE (POLYGAMY)

Beginnings of Polygamy

One of the most controversial beliefs the Mormon Church held was Plural Marriage or Polygamy. Joseph Smith received several revelations toward the end of his life that paved the way for the doctrine of polygamy to enter the church. This belief was directly linked to a person's salvation and was a very delicate issue. Joseph Smith's revelations relating to marriage (Doctrines and Covenants 124-132) extended and expounded on ceremonies that linked the living and the dead, or the material world to the spirit world. According to LDS doctrine, after this life, people will enter a literal physical spirit realm in which "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as a man's..." (Doctrines and Covenants 130:22). Moreover, ceremonies performed in temples would be observed and recorded in Heaven. Families which are sealed together during this life will remain together in the spirit life.

Mormons used the Old Testament as well as their own Doctrines and Covenants to justify polygamy. The presence of polygamy in the Old Testament, especially with references to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was the first Biblical evidence the Mormons used to justify the practice, and reinstating polygamy was a natural part of the Church's claim to be restoring both the Old and New Testaments.

The majority of the evidence supporting polygamy was found in the Doctrines and Covenants (D&C). In D&C 132:61- 62 it is revealed that if a man marries a virgin and later wants to marry another, it is permissible and not adultery if the first wife gives her consent. The same is true if a man has "ten virgins given unto him by this law." The practice of polygamy goes back to the three kingdoms of heaven and ultimate exaltation. To reach the highest celestial glory, a man had to be part of the priesthood and enter into the covenant of celestial marriage.

When a woman and man are married or sealed “on earth [they] shall be sealed in heaven” and bound together for all eternity (D&C 132:46). Part of the reasoning for practicing polygamy was that if a man can reach exaltation through marriage with one wife, the process would be accelerated and assured with multiple wives. These revelations did not tell how the “principle” of plural marriage was to be practiced or carried out, however, would later pose problems for the church.

Polygamy, though initially uninviting to some soon came to be seen as one of God’s commandments that had to be followed if members were going to be saved and exalted. Doctrines and Covenants gave other examples of times when God’s commands seemed to go against human reason, but were obeyed because they were God’s command. When Abraham was commanded to kill his son Isaac, he obeyed because it was what God commanded him to do, even though it went against his reasoning (D&C 132:36). In the same way, while some Mormons did not fully understand or agree with the revelation of polygamy, they obeyed it because it was God’s command.

It is unclear how much Joseph Smith himself taught polygamy during his lifetime. Plural marriage was a very radical doctrine in 19th century Illinois even within the church, and so Smith had to ease his followers’ minds into the idea. Although Smith publicly denied the rumors of his practice of polygamy, he had several scandals regarding his plural wives. Some scholars, such as Richard Abnes, have taken these scandals to demonstrate that Smith used polygamy to fulfill his physical lust;²⁰ however, the evidence is scarce and does not prove this was the case. When Smith was murdered in 1844, he left many questions unanswered regarding polygamy and how it was to be practiced. These questions fell into the hands of the second president of the church, Brigham Young.

²⁰ Richard Abnes, *One Nation Under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 192.

Polygamy and the church--1844 - 1890

It would be almost ten years before the church authority would be open with its members and the general public about their practice of polygamy. Brigham Young was the first church authority to make a public declaration about his practice of polygamy. In February of 1851 Young made a public announcement that he had more than one wife and was “not ashamed to have it known.”²¹ A year later in 1852, the leaders of the church thought that it was time the church made an official declaration to church members and to the American public. Orson Pratt was chosen to make the declaration at the general conference. He emphasized that the doctrine was not meant to “gratify the carnal lusts and feelings of men,” but was rather to provide men and women with “a numerous and faithful posterity [family] to be raised up and taught in the principles of righteousness and truth.” He claimed polygamy as a way to offer every Mormon woman salvation through marriage.²² To enter into a heaven, a woman must be called by her husband. Many members believed that plural marriage would offer salvation to more women.

The reactions to this statement within the church varied around the world. By this time, the church had moved to Utah and had established a broad enterprise of missions around the world. The statement affirming and supporting the practice of polygamy within the church sent shock waves through the churches abroad. Foreign members were unaware of the practice of polygamy among the church authorities, and many left the church because of it. However, members in Utah were well aware of the practice of polygamy among the church authorities and were not surprised by the announcement. With this announcement, the United States government began to view the church as a threat to the rest of the nation. After all, the majority

²¹ Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1989), 83. Richard S. Van Wagoner is a member of the LDS church and a Lehi city historian. He has received many awards for his books and articles about the Mormon Church.

²² *Ibid.*, 85.

of the local government was in Mormon hands, with Brigham Young the governor of the territory. If the ability to make laws was in the hands of Mormons, local laws supporting the church's beliefs and practices could be passed, regardless of the US government's stance. Since Young was perceived to have control over the beliefs (and consequently, actions) of church members, he would have the ability to control both the church and the state, and federal lawmakers were concerned that church members would obey their God before their nation. President James Buchanan took immediate action and appointed a new board to the territorial government and sent 2,500 soldiers to escort them.²³ The newly appointed board would have the power to pass anti-polygamy legislation to test if Mormons' allegiance was to the law of God or the law of the land; however, not long after the appointment of this territorial government, the Civil War broke out and the nation's attention turned to the south.

Following the announcement of polygamy as an accepted practice, the church was faced with fully integrating the belief into the lives of its followers. Because of Joseph Smith's early death, there were no set guidelines as to how many wives men should have or how they should be brought into the family. The lack of guidelines led to a variety of forms of polygamy. Some families lived together under one roof while other families were scattered. Most plural wives saw this as a "practical and honorable" system that allowed women who would have been single to marry in the temple and thereby ensure themselves eternal salvation. The church had an enormous influence on the rate in which men entered polygamous unions. As many scholars have pointed out, Mormons started to see the practice of the principle as part of their devotion to God's commandments and the way to salvation.²⁴ Young was quoted in *The Deseret News* as

²³ Ibid., 87.

²⁴ Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 23. Sarah Barringer Gordon is a professor of

having told members that if they continued to deny the “plurality of wives” he promised them that they “will be damned.”²⁵

As polygamy became more accepted within the church the pressures to stop polygamy from outside the church started to mount. The church’s public statement officially condoning their practice of polygamy confirmed what outsiders believed about the Mormons. The rest of America saw polygamy as a “crying evil” that was “perverting the social virtues” of its adherents and needed to be stopped.²⁶ Clergymen, women’s leaders, newspaper editors, and federal appointees banded together to end polygamy. The Salt Lake Evangelical ministry worked hard to keep the presses filled with enough anti-polygamy information to “keep the Mormon question *in* the American press and Utah *out* of statehood.”²⁷ Underlying the actions of the anti-polygamy legislators was the fear that the Mormon community’s loyalty lay with the church and not with the US government.

A major pressure from both within and outside the church was the continuing possibility of Utah’s statehood. For the church, attaining statehood would bring a reduction of federal influence over domestic affairs in the state. While the US government would require an anti-polygamy clause in a state constitution, the enforcement of that law could be sporadic, if not all altogether ignored. The US government, aware of this loophole, continued to deny Utah statehood and encouraged the LDS church to make a public declaration announcing their abandonment of polygamy.

Perhaps the strongest pressure felt by the church from the outside community was the anti-polygamy legislation. The first major piece of anti-polygamy legislation was the Morrill

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²⁵ *Deseret News*, November 14, 1855, quoted in Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 91.

²⁶ Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 106.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 105

Anti-bigamy Act of 1862. The Morrill act was signed into law by President Lincoln on July 8. It banned plural marriage and limited the amount of real estate owned by “any corporation or association for religious or charitable purposes” within any US territory to 50,000 dollars.²⁸ This funding limit threatened the church because their faith required buildings (such as temples) to perform ordinances necessary for salvation (including marriage ceremonies). The Mormon community believed this act violated the first amendment of freedom of religion, and although they tried to get the act removed in 1867, they were denied.

The second major piece of anti-polygamy legislation was the Poland Act in 1874. At this time, the majority of government positions in the Utah territorial government were held by members of the Mormon Church. The Poland Act took control of the Utah Territory judicial system away from the LDS church and placed it with the United States district courts. This transfer of power also aided enforcement of the Morrill Act because officials were not part of the Mormon Church and would be less sympathetic to polygamists. To help ease minds in Washington, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed General J. Wilson Shaffer as the governor of Utah and James B. McKean as chief justice. Both of these men were previously working to abolish slavery in the south and saw polygamy as the same kind of evil that had to be controlled.

The Edmunds Act, passed in 1882, increased the penalties for people who were practicing polygamy or cohabitation (living with one’s plural wives). During this time men were forced to hide or in some cases flee into exile, because the act decreased the amount of evidence police needed to convict a man of polygamy or cohabitation. Increased conviction rates left many wives and children without a provider for the family.

Perhaps the strongest and most influential bill passed by the US government was the Edmunds-Tucker Bill in 1887. This bill, stricter than any preceding it, seemed to touch on every

²⁸ *The Morrill Act of 1862*, Public Law 126, 37th cong., 2d sess. (July 1, 1862), 501.

issue the government had with Mormonism and polygamy. Like previous legislation, the act prohibited polygamy and threatened a fine and up to five years of prison. It also sought to confiscate all church properties valued over the previously defined limit of \$50,000. Elective positions were filled by appointment, which would take legislative control and law enforcement out of Mormon hands altogether.

Compounding the effects of these various acts, the church also faced two devastating losses in Supreme Court cases. The first was the *Reynolds v. United States* in 1879. George Reynolds, a member of the LDS church and a polygamist, was selected by the LDS church to be the test case regarding the constitutionality of the anti-polygamy legislation. After supplying his own witnesses, Reynolds was found guilty of bigamy based on the Morrill Act in 1874 by a grand jury. The church then made an appeal to the U.S. Supreme court that the ruling was unconstitutional based on the first amendment. On January 6, 1879, the Supreme Court ruled that the Morrill Act was not against the constitution. The court decided that while laws “cannot interfere with mere religious belief and opinions, they may with practices.” The court upheld that “there never has been a time in any State of the Union when polygamy has not been an offence against society” and thus was still considered a criminal offence. Reynolds was sentenced to two years in jail and fined 500 dollars.²⁹

Following the *Reynolds* ruling, the LDS church faced a difficult decision. The church, having always cast itself as a patriotic American religion, was now left with the choice of obeying the law of the land or the law of God. The church authorities advised church members to follow the law of God and the government would be judged accordingly.

The second Supreme Court case was the *Late Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints v. United States* in 1890. Prior to this case, the church’s property had been

²⁹ US Supreme Court, *Reynolds v United States* 98 U.S. 145, 1878.

repossessed because it had exceeded the \$50,000 limit allocated to organizations in US territories in the Edmunds-Tucker Act. The Supreme Court upheld this decision, and soon after, Church President Woodruff was notified that the federal marshal was planning on seizing the LDS temples. The temples were never taken, however, because the revelation abandoning polygamy came a short five months later.

Problems facing missionaries also put pressure of the church during this time. Reports of physical attacks on missionaries all over the country were common in the late 19th century. LDS missionaries were whipped, tar-and-feathered, and, in some very extreme cases, murdered.³⁰ Both the US and foreign governments were also restricting what missionaries could and could not do. Missionaries were banned from preaching on the streets in New York, and abroad, Germany banished missionaries altogether. These obstacles were very damaging to a church whose major calling was to preach its message to the whole world.

With so many pressures on church members, it is not surprising that there was a decrease in support for polygamy in the late 19th century within the church. The US government and its legislation were making it hard for polygamous families to stay together without getting caught. In some cases, Mormons entered into polygamy in the 1850s believing that Christ's return was imminent, and so there was a push to have girls over 14 married. When the second coming did not happen, some families were left in unhappy marriages and sought divorce; however, there were also polygamous families who remained together and were happy. While some authorities (including Brigham Young) sometimes wavered on their view of polygamy in the face of outside opposition, other church authorities (such as Joseph F. Smith and John Taylor) were very clear in their belief that polygamy was necessary for ultimate exaltation and refused to surrender to the

³⁰ Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 31.

law of the land.³¹ This dissonance within the church was significant during the years leading up to the Woodruff Manifesto.

Abandoning Polygamy: Wilford Woodruff

The LDS officially abandoned polygamy during Wilford Woodruff's presidency (1889-1898). When Woodruff assumed the church presidency, several laws against the church, specifically polygamy, had led members to distance themselves from the church. Both church authorities and members were starting to feel the pressure from the government and the rest of the nation. To protect believers from the increased danger associated with performing plural marriages, Woodruff halted the formation of further polygamous unions within the Utah territory in 1889, but it was another year before the practice was abandoned altogether.

Feeling these pressures, Woodruff entered the temple to pray to God on the evening of September 23, 1890. The next day, he met with other church authorities to declare that he had received a revelation from God during the night to abandon the principle of plural marriage. Some authorities were not supportive of this revelation because of the implications for their own families. The Quorum of the Twelve (the second highest group of authorities meant to help the first presidency) did not officially approve the revelation until October 3, which allowed the revelation to be read at the general conference for the public to hear. There was much debate about whether this revelation was a divine or political move by the church. It did not begin with the customary "Thus saith the Lord," but instead reads "To Whom it may concern." The signatures of the First Presidency counselors were also missing, causing people to question the declaration's credibility.

The Woodruff Manifesto (Declaration 1) signified the end of polygamy within the Mormon Church; however, since polygamy was by this time inextricably part of people's lives, it

³¹ Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 112.

took time for the practice to officially end. Many of the elders did not know how to abandon polygamy without abandoning their beloved wives and children. At first, Woodruff assured them that he would not allow men to abandon their families. When the First Presidency tried to get their property back from the government, however, Woodruff was forced to concede that illegal cohabitation should be stopped within the church as well, which entailed men abandoning their plural wives and children. Woodruff later explained in private that he could not have said anything else or they would not have gotten their property back. The conclusion was that men were not to abandon their families, but had to be cautious to avoid being arrested and convicted of polygamy or “cohabitation,” placing the church in a worse position than they had been before the Manifesto.

Woodruff Manifesto (Official Declaration 1) - Toward a Core Theology?

The history surrounding the Manifesto suggests the development of a core theology that the church was not willing to change even in times of great social pressure. On the LDS Church’s website, the Manifesto is accompanied by several related excerpts by President Woodruff. These excerpts are included in this analysis primarily because the actual declaration is very vague, and also because the church considers them important enough to include with the Manifesto itself.

The first element of the LDS church’s core theology is a deep concern for the future of the church, meaning both the continued survival of the church and its ordinances, and also a concern for the missions movement. President Woodruff claimed that he was ordered by God to ask the church a tough question regarding polygamy: whether it was better for the church to be against every other institution and person in the US and continue plural marriage, or “cease the

practice and submit to the law” so that the church could continue to function.³² Woodruff concluded that it was more important to everything within his power to help the church continue to function and carry out its duties.

Woodruff also claimed that in his revelation, God showed him what would happen to the church and its members if they continued to practice polygamy. What he saw was a time where all practices and ordinances of the church had stopped, and utter chaos reigned. To avoid this scenario, Woodruff called members to abide by the revelation and abandon plural marriage.

Concern for the church’s future is also explained Woodruff’s plea for members to submit to the “law of the land.” In the Manifesto, Woodruff declared his intention to “submit to those laws” which had outlawed polygamy and to use his “influence with the members of the Church” to do the same. His advice to followers was to refrain from any “marriage forbidden by the law of the land.”³³ This statement signified a definite change in church policy from when church authorities promised that they would never submit to the laws of the land just a few years prior. However, as federal laws increased in number and severity, the church had to obey or suffer the consequences. Woodruff’s call for submission to the law protected the church, its property, and its members.

Concern for the future of the church is also prominently visible in the history surrounding the declaration. Prosecution of polygamous men was hurting families and children, the future generations that would soon take over the church authority. Church authorities were often either imprisoned or went into hiding, and therefore unable to lead the church in an appropriate manner. Followers felt abandoned by the leaders who went into hiding, creating more division and dissonance within the church.

³² Cache Stake Conference, November 1, 1891. Addition to Declaration 1 on LDS website lds.org. <<http://scriptures.lds.org/en/od/1>>

³³ *Doctrine and Covenants*, Declaration 1.

Restrictions and actions taken against Mormon missionaries as a result of the church's endorsement of polygamy also pressured the church to re-think its position on the issue. Missionaries were often attacked for preaching (or not allowed to preach at all) while carrying out one of the most important aspects of the church: creating a kingdom of believers. These events presented a huge burden for the church, as its future and expansion rested in the ability of missionaries to preach and convert. If evangelization was not possible, the future and ultimate fulfillment of the church's mission would be impossible.

Concern for the priesthood and the saving ordinances also emerged as a second critical aspect of the church's core theology during this time. Throughout his addresses, Woodruff focused on the need for the duties of the church and the priesthood to continue. If the Church had not reversed its position on polygamy, all of the temples would have been repossessed by the government, halting all of the ordinances (for both the living and the dead) that were performed in them. Because the temples are where these sacred ordinances are performed, they are central to the duties of the priesthood and people's salvation. Woodruff frequently references the continuation of these ordinances in his statements, which suggests that they were of utmost concern both to him and to the members of the church. Following the decision by the Supreme Court in *Late Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints v. United States*, President Woodruff acted quickly to save the temples of the church. Within five months of learning the temples were in danger, Woodruff announced the revelation to abandon polygamy.

There is an interesting tension in having the priesthood being part of this core to Mormonism. In the church's beginnings God instituted polygamy "for the express purpose of raising up to His name a royal Priesthood."³⁴ In the end, however, the church was forced to abandon polygamy so that the priesthood and its ordinances could continue. This change

³⁴ Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 89.

signifies that the importance of the priesthood took precedence over polygamy and reveals that while its definition is constantly evolving, the priesthood itself stayed at the core of Mormon theology.

Concern for maintaining the ultimate truth found in scripture and revelation comprises the third aspect of the LDS core theology. In a statement at the same conference at which the Manifesto was adopted, President Woodruff assured church members that God “will never permit [the] President of this Church to lead you astray.”³⁵ God’s loyalty to God’s followers is seen in God’s continuous revelation through the President of the Church, and Woodruff also emphasized the truth in revelation when he explained that the Lord showed him “exactly what would take place if we did not stop this practice [polygamy].”³⁶ Through these statements President Woodruff assured members that the revelations were directly from God, and were therefore leading the church down the right path.

Polygamy and the Church- 1890-1905

Following the issuance of the manifesto, convicted polygamists were pardoned because they pledged to obey the declaration, but, few apostles actually stopped practicing polygamy. Newly installed church president Lorenzo Snow was the only authority to seemed to abandon polygamy. The First Presidency stopped granting plural marriages during the first three years after the Manifesto; however, members were still allowed to go to Mexico and entered into plural marriages there. In 1896, Utah finally achieved statehood, rekindling the hopes of Mormons that polygamy could soon be practiced openly again, but this hope was short lived, for polygamy was outlawed forever in the newly drafted state constitution.

³⁵ 61 Semiannual General Conference, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, October 6, 1890.

³⁶ Cache Stake Conference, Nov. 1, 1891.

Since polygamy was such an integral part of the Mormon lifestyle, it was not until the early 20th century when the church finally took action against polygamy from within. The start of the new century was a trying time for the Mormon Church. In 1900, Elder B.H Roberts was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, but a congressional investigation prohibited Roberts from taking his seat. This investigation unearthed evidence that many members of the Mormon Church, including Roberts, were still practicing polygamy in spite of both the Church's official declaration and state law. In light of this finding, newly installed Church President Lorenzo Snow was forced to make another public announcement that "any man living with his plural wives was in violation of the law."³⁷ Snow's statement was a comfort to those members who believed that the church really had abandoned polygamy, but was taken as a signal to polygamous families that the church was still working to protect their domestic lives. Lorenzo Snow died in 1901 and Joseph F. Smith took over as church president.

The next challenge the church encountered regarding polygamy was the election of Mormon Apostle Reed Smoot to the US Senate in 1902. Smoot's election started a five year process that put the LDS church in continuous national spotlight, but in the end, eradicated polygamy in the Mormon Church. During these years, Smoot worked to convince the state and the nation that the church had changed, had abandoned polygamy, and would obey the US government before church authorities.

The majority of concerns with Smoot's election stemmed from the perception of non-Mormons that the church and its authorities had total control of Smoot. They believed Smoot's election marked the beginning of "an ecclesiastical conspiracy" by the Mormon Church to overtake the US government.³⁸ Those who protested Smoot's seating were bothered by his

³⁷ Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 158.

³⁸ Flake, *The Politics*, 13.

membership in a church that “violated the law, corrupted the home, and controlled Utah’s government and economy.”³⁹ In general, anxiety about Smoot was not actually caused by him as a person, but rather by the Mormon Church and its relationship to the U.S. government. These concerns were not unfounded, for the Mormon Church openly believed in building the Kingdom of God on Earth. The church would lead and govern this new Kingdom, and would also be the government, presenting obvious tensions with the principles America was founded on. Historian Kathleen Flake perhaps best summarizes the problem as “the nation with the soul of a church had given birth to a church with the soul of a nation.”⁴⁰

During these hearings, President J.F. Smith was called to testify and put under extreme pressure from the government to affirm that polygamy had truly ended in the church. During his testimony, Smith promised that any member found to have engaged in polygamy after the 1890 Manifesto would be disciplined and excommunicated by the church. To preserve his credibility, Smith had to make this announcement official to the church and its members. In April of 1904, Smith made a declaration, the Second Manifesto, announcing that if any member was found practicing polygamy, they would be “dealt with according to the rules and regulations thereof and excommunicated therefrom.”⁴¹

The lack of cohesion within the church authority during the Smoot hearings quickly became apparent. These differences began to split the church’s very foundation and caused confusion among the members as well as within the hierarchy of the church. The culmination of this dissonance among the authorities with respect to polygamy came in 1905 when President Joseph F. Smith excommunicated two members of the Quorum of the Twelve), John W. Taylor and Matthias F. Cowley for practicing polygamy.

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁴¹ Joseph F. Smith, *Second Manifesto*, April 6, 1904.

Taylor and Cowley had refused to appear before the senate, which for the senate signaled both their continued practice of polygamy and, more importantly, their defiance of the law of the land. Smith, having promised that he would punish members still engaged in polygamy, had to put his words to action to secure the future of the church. On October 28, 1905 Taylor and Cowley resigned from the church on the basis of being “out of harmony with the Church [and] were against the declarations of [church] Presidents.”⁴² This was the first time in Mormon history that members had been disciplined because of their belief in and practice of polygamy, many scholars consider it to be the official ending of polygamy within the church.

Meanwhile J.F. Smith also worked to convince the church members that the fundamentals of the church had not changed, and that it was still the one true church. Entire books have been written about the church during this time period, but a brief summary of the important events will suffice for the purposes of this paper. Once again, Kathleen Flake has offered a compelling analysis of how the church navigated this time of reconstruction.

In 1905, Joseph F. Smith left for Sharon, Vermont to dedicate a monument to commemorate the centennial of the birth of church founder Joseph Smith, but also to reaffirm the identity of the church. Flake argues that J.F. Smith used the trip to Vermont as a means to “remove his people’s faith in plural marriage without undermining their confidence in other revelations.”⁴³ The Mormon Church has always taken pride and comfort in having an element of uniqueness about it, such as polygamy. Claiming to be the restored Christian church, the LDS beliefs had to be unique and different from the other Christian churches. Without a unique doctrine, the LDS church would be no different from the other Christian denominations. When the church was called to abandon the practice of polygamy, members of the church felt a loss of

⁴² Flake, *The Politics*, 106.

⁴³ Kathleen Flake, “Re-Placing Memory: Latter-day Saint use of Historical Monuments and narrative in the early twentieth century,” *Religion and American Culture* 13 no. 1 (Winter 2003): 71.

identity which had to be filled. Joseph F. Smith, as president of the church, had to work to create a new sense of uniqueness within the members of the church.

J.F. Smith turned to the first revelations of Joseph Smith as a source for Mormon distinctiveness. The conclusion of the case *Reynolds v. US* in 1879 said that the government could not interfere with a religion's "beliefs," but did have the right to intervene with practices. Thus, Smith began to place great emphasis on the LDS' distinctive beliefs about the true nature of God and the inaccuracies found in other Christian denominations. The Mormon Church could now find their sense of uniqueness in their unique view of the nature of God and in being the true restored Christian church. Based on the Supreme Court decision, the US government would not have cause to attack the church; however, holding these unconventional beliefs put the Mormon Church in disagreement with other Christian churches which has continued into present day.

J.F. Smith also used the dedication in Vermont as a way to comfort the members of the church that they, more than any other religion, had the right to be in America. Commemorating and remembering the birthplace of the founder of the Mormon Church, J.F. Smith's action was an impressive, non-theological, celebration that reminded the church of its American heritage. As Flake states, it was an opportunity for the church to "come out from behind its mountain barrier and claim a place in America at large."⁴⁴

The negative press coverage of the church during the Smoot hearings and Smith's trip to Vermont continued to affect the missions movement within the church. LDS missionaries around the world were already under attack because of the church's belief in and practice of polygamy before Declaration 1, and as it became increasingly clear to outsiders of the church that the Woodruff Manifesto had not actually ended the practice of polygamy, the media continued to criticize the Church and its practices. These "slandorous reports" created such a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 80.

negative image of the church that outsiders would not even listen to the message of the Mormons missionaries. For a church whose purpose was to transform and convert the world, a world that would not listen to its message created a crisis for the very nature of the church. This crisis encouraged the church to end the Smoot trial as quickly as possible so they could begin to rebuild their public image.

Summary: Emergence of a core theology through the polygamy debate

A major part Joseph F. Smith's Second Manifesto, issued in 1904, was re-affirming the Woodruff Manifesto of 1890. In upholding this manifesto, Smith also affirms the claims and statements made by President Woodruff in 1890, including the core theology discussed earlier. However, J.F. Smith took the future of the church a step farther than Woodruff did in 1890 by specifying that any member of the church who was found practicing polygamy would be excommunicated from the church. In threatening excommunication, J.F. Smith ensured that future members would not be permitted to practice polygamy, and that member's *actions* would align with the US government in accordance with the *Reynolds vs. US* verdict.

The historical events leading to and immediately following the Second Manifesto also demonstrate aspects of a possible core theology which helped the church secure its future while maintaining a sense of uniqueness and group identity. As long as missionaries continued to face attacks over polygamy, the future of the church and its potential members was in jeopardy. J.F. Smith's action to excommunicate Taylor and Cowley helped protect the future of the church. If Smith had not upheld his promise to punish members continuing polygamy, the US government would have taken action against the church, leaving it in a worse position than before the Woodruff Manifesto.

The importance of the priesthood was also emphasized during this time, affirming its role in the LDS church's core theology. For the priesthood to continue without conflict from the US government, the practice of plural marriages would have to stop completely. J.F. Smith asserts in his Second Declaration that "no such marriages have been solemnized" with the knowledge of any leader or authority of the church. In taking action to excommunicate members who continued to perform plural marriages, J.F. Smith worked to keep members of the priesthood aligned with the demands of the US government. This allowed the priesthood to continue performing the other important saving ordinances.

Finally, the importance of scripture and revelation was once again affirmed. J.F. Smith's trip to Vermont allowed him to shift members' focus from Joseph Smith's last revelation (polygamy) to his first regarding the nature of God. This allowed J.F. Smith to keep the focus on the truth and importance of scripture, but shifted the topic from the controversial polygamy, to a less divisive, but unique, belief in a "non-triune" view of the nature of God.

Understanding the beliefs that were preserved and protected during this fifteen-year period of change can help in deciphering if the LDS church has a core theology and what it might consist of. Protecting the future of the church, the integrity of the priesthood, and the truth found in scripture and revelation during a time in which the church's doctrine was changing shows that it was unwilling to compromise these aspects of its doctrine. The church's ability to change suddenly in accordance with on-going revelation was seen again in the 1970's, when the church lifted the racial ban on the priesthood.

PRIESTHOOD

History Behind the Priesthood Ban

Another major doctrinal change within the LDS church that illuminates the development of a core theology within the Church concerns the race restriction placed on the priesthood. Until 1978, any person with African heritage was not eligible to hold any position of the priesthood. As people from both inside and outside the church became aware of this restriction, it became less acceptable and more pressure was placed on the church to lift the ban.

To understand the implications of the priesthood ban it is important to understand the role of the priesthood in the LDS church and in the lives of Mormons. The “priesthood” generally refers to the overall organization of the church and is divided into two main branches, the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthood. The Aaronic priesthood is believed to have been restored through John the Baptist while the Melchizedek priesthood was restored through Peter, James and John. These divisions are organized by age: the Aaronic is for boys 12-18, and the Melchizedek is reserved for those who continue on from the Aaronic priesthood and become missionaries.⁴⁵ The Aaronic priesthood focuses on the congregational life and is not of as much importance in this discussion as the Melchizedek priesthood. The Melchizedek priesthood is believed to have been on earth from Adam to Moses, after which it was withdrawn and the Aaronic priesthood took over. The Melchizedek priesthood was not restored until Joseph Smith received revelations from God between 1836 and 1844, and it has been present ever since.⁴⁶

The Melchizedek priesthood is important in the LDS church because of the duties performed by its members and their link to salvation. The Mormons believe that ordinances performed on Earth will be carried over into heaven and are essential for a person’s eventual

⁴⁵ Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 175-76.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

exaltation. An “ordinance” is “a sacred, formal act performed by the authority of the priesthood.”⁴⁷ The saving ordinances that are linked to a person’s salvation, include baptism, confirmation, ordination to the Melchizedek priesthood (men only), the temple endowment, and the marriage sealing. These ceremonies can only be performed by members of the Melchizedek priesthood within a consecrated temple. This direct link between holding the priesthood and a person’s (and their family’s) salvation made the racial ban on the priesthood a real problem for non-white members of the church.

The theology that was behind the priesthood ban originated in two places: stories in Genesis of Cain and Abel as well as Noah’s son Ham, and the LDS’ unique belief in preexistence. In the Genesis story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), Cain murders Abel out of jealousy and God curses Cain and his descendants because of this murderous act. In the second story, Ham, Noah’s son, finds his father unclothed and tells his brothers, who cover their father. Noah then curses Ham and his son Canaan to be the “servants of servants” (Genesis 9:25, KJV). The only link between this curse and the priesthood is a passage in The Book of Abraham (1:26-27) found in The Pearl of Great Price. This passage links the pharaohs of Ancient Egypt to the descendants of Ham who were not allowed to “have the right of Priesthood” (Abraham 1:27). This is the only passage in the LDS scriptures directly linking lineage to the denial of the priesthood, and as will be explained later, it was not sufficient to uphold the ban on the priesthood.

The other theological claim within the LDS tradition that reinforced the racial ban on the priesthood was the belief of preexistence. The LDS believe that everyone existed as spirits

⁴⁷ The church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, “Ordinances,” Official Website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, http://lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vnextoid=bbd508f54922d010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&sourceId=13bb9daac5d98010VgnVCM1000004d82620a_____ (accessed September 25, 2008).

before their mortal existence. According to Armand Mauss, a leading scholar of Mormonism, it is unclear from the record how much Joseph Smith emphasized the idea of preexistence as a time for “divine assignment to mortal roles” on an individual level or on a lineage level.⁴⁸ However, later leaders of the church emphasized the point that primordial existence included a “collective foreordination to lineages and to other mortal circumstances.”⁴⁹

This idea was later applied, by some, to a person’s race as an indicator of what kind of spirit life one led. The lighter a person’s skin color, the better spirit life they had led. So a white Mormon was believed to have led the most upright pre-mortal life whereas someone of African descent was seen as having led an unprincipled spirit life. The tenth president of the LDS church, Joseph F. Smith, declared in his *Doctrines of Salvation* that “those who were faithful in all things there [the spirit world] received greater blessings here [on Earth], and those who were not faithful received less.”⁵⁰ The LDS believed that a consequence of the disobedience in the primordial life was a loss of the right to the priesthood in this life.

It is unclear when these doctrines were first used to exclude non-white members from the priesthood. Some scholars have tried to attribute the doctrine to Joseph Smith, but there is no indication of any official church policy denying the priesthood based on a person’s race.⁵¹ On the contrary, there is actually evidence that a small group of blacks were allowed into the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s life. Most notable was Elijah Abel who entered as an elder

⁴⁸ Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 25. Armand Mauss is a professor of sociology at Washington State University and a lifelong Mormon. His work in the sociology of religion has been the most notable of his contributions. He has also contributed to *Dialogue*, a scholarly journal covering information regarding the LDS church, but is not owned by the church.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁰ Joseph F. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), vol. 1, 61 quoted in Abanes, *One Nation*, 358.

⁵¹ Mauss, *All Abraham’s*, 213.

and was also part of the Quorum of the Seventy (the third highest group in the church hierarchy) during the early years of the church.⁵²

The origin of the priesthood ban has most recently been attributed by leading scholars to Brigham Young, the second president of the LDS church. Like polygamy, he was the first to make an official recorded public statement on the ban in 1852 during the first session of the Utah territorial legislation that “any man having one drop of the seed of [Cain]... in him cannot hold the priesthood.”⁵³ As the first official declaration regarding the ban on the priesthood, this statement received some objection from within the church. The major grounds for reconsidering this declaration regarded Elijah Abel, whose status in the priesthood went under investigation in 1879 a few years after Brigham Young’s death. Two prominent church officials came forward and claimed that Joseph Smith had declared blacks unfit to hold the priesthood and had ordered Abel to be stripped of the priesthood years earlier. However, these two officials were elderly, and their memories were questioned by younger church authorities. The authorities did not fully resolve this issue and instead sent Abel on a mission.⁵⁴

After a while, the ban became an accepted doctrine within as well as outside the church. By the 1920’s there were numerous statements from church authorities affirming the doctrine and most of the church authorities were not alive when the ban was placed on the priesthood and so had always accepted it as church policy.⁵⁵ As outlined by Armand Mauss, there were three factors keeping the racial ban in place after Brigham Young’s declaration. The first was the formal canonization of The Pearl of Great Price in 1880. Since it contained the only scripture that could be applied to the priesthood ban, the canonization of the book made the piece of

⁵² Ibid., 213.

⁵³ Ibid., 212

⁵⁴ Ibid., 215

⁵⁵ Ibid., 216

scripture even more authoritative among church members. The second factor was an expansion on the doctrine of “preexistence” within the church. Finally, the general acceptance of historical theories that placed Anglo-Saxon heritage above others was developed from the claim that people of Great Britain and northwestern Europe were of Israelite origins.⁵⁶ The Leaders of the LDS church were well within the historical theories of their day to perceive their race as superior to others not in the Israelite lineage.

Factors outside of church authority and doctrine also kept the priesthood ban unchallenged and out of the public-eye. One of these factors was that the number of black Mormons was very small. This doctrine did not affect many people during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and so was not an issue inside or outside of the church. Another factor was the geographic location of the Mormons. Utah was still a fairly isolated place during this time, so the Mormon community was sheltered from the changing thoughts regarding race within the rest of the United States. Likewise, the LDS community was also not under direct public scrutiny from the rest of the country because of their isolated location. However, as the civil rights movement grew in the rest of America, attention and pressures also grew against the church and its racial ban.

Internal pressures facing the ban

With the start of the civil rights movement the racial priesthood ban became a contentious topic both inside and outside the church. From within, several pressures forced the church to reconsider the priesthood ban. By examining these pressures, this analysis does not seek to disprove that divine revelation occurred, but rather seeks to explain the environment in which these declarations were made and what pressures were felt by church authorities.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 216

One of the major factors facing the church with respect to priesthood ban was the lack of scriptural evidence. In 1967, papyrus fragments of The Book of Abraham which Joseph Smith had originally translated from in the 1830s were found.⁵⁷ This fragment, after being established as the basis for the Book of Abraham from which Smith had translated, was put under the critical eye of Egyptologists, who by then had decoded the Rosetta stone. These experts agreed that the text was a funerary text from an Egyptian period long after the time of Abraham, and that their translation into English did not resemble that of Joseph Smith's translation at all. After these findings were announced, Mormon scholars focused on finding other explanations for the inconsistency between the two translations.⁵⁸ Most explanations contend that all of Smith's translations are divinely inspired and so are to be upheld by the church, but after this finding the church; however, the church stopped using the Book of Abraham as evidence to support the priesthood ban after this finding.⁵⁹

Another historical discovery from within the Mormon community was made by Lester Bush, Jr. Bush dedicated his scholarship to understanding the origins and scripture behind the racial doctrines and beliefs. Bush's research revealed four major uncontested claims that were published in 1973 in *Dialogue*, a journal dedicated to Mormon culture and examining the tensions between religious life and secular life.⁶⁰ First, Bush determined that most early Mormon believed that Africans were descendants of Cain and Ham; this belief was accepted by most Americans and Europeans. Second, Joseph Smith was not responsible for linking lineage to denial of the priesthood. Bush discovered thirdly that the restriction emerged over time, and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 239.

⁵⁹ Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The changing place of Black People within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 193.

⁶⁰ Mauss, *All Abraham's*, 240.

was only made official by Brigham Young. Finally, Bush asserted that the Book of Abraham was only used as scriptural evidence after it was canonized in *The Pearl of Great Price*.⁶¹

While it is impossible to know exactly how these discoveries influenced the change regarding the priesthood, it is important to note what information was being published during this time. The history behind the ban was very new information for LDS members, and allowed them formulate their own opinions about the priesthood ban rather than accept it because it had always been so. In response to his article in *Dialogue*, many Mormons applauded Bush on his historical work, but still supported the racial ban because it was directed through revelation to the church.⁶²

Another important internal force that faced the church in regards to the priesthood ban was the expansion of the church within the wider global community. By the 1970s Mormon membership in non-white regions was equal if not greater to that in Europe and America. This expansion forced the church to reexamine their position on racial restrictions. Indeed, the church had been facing some racial issues in the early 20th century in Hawaii and New Zealand where inhabitants of mixed ancestry were being ordained into the priesthood.

Missions work in Latin America proved to accentuate the tensions created by the racial ban and the church's expansion to other parts of the globe. The church ran into many problems because racial lines were not as rigid in Latin American cultures as in America. Missions to Cuba were soon abandoned because it was hard, if not impossible, to find "groups of pure white people."⁶³ The church turned to Brazil, where they focused on the German population and later to the Portuguese-speaking population. Missions to Brazil were not abandoned, but the racial

⁶¹ Ibid., 240.

⁶² England, Eugene. "The Mormon Cross," *Dialogue*, 8 no. 1 (Spring 1973): 79.

⁶³ Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 190.

policy situation continued to challenge the church and church officials.⁶⁴ This challenge was especially evident with the 1974 announcement from LDS President Spencer Kimball of plans to build a new temple in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Temples, where saving ordinances are performed, may only be entered by members of the priesthood, which posed a problem for the racially diverse population of Brazil. Men of the church would not be able to join the priesthood, so other members would not be able to receive the saving ordinances that are an integral part of a person's ultimate salvation.

External pressures facing the ban

The influences of outside groups on the LDS mission work were also important forces leading up to the change in the priesthood ban. Equal rights activist groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people (NAACP) started a campaign to encourage third world countries to deny visas to Mormon missionaries until the priesthood ban was lifted. In 1963, after becoming aware of the racial priesthood ban, the Nigerian government denied visas to any Mormon missionaries wanting to enter. Other civil rights groups at home took action to stop tourism into Salt Lake City and boycotted any Mormon goods.⁶⁵

Mormon political figures during this time also influenced racial policies both within and outside of the church. George Romney, a prominent Mormon, ran for governor of Michigan in 1962, a state with a large black population. During his campaign he was clear that the church's racial policies would not influence his pro-civil rights attitude.⁶⁶ Romney was so successful in his three-term governorship between 1963 and 1968 that he became a possibility for the Republican presidential candidate; however, Romney was not able to keep the church's racial policies out of public vision during his presidential campaign. These "discriminatory practices"

⁶⁴ Ibid., 191.

⁶⁵ Abanes, *One Nation*, 368.

⁶⁶ Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 186.

(as they were seen by the public) became a stumbling block for Romney. The media kept its focus on the church's policy instead of on Romney's pro-civil rights record as governor of Michigan. While this issue may not have been the cause of Romney's failed presidential campaign, it certainly put the LDS church and its policies in an unpleasant spotlight for the American public.

As the LDS church and its members entered more prominent positions in American culture, their racial doctrines came under more and more criticism from outside institutions. Many civil rights groups started to pressure the LDS church and its members to change their racial ban on the priesthood. One of the groups at the forefront of this movement was the Salt Lake City chapter of the NAACP.

The NAACP started to pressure the church as early as the 1930s and continued to do so until the 1978 declaration lifting the ban. When the LDS church did not immediately change its policy in response to pressure, the NAACP started to take more aggressive actions. Instead of focusing on pressuring the Utah legislature, NAACP members started to focus on the LDS church and its authority. In 1963, the NAACP of Salt Lake planned a protest at Temple Square because they believed church leaders were preventing civil rights legislation from passing in the state legislature. In response, the church issued a statement defining their stance on civil rights. While it was not a revelation, the document plainly stated that the church supported "full civil rights [of] any person regardless of race, color, or creed."⁶⁷ This statement gave the church a brief reprieve from the spotlight of activist groups from 1963 to 1965.

In 1965, however, the LDS church again came under attack from the NAACP, which claimed that the church was still preventing civil rights legislation from passing, and again

⁶⁷ Statement from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints quoted in Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 181.

organized three more marches on the church administration building.⁶⁸ As in other times of pressure, the Church reiterated its pro-civil rights statement and the state legislature passed two acts improving employment and housing opportunities for minorities. These actions were part of the greater American civil rights movement focusing on the root of discrimination. Activist groups focused on the priesthood ban because they saw it as perpetuation of “fundamental racist concepts or doctrines.”⁶⁹

Focused attacks were also directed at other institutions related to the LDS church. Many Brigham Young University (BYU) athletic games were the focus for protesters. In several states, members of the opposing team openly protested the priesthood ban. In some cases, universities and colleges such as Stanford University, the University of Washington, and San Jose State, would outright refuse to compete with BYU because of the church’s “alleged racial discrimination.”⁷⁰

Official Declaration Two

As the Woodruff Manifesto abolished polygamy, “Official Declaration 2” officially lifted the racial ban on the priesthood while continuing to affirm and create the core theology of the church. God revealed “Official Declaration 2” to President Spencer W. Kimball on June 8, 1978 and was read to the Mormon community on September 30, 1978 at the semiannual General Conference. As with the abandonment of polygamy, the concerns raised in Declaration Two in the context of the pressures to which the church responded help illuminate what beliefs form the church’s core theology.

The concern for the future and health of the church was again a major factor in Declaration 2 and the events surrounding it. Two aspects to the church’s future are emphasized

⁶⁸ Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 181.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

in this declaration. One emphasized aspect is the future of the Church's mission enterprise. The president expresses his joy that "many nations" have converted which has inspired the authorities with a desire to extend all the blessings to all members.

Making the LDS church a universal institution was the second aspect of the church's future. Since the church's beginnings were rooted in America, members clung to the sense of being an "American Religion." The majority of members tended to be white Americans and Europeans. If the church was going to appeal to all the people of the world, potential members would have to feel accepted, which necessitated lifting the racial ban on the priesthood. The declaration opened the priesthood to "all worthy male members of the Church" regardless of "race or color." This statement makes it clear to the world's population that the church and its blessings are open to the human race, not just white Americans. The priesthood, while still closed to women, was opened to every male within the church despite their race; however, President Kimball emphasized that the men still have to be "worthy" of the priesthood.

The declaration also reaffirmed the priesthood as part of the LDS core theology. The entire declaration assures the preservation of the priesthood and the ordinances performed by its members. President Kimball directs leaders to "follow the policy of carefully interviewing all candidates for ordination...to ensure that they meet the established standards for worthiness." Retaining an interviewing process shows the church's continuing commitment to keeping the priesthood as holy as possible. It is also important to recognize that through this statement President Kimball has stated that the "standards" of the priesthood have not changed despite the declaration. In this way, President Kimball reassures the members of the church that the same priesthood remains unaltered, and has with the same authority, but is now available to all men.

This point was important to emphasize during a time when doubt might have surrounded the church and its authority.

Finally, as when they abandoned polygamy, the authorities used scripture and revelation as an anchor for the church, and it constitutes the third aspect of the core theology. In the declaration, President Kimball first affirms the revelations that came before. In the second section, he claims that there have been “promises made by the prophets and presidents” that the priesthood would one day be open to all males. “Promise” is a loaded term, indicating that the change was bound to come about because God made it. These promises were revealed to past prophets and presidents by God, and then were added into the Holy Scriptures. President Kimball then shifts the focus to affirm that revelation is continuing today and is indeed on-going. He tells of the “many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple” that he spent to receive this revelation. Like in the Old Testament, Temples are believed to be Houses of the Lord in which humans make sacred covenants with God, and to enter these temples people must prepare themselves and wear special temple garments. For members of the church, Kimball spending hours in the House of the Lord was what a president should do to receive such a significant revelation. Finally Kimball declares that the Lord heard their prayers and “by revelation” has opened the priesthood to all men. Throughout history, God chose to communicate through revelation. Therefore to give the declaration revelation status was just as authoritative as God appearing and declaring the priesthood to be open to all. These references to the importance and authority found in revelation and scripture affirm their place in the church’s core theology.

The importance of scripture and revelation posed a unique tension for the church because while affirming the truth of scripture and revelation, they were letting a “scriptural” priesthood ban go. However, it was exactly because of their abandonment of the priesthood ban that the

church needed to re-emphasize the truth and divine inspiration found in scripture and revelation. Without this emphasis, some members of the church could have lost faith in the validity of scripture and revelation by watching the church rescind what it had previously stood by.

Other historical factors also influenced Declaration Two's stress on the truth of scripture and revelation. With the investigation of the fragment of the Book of Abraham in 1967, the church's scripture was in danger of being perceived as unreliable both by members of the church and outsiders. In this declaration, the church reaffirmed the validity of the Book of Abraham, despite the fragments and their translations, and was able to re-assert the truth found in this scripture because Joseph Smith's translation was guided by divine revelation.

Mormon's were faced with a problem familiar to other religious groups. Followers of the Reverend Jerry Falwell were faced with a similar situation when Falwell abruptly changed his position on race and integration. During the 1950s and 60s Falwell was an advocate for racial segregation. Starting in the mid to late 60s however, Falwell's position on racial segregation started to change and by the 70s allowed the first black members into his church. Falwell explained the reversal as a "change of heart," which left his followers with a seemingly contradictory leader. During this time, Falwell's followers came to view him, much like the Bible, as "not already true, but always coming true."⁷¹ As Susan Harding claims, Fundamentalists found ways to fill the gaps in Falwell's story just as they fill in gaps in the Bible. Perhaps the LDS took the same kind of approach to the incongruities between different translations of the Book of Abraham. They filled in the gaps between the translations and refused to admit a contradiction, in part by affirming the truthfulness of the Book of Abraham.

⁷¹ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist language and politics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

The book was perhaps seen as “coming true” and so didn’t necessarily have to correspond word for word with the new translation.

CORE THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

Through looking at these two moments in the history of the LDS church during which it drastically changed its practices in response to a revelation, it is clear that the LDS church has formed a core theology. This core theology, comprised of a concern for the future of the church, the priesthood, and the truth found in scripture and revelation, has helped direct the actions of the leaders of the church, especially in times of turbulent change. These three parts of the LDS church’s core theology were at the heart of the church presidents’ message to the members and their reactions to both internal and external pressures.

These three aspects of the church’s core theology are unchanging, inextricably intertwined with each other, and must be upheld together. The future of the church is hugely dependent on the continuation of the priesthood and its ordinances, which are found with in the scripture. Similarly, to fulfill the calls found in scripture and revelation, members must hold the priesthood and care for the future of the church, mainly through missions work.

While the concept of a core theology is not explicitly present in LDS teaching, its underlying themes are present because the authorities continue to make decisions that reflect the interests of the core theology. The core theology, while it might appear in other traditions, is especially pertinent to the LDS church because of their belief in on-going revelation. In other traditions, changing a doctrine can take years of debating and negotiating; however the LDS church’s belief in on-going revelation allows the church to change their doctrine immediately and decisively. Because it has the means for such drastic change in theology the LDS church is a unique and less straight-forward study for finding what is at the core of a religious tradition.

Understanding the core theology that the LDS Church has maintained during times of change can help explain why the church has not fully assimilated into American society. There are aspects of the LDS church's theology that are in direct conflict with other "mainstream" Christian groups. While there are many differences between various Christian groups, they share the same basic doctrines that conflict with the LDS core theology.

The Future of the Church

Although they are no longer attacked because of the church's practice of polygamy or the racial ban on the priesthood, today's missionaries continue to face obstacles because of their beliefs. Because it is such an important aspect of the future of the church, the mission enterprise has expanded to one of the largest in the world, with around 50,000 missionaries in the field.⁷²

The LDS church tends to focus its missions on areas where Christianity, in some form, has already been spread. The LDS missionaries have greater success in these areas because they preach the restoration of the church, and it is easier to convince people who have already been introduced to Christianity that restoration was necessary. This creates tension with other Christian missionaries because it tends to be seen as "sheep stealing," and not helping to spread the true gospel.⁷³ Members of other Christian groups perceive the LDS missions enterprise as encouraging other Christians to "renounce the validity of their former group."⁷⁴

Several ministries associated with various Christian groups have been formed to counter the LDS missions movement. While some are more considerate of the LDS faith, many are very outspoken in calling the LDS church deceptive and preaching "a false God, a false Christ and a false Gospel."⁷⁵ Many Christian groups have started their own counter-movement to convert

⁷² Rick Phillips, "Expansion of Mormonism" *Nova Religio* 10, no. 1 (2006): 53.

⁷³ John W. Kennedy, "Southern Baptists Take up the Mormon Challenge," *Christianity Today* 42, no. 7 (1998): 28.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁵ James White, "Why Do you Do This?," *Alpha and Omega Ministries*, <http://vintage.aomin.org/ETractWhy.html>

Mormons to the “true Gospel.” The LDS church’s push to convert people to the “restored” Christian church and other groups’ drive to convert Mormon’s back to the “true Christianity” is a major source of tension between all the various groups claiming to be Christian. Although the importance of the future of the church to the LDS throughout its history has been part of the tension between these groups, major theological disagreements have also added to the conflict. These differences in doctrine are clearly visible in the other parts of the LDS core theology.

Priesthood

As previously discussed, the priesthood is essential to the saving ordinances necessary for a member of the LDS church to reach the highest heaven, or exaltation. Through the debates over polygamy and the racial priesthood ban, the church maintained and emphasized the importance of the priesthood. It was crucial for the church to keep the temples and other property during the polygamy debate in order to preserve the priesthood and its ordinances. Similarly, with the lift of the racial ban on the priesthood, the church opened this important position to all male members, enabling the priesthood and its ordinances to spread across the world and reach many more people.

The organization and importance of the priesthood found in the LDS tradition is not present in other Christian groups. While other Christian groups place great emphasis and importance on the training and preparing of their clergy through schooling and experience, it is not seen as something that every member must do for salvation. The LDS church’s belief in a man’s service in the priesthood as an integral part of his way to salvation and exaltation, places special weight on the importance of the priesthood that is not present in other Christian groups. This belief also requires all men to join the priesthood, not just those who feel called to enter positions of authority as in other Christian groups.

Unique ordinances that have been retained because of the preservation of the priesthood have also caused tension with other Christian groups. Baptism of the dead and family sealing ceremonies are only performed and recognized by the LDS church, and are not seen as part of one's salvation by other Christian groups. Disagreement about what is required for salvation has always been present in between various groups of Christians; however, the LDS' belief in different ceremonies and lifestyle changes has widened the gap between the LDS church and the broader Christian community.

The LDS church's exclusive claim to the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthood has also created tension with other Christian groups. Other Christian groups contend that their church authorities are able to conduct ceremonies, such as communion or baptism. LDS doctrine however, claims that only those who hold the priesthood can perform these and other ordinances and that other Christian groups' ceremonies are therefore invalid. The LDS church's claim to holding the priesthood exclusively has augmented the theological tension between the LDS church and other Christian groups.

Finally, differing views on the role of the priesthood and the death of Jesus Christ has also caused tension with other Christian groups, who claim that the LDS belief in the restoration of the priesthood through Joseph Smith is proof that they do not hold a "Christian" doctrine of Jesus. These groups believe that Christ's sacrificial death "signified the 'change' or absolution of the Aaronic priesthood" and therefore the LDS church's doctrine "rejects the 'once for all' atoning death of Jesus Christ."⁷⁶ This theological disconnect between the LDS church and other Christian groups has become a major issue in mainstream acceptance of the LDS as a Christian faith.

⁷⁶ Kerry D. McRoberts, "The Religion of Mormonism (The Priesthood: Mormonism's Foundation)" *Enrichment Journal*, Winter 1999, http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/199901/114_mormonism.cfm.

Scripture and Revelation

One thing that all Christian traditions share is the importance of truth found in scripture, which is believed to be the inspired word of God. The LDS church upheld the importance of scripture and revelation during times of major change in their doctrine, but their resistance to give up any aspect of their scripture or belief in continuing revelation has created tension with other Christian groups. During these times of change, the church maintained past revelations and scripture referencing polygamy and the priesthood ban in their canon, demonstrating the importance of these documents, even if they were later invalidated by another revelation.

One important source of tension between the LDS church and other Christian groups that emerged from the polygamy debate concerned the nature of God. When Joseph F. Smith made his trip to Vermont in 1905 to dedicate a monument in honor of church founder Joseph Smith, he was able to shift the public attention from the prophet's last revelations regarding polygamy to his first revelations concerning the nature of God. These revelations teach that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three distinct beings, and do not fit the form of the traditional Christian teaching of the three-in-one Trinity. This belief created conflict then, and continues to do so for Mormons today. Many Christian groups perceive the LDS teaching of the nature of God as “substantially different from that of orthodox, creedal Christianity” and this division has led to a widespread perception that the LDS church is not a Christian institution.⁷⁷

The LDS belief in continuing revelation from God has also been a barrier in the acceptance of the LDS church within the wider Christian community. While many Christian groups believe that God works with and through believers today, the LDS church is unique in their belief that God speaks directly through a prophet. Although the pope in the Catholic Church is the closest comparison to the LDS President by virtue of his immense importance, the

⁷⁷ ELCA, “Should Lutherans rebaptize former Mormons who are joining the congregation?”

Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly states that “no new public revelation is to be expected.” This statement is vastly different from the LDS belief that the Church President can receive revelations to end practices and beliefs installed by previous presidents, including the church’s founder Joseph Smith.

Continuing revelation has also led to an open canon for the LDS Church. The two declarations analyzed above were added to the LDS scripture long after Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon, but other Christian groups believe that the Bible is the complete inspired word of God. For “mainstream” Christians, the Bible can be interpreted in today’s world, but it does not need amendments or additions. In contrast, the LDS belief that the Bible is not the complete word of God, and that additional writings are necessary, has created tension with other Christian groups.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Mormons have assimilated socially into America. They are no longer being persecuted in the same way that Joseph Smith and the early church were. They do not isolate themselves or their communities from the rest of America or the world, and with the possible exception of the “missionary suit,” they blend in with Americans on the street. They have not, however, assimilated theologically with mainstream Christian groups. Many Christian groups see the LDS church as “an original, invented religion, born of the mind of Joseph Smith.”⁷⁸ In maintaining the core theology, the leaders of the LDS church have created and maintained a division between their church and other Christian groups. However, despite this tension with other groups, the LDS church has not wavered on the core theology, further evidence that these aspects are a core theology to the church.

⁷⁸ James R. Spencer, “Is Mormonism Christian?” *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*, http://pentecostalevangel.ag.org/Articles2002/4579_spencer.cfm (accessed November 4, 2008).

Critics of the church could benefit from understanding this core theology. Many critics argue that the church changed their beliefs surrounding polygamy and the priesthood as a direct result of outside pressures. These critics claim Woodruff issued the Manifesto in order to retain the church and its property, that the Manifesto was only temporarily adopted to grant Utah statehood, and that it was going to be repealed after statehood.⁷⁹ In the case of the priesthood, the critics similarly claim that President Kimball lifted the racial ban primarily because a temple was about to open in Brazil, which required a racially diverse congregation to hold the priesthood so that ordinances could be performed. These skeptics view revelations as the LDS church's attempt to become a more "mainstream" Christian church.⁸⁰

Although it is impossible to know exactly what influenced the church to abandon polygamy and lift the priesthood ban, it is evident that assimilation into the wider Christian community was not the sole driving force for these changes. The LDS core theology has enabled the church to maintain a sense of group identity through turbulent times; however, this theology has also kept the church from aligning with other Christian groups because it is in direct conflict with what others hold as "Christian" doctrine. The actions taken by the LDS authorities during these two time periods primarily served to protect and maintain the core theology and identity of the church. While critics have accused the LDS church of caving under pressure from outside forces, church leaders (and/or God through revelation) were actually acting to keep the core theology of the church intact during times when it was in danger, even when doing so created tension with other Christian groups. If this core theology is truly the core of the church, it will not change, and the church will probably never fully theologically align with other Christian groups.

⁷⁹ Abnes, *One Nation*, 324.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 370.

It is impossible to know exactly what influenced the church to abandon polygamy and lift the priesthood ban but, it is evident through examining their core theology that it was not solely to try and assimilate into the wider Christian community. Their core theology has enabled the church to maintain a sense of group identity while trying to navigate through a society who has cast them as religious outsiders.

Gaining a better understanding of these very stigmatized times of the church can help people lay to rest many negative stereotypes regarding the LDS church that have evolved over time. Many of these negative stereotypes have come from a lack of understanding from outsiders of the church. The stereotypes have tended to skew how the LDS church is brought up and talked about, leading to inaccurate information spreading widely. In understanding the church's core theology its role in the history and formation of the church, people can gain a better understand of what the LDS actually believe and can start to gain a better perception of the church, its actions, and its beliefs.

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