

Shedding Light on Church History: *Repicturing the Restoration*

Cara L. P. Nickels

CARA L. P. NICKELS (caralein@gmail.com) IS A SENIOR AT BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY, MAJORING IN ENGLISH WITH MINORS IN EDITING AND FAMILY LIFE.

Of the many misconceptions that exist about the beliefs of Latter-day Saints, one that always managed to fluster me was the accusation that Black people weren't allowed to receive the priesthood in the Church. As a teenager, it seemed a weak defense to remind my skeptical friends that the accusation wasn't true—anymore. Church history can sometimes seem fraught with confusing and even concerning events, but these can be rapidly brought into the light with a little help. Although I wasn't sure how to respond to my friends at the time, I found an answer several years later in a BYU classroom.

Anthony Sweat, a professor at Brigham Young University, specializes in the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and has made it his mission to help shed light on historical issues of concern, such as the priesthood ban, in his new book, *Repicturing the Restoration*. And there is no better way to learn about history than to see it. Being an artist as well as a teacher, Sweat began painting scenes from Church history, focusing on events that have been overlooked or misunderstood over the years. These paintings depict things such as the methods Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon, the first baptism for the dead (which was witnessed by a woman!), and the day Joseph Smith shared the revelation concerning plural marriage with Emma.

One painting in particular shows the ordination of Q. Walker Lewis, one of the first Black men to be ordained to the priesthood in the latter days—an ordination that was reportedly performed by Joseph Smith's brother William

around 1843–44.¹ While I first saw the painting in a classroom, it is now featured in Sweat's book along with detailed information on the event and its relevance to Church history and the priesthood ban, all backed by primary sources, and is accompanied by a description of Sweat's process for creating the artwork.

Many of these paintings may surprise members and nonmembers alike as they depict little-known historical facts with the power to alter one's perspective of certain early events in the Church. Yet, as Sweat discovered in his classroom over the years, the visual representations have proved extremely effective in teaching about difficult Church history moments that have sometimes been glossed over or avoided by many teachers in the Church. As another review of *Repicturing the Restoration* points out, "It's a model that many Latter-day Saint educators would do well to remember: students want information given to them straight."² ✂



Notes

1. Anthony Sweat, *Repicturing the Restoration: New Art to Expand Our Understanding* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020), 198.
2. Joseph Stuart, "Review: Anthony Sweat, *Repicturing the Restoration*," *Juvenile Instructor*, December 8, 2020.