

A Voice From the Past: The Benson Instructions for Parents

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IN FEBRUARY 1987 AT A FIRESIDE FOR PARENTS, President Ezra Taft Benson delivered an address called "To the Mothers in Zion." In October 1987, he delivered a parallel address in the priesthood session of general conference called "To the Fathers in Zion." The first address created a great deal of discussion, both in agreement and in disagreement, among individual women and in gatherings of women. The second seems to have taken its place among other conference addresses in almost total silence. I wish to discuss these two addresses and the responses to them.

I must admit that the immediate reaction to the "Mothers" speech — largely negative in my immediate circle — caught me off guard. I was meeting with a group of women on the night that it was broadcast, and my husband, Paul, thoughtfully recorded it for me. I listened to it the next day, mentally observed that the speech had a decidedly old-fashioned ring to it, and used the tape to record *3-2-1 Contact* for our son, Christian. I was immediately sorry. At a midweek lunch with some women, the address was the main topic of conversation, and someone had made photocopies of the delivery text. At a weekend scripture study group with other women, it again dominated the conversation. *Network*, a newspaper for Utah women, devoted an editorial to it and also published an article reporting comments from twenty-six men and women, both LDS and non-LDS (Shepherd 1987; Hilton 1987).¹

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¹ Editor Karen Shepherd (1987), after chronicling many of the advances for women in the state since the bitter 1978 experience of the International Women's Year convention, pointed out:

The LDS Church seems no less intent than it ever has been on insisting that women stay as much as possible in traditional roles. In a recent speech to women, President Benson lays down the law. A woman's place is in the home, he says, whether the family needs the money or not. Furthermore, women must bear many children regardless of

When the edited version appeared in pink pamphlet form in late March or early April, I found six copies on the doorstep. I assumed that they were either a gift from a friend who knew I'd be interested in the issue or proselyting literature from someone who thought six would be more effective than one. I promptly distributed them to my friends and discovered only later that they were for Paul. He was supposed to take them to his home teaching families that month although, as a letter to bishops clarified, they were not to replace the scheduled home teaching message for the month.

The speech was again the subject of an explosive discussion during an annual women's retreat that I attend in early summer. By then, opinions had crystallized, but much of the tension and emotional response was still there, unresolved.

Basically, the speech advocated that women place mothering responsibilities first by refusing paid employment. Since this has been virtually the major message Mormon women have heard from their male leaders since the 1920s, it is hardly new. Yet it seemed to arouse emotions out of all proportion to its content. I have made no effort to collect opinions randomly and representatively from Church women in a variety of regions, but I have asked many women about their own reactions and those of other women with whom they have talked. It is important to note that no one suggested President Benson's concern about children was misplaced or that child-rearing was not supremely important. Women who responded positively to President Benson's message seemed to focus on the benefits for children; those who responded negatively seemed concerned with the sweeping nature of his instructions, which did not adequately acknowledge the diversity of women and their circumstances.

Among the affirmative responses I have heard to the address was one woman, then pregnant with her third child, who expressed decided approval of the speech: "The world has seduced us away from our children," she said. "We needed this strong reminder to return to them." Another, the mother of four and a schoolteacher, had been trying to spend quality time with her children and her husband, then underemployed. She was driving home at noon to fix his lunch, staying up to help the children with their projects, and getting up at 3 A.M. to correct her students' papers. She felt the address "was exactly

their economic means. He does not address women who are the only means of support for their children, and he did not suggest what Utah would do if it were to lose 44 percent of its entire work force, a work force that accepts a wage which is just slightly more than half (52 percent) that paid the male work force.* His words have no application in reality for most women in 1987, but they do have the powerful affect [sic] of making women feel as guilty and alone as they felt in 1978. . . .

Most women are mothers at some point in their lives and nine in 10 women work for 28 years of their lives. Most men are fathers, and fathers can no longer afford the luxury of being fathers only on weekends. This state [Utah], the United States, the world is now at risk if we don't take care of our children. We can't afford another ten years of denial. . . . We women . . . must relentlessly pursue the goal of economic independence. We must convince the men in our lives that such independence will benefit everyone, including them.

* According to an article published in *Utah Holiday* in February 1988, based on 1980 U.S. census statistics, 52.6 percent of all Utah women work full time, "a full point above the national average." It agrees that women make up 44 percent of the Utah work force but says their earning rate is 54.2 percent of men's. It also adds that, while nine out of ten women work twenty-eight years of their life, men work only twenty-nine (Cannon 1988, 50).

what our family needed. I know he was inspired.” She stopped teaching in mid-year.

Another, the mother of seven, said, “My husband and I were sitting behind his secretary, and we just watched her squirm. Maybe now she’ll quit and take care of her teenagers.” My father wrote in early March that he was pleased with the address: “I wondered if any General Authority would dare take that firm stand again.” He also reported that his stake president estimated 80 percent of the tithing in the stake came from families “where the mothers are remaining in the home.”

Another woman commented that her sister, the full-time mother of five, was greatly distressed because other women in her ward, also not employed, had made “strident” comments in Relief Society and during testimony meeting about women in the ward who were “violating” the prophet’s counsel. Still another friend commented during late spring that her bishop had held up the pink pamphlet in church for three weeks running with approving references and strongly encouraged all women of the ward to read it. (His wife, whose job at the University of Utah had been eliminated due to budget cuts and was therefore unemployed at the time the speech was given, found another job within a few weeks.)

These positive reactions seem to come from people who found the counsel helpful to them personally, either in validating choices that they had made or in helping them to make such choices. Another group seems to have approved of the speech because they felt that its counsel would help resolve or eliminate problems that other people were having or because they generally gave their support to any strong position taken by a Church leader.

However, such reactions were not the most common ones, in my experience. Overwhelmingly, the reaction I have heard from women has been one of pain and of anger, whether they have been employed or not. One woman, who has worked all her adult life and has five children, said that her husband, who was a bishop, had been besieged during the week following the address by women full of hurt and resentment. One in particular came to his office, spilled forth angry feelings at what she considered to be the “unreasonable and unreasoning” attitude conveyed in the speech, and was “quite deflated” to hear this bishop agree, “You’re right. I agree with you completely. It’s the worst advice to women I’ve ever listened to.”

Another, whose husband was bishop of a student ward, said that for the next three or four weeks, she had many young student wives come to her privately in tears and pain. “There’re not talking to each other,” she said. “They don’t even seem to be talking to their husbands, but they have to talk to someone.” One of these young women with one child and a ten-hour-a-week part-time job quit her job; the family moved into a small basement apartment, and her husband, who was already going to school full-time and working part-time, got a second part-time job. However, when my friend told her bishop-husband about the young women who came to her, he told her that the husbands of these women in pain were, for the most part, singularly unaffected. None of them voluntarily brought up the subject to him. He learned

about the couple who moved into the basement apartment only because the husband explained why they had to move out of the ward. This bishop also reported one husband summarizing what seemed to be a group consensus when the topic came up during priesthood meeting: “My wife and I talked about what we wanted to do educationally, when we wanted to start our family and why, and we knew what the Church position was when we made those decisions. Nothing has changed, including the Church position and our own situations. I don’t see any reason to reevaluate our decision.”

One single man told a friend that he was “devastated” by the speech because his skills are such that he will probably never have a job that will pay more than medium range. “Looking at things objectively,” he said, “on the salary I’m likely to make, I could probably not afford to feed, clothe, and educate any children. Does this mean I should not get married?”

A Relief Society president whose children are adopted wept, “I’ve struggled with infertility for more than fifteen years. I thought I’d resolved the issue. But when he said that a woman’s first responsibility is to bear children, that knife turned in my heart again. I felt that it didn’t really matter what else I did because what I *couldn’t* do was so much more important.”

An older working-class couple in my ward who raised their nine children in West Virginia both did shift work in a factory so that one of them would be home with the children. Now retired, they are routinely on call when their married children here have a sick child who cannot go to school or its usual daycare. The woman bristled a bit, referring to the address, in defending her daughter and daughters-in-law, while her husband observed mildly in his Southern accent, “If’n you can get jobs out of the top drawer all your life like he’s got, I think that’s just fine. But it took both of us workin’ just about as hard as we could all our lives — and the kids workin’ too — to get our family raised, and I don’t see things gettin’ any easier.”

Still another woman reported that her neighbor, now a grandmother, came to her in “agony.” Not all of her children have turned out in the perfect church image, yet my friend had never heard this woman be other than positive, cheerful, loving, and accepting of even her deviant children. “I’ve never seen such pain and such a sense of betrayal,” my friend recalled. “She had a photocopy of the talk and had the ten ways of spending quality time with children underlined. She wept, ‘I stayed home, I never worked, I was always there when they got home from school, I made cookies, I read to them, I prayed with them, I always had hot meals for them, and I loved them. Tell me, what more could I have done? I did everything on this list and it still didn’t work.’”

What caused these powerful emotional responses? Why did so many women react with guilt, anger, and pain?

First, the language of the address was directive and prescriptive. Thus, it was possible to hear it as also accusatory, despite President Benson’s obviously sincere desire to “lift and bless your lives.” Although the fireside was for “parents,” the instructions were focused only on mothers. Women were thus assigned, by implication, total responsibility for the emotional and spiritual

welfare of their children. (“Mothers . . . are, or should be, the very heart and soul of the family,” p. 1).

Second, the lack of differentiation between the physical and the emotional components of motherhood can easily put women in a double bind. Misleadingly, women are often praised for quantity (having a large number of children) as though they were simultaneously producing quality children, usually a much more difficult process.

For example, the address describes a mother’s “God-ordained” role as being “to conceive, to bear, to nourish, to love, and to train” (p. 2). However, the physical processes of conception, pregnancy, and birthing are not “quality” operations, like loving and training. In fact, they are virtually involuntary operations. While a woman’s attitude about pregnancy may greatly affect her feelings about the experience, the physical facts of the experience are largely out of her control. It has always seemed somewhat paradoxical to me that women are so urgently commanded to — and commended for — allowing a natural process, over which they have little or no control, to continue to its end. Making direct comparisons between the “creative” process of pregnancy and the “creative” process of writing or painting is to completely ignore will and talent as elements of creativity. I fully acknowledge, however, that raising a healthy, happy, productive child in the years after birth taxes every ounce of creativity — and many other qualities — to the fullest.

Third, the view of mothers “in the marketplace” as being the “world’s way” not the “Lord’s way” seemed to arouse particularly painful emotions. This section impressed me as perhaps being least in touch with the realities of the 1980s. Again, the prescriptive language virtually ignores the economic realities that have shelved or underemployed large numbers of men, plus the rising costs of living and education that have made one-salary families a minority. The speech seemed to envision the “marketplace” for men as a farm where harder work would invariably produce more food. This situation is no longer the case in our monetized society.

The evidence lies in the patterns of women’s lives. In the United States as a whole when the 1980 federal census was taken, 51 percent of all women were working. In Utah, over 52 percent were (Cannon 1988, 50). Nationally, the average is now “some 70 percent” (“Do” 1988). Because women are paid less than men, their wages represent about 30 percent of the wages paid in Utah. Even so, a drop of 30 percent in the taxes paid state and local government would represent a reduction in services almost certain to have far-reaching and undesirable negative consequences.

When it comes to Latter-day Saint women in the United States, data collected in 1981 by the Church Research and Evaluation Department (Goodman and Heaton 1986) indicate that 35 percent of the Church’s women will experience divorce and that only 19 percent will, at age sixty, be in an intact first marriage (p. 92). While United States women average 2.23 children, LDS women have an average of 3.27 — 3.46 if temple married (p. 95).

Fifty-one percent of LDS women were either working or looking for work in 1981, compared to a national average of 52 percent. If a married LDS woman

has children under age six, the figure drops to 36.5 percent but climbs to 57 percent of mothers with children between six and seventeen. Over 80 percent of the single women in the Church are in the work force, including those with children (Goodman and Heaton 1986, 100). Thirty-three percent of single Mormon mothers with three children survive at or near the poverty level; so do 7 percent of married couples with at least two children (p. 101). I have no reason to believe that any of these figures have decreased in the seven intervening years.

Despite President Benson's acknowledgment of divorced and widowed women and those "in unusual circumstances" who are "required to work for a period of time," I found it perplexing to have the address state that "these instances are the exception, not the rule." I know of virtually no divorced or widowed mother who can look forward with any confidence to a time when she will not be required to work. And as Claudia L. Bushman trenchantly observed about the lack of welfare funds supplied to single mothers, "The luxury of being a full-time mother is only for those who can afford it. Single and poor mothers who have to work, *have* to work. The Church does not put its money where its mouth is" (1987, 39).

I also have some question about whether the "rule" really is an employed father and an at-home mother with several children. Nationally, such a configuration occurs in only 7 percent of the households; and within the Church, only 19 percent — fewer than one in five — of LDS households have two adult members with a temple marriage and children at home (Goodman and Heaton 1986, 95). There was no breakdown on how many of these mothers were employed; but if they followed the more general pattern, up to 57 percent of them would be.

If I were a single parent, I would also be deeply concerned about the implication that a full-time mother is essential for the child of a two-parent family but optional in the case of my child. This position seems illogical on its face. Should it not be twice as important for the remaining parent to be fully available all the time to the children?

The address also quotes President Spencer W. Kimball's "John and Mary" article, published in 1949 when he was an apostle, urging married women not to "'compete with men in employment'" and a 1977 area conference speech begging them to "'come home from the typewriter, the laundry, the nursing, . . . the factory, the cafe. No career approaches in importance that of wife, homemaker, mother — cooking meals, washing dishes, making beds for one's precious husband and children'" (p. 7). I am not the only person to observe that this list of tasks could be performed by any man, any woman, and any child over a certain age. What is missing from this role definition of a mother is a description of interactions with children or with a husband.

Furthermore, I found myself needing to translate this 1977 language into possible careers. "Nursing" is obvious. The typewriter implies secretarial skills, the factory describes a setting, but the cafe suggests waitressing as a career, and the reference to "the laundry" left me baffled. Certainly all of these services are important and necessary, but they are all, with the exception of nursing

and some secretarial jobs, relatively low paid and relatively unskilled labor. If such activities were the sole income for a family, the family would probably be below the poverty level. If women were engaged in these activities to earn money, a more persuasive argument to keep them home would be to compare what they would be making on welfare payments. I also wondered about the omission of teaching, long considered to be a suitable occupation for women, from this list.

An additional difficulty I have with this advice is that it does not acknowledge the reality that many women have serious educational commitments to demanding, complex, and highly skilled employment and literally cannot afford to work at low-paying jobs, dropping in and out of the work force, any more than men can. According to the LDS demographic study already cited, 53.5 percent of LDS men and 44.3 percent of LDS women — “about a third more than among U.S. men and women” — have some college experience (Goodman and Heaton 1986, 97).

Another philosophical difficulty with this address is that by focusing so narrowly on the task of mothering, President Benson implies that mothering is not only a woman’s most important responsibility but that it is also her *only* responsibility and that it is *only* her responsibility. There is little expression in this address of the role of a father although he is supposed “to provide, to love, to teach, and to direct” (p. 2). The implication is that the mother alone is responsible for “the salvation and exaltation of your family” (p. 8). Teaching children the gospel is assigned to the mother. “It cannot be done effectively part-time,” says the address. “It must be done all the time in order to save and exalt your children” (p. 11). If this were true, then fathers are truly expendable, except for conception and money.

I am reminded of the first priesthood meeting my husband attended in our current ward. The elders’ quorum president announced that he had just taken his second part-time job. (He was already working full-time.) He asserted with conviction, “No one else is going to raise *my* children.” What he had overlooked is that obviously *he* was not going to raise his children.

Successful motherhood is difficult to define since it is a process that lasts intensively for at least twenty years, since it never really ends, and since the ultimate evaluation depends on how well someone else — namely the child — does, not on what you yourself do. No wonder so many women feel inadequate, guilty, and defensive about their parenting.

The speech lists “ten ways to spend time with your children.” This list is vast, encyclopedic, and comprehensive. It recommends (1) being home “when your children are either coming or going . . . from school, . . . from dates, when they bring friends home,” (2) regularly spend[ing] unrushed one-on-one time with each child,” (3) “read[ing] to your children . . . starting from the cradle,” (4) “pray[ing] with your children, . . . under the direction of the father, . . . morning and night,” (5) “hav[ing] a meaningful weekly home evening with your husband presiding,” (6) “be[ing] together at mealtimes as often as possible . . . [for] happy conversation, sharing of the day’s plans and activities, and special teaching moments,” (7) “daily . . . read[ing] the scrip-

tures together as a family,” (8) “do[ing] things together as a family,” (9) “teach[ing] your children . . . at mealtime, in casual settings, or at special sit-down times together, at the foot of the bed at the end of the day, or during an early morning walk together,” and (10) “truly lov[ing] your children” (pp. 8–10).

Certainly the counsel in this list is good. I know no mother, including myself, who does not enjoy spending time with her children and who does not try to do most of the things on this list. However, following this list completely is impossible because it is vague and lacks any standard of “enough.” Item 8, doing “things” together as a family, could cover virtually every other item on the list. Furthermore, it assumes that spending time doing these things will automatically produce the promised results: “Your children will remember your teachings forever, and when they are old, they will not depart from them. They will call you blessed — their truly angel mother” (p. 11). But what if the children fall away from the Church, are alienated from the family, and call you something besides their “angel mother”? The implication is clear that it is because you didn’t spend enough time with them. The woman who wept in betrayal and anger at this list provides the balancing perspective that time is not the only factor.

Thus, a serious problem with this presentation is its assumption that only women can mother children. The related problem — that a mother should *only* mother, has the automatic effect of condemning women who do other things. Since the quotations from President Kimball seemed uncharacteristically harsh compared to my memory of how he typically addressed women, I curiously compared this speech with his address at the first women’s fireside in 1978. Certainly he made a great many references to marriage and motherhood. Out of 96.5 column inches, 36.25 are devoted to such topics as marriage, divorce, motherhood, bearing children, and homemaking. But he discusses the importance of marriage as “re-emphasizing some everlasting truth,” the first of which is “to keep the commandments of God,” pray, study the scriptures, and “keep your life clean and free from all unholy and impure thoughts and actions” (p. 102). Between the sections on marriage (p. 103) and those on motherhood and home life (p. 105), he pays tribute to the “talents and leadership” of his wife, praises Mormon women as “basically strong, independent, and faithful,” characterizes “selflessness [as] a key to happiness and effectiveness,” urges Christian service in many settings, encourages women to “have a program of personal improvement,” and observes:

We should be as concerned with the woman’s capacity to communicate as we are to have her sew and preserve food. Good women are articulate as well as affectionate. One skill or attribute need not be developed at the expense of another. Symmetry in our spiritual development is much to be desired. We are as anxious for women to be as wise in the management of their time as we are for women to be wise stewards of the family’s storehouse of good. We know that women who have a deep appreciation for the past will be concerned about shaping a righteous future (p. 105).

President Kimball then goes on to talk about cultivating Christlike qualities, free agency, trust in the Lord and “each other,” the importance of

“reach[ing] your fullest potential,” and a reminder that “in you is the control of your life” (p. 105). He then discusses the importance of home and family life, speaking of marriage as “a contributing and full partner[ship].” He concludes: “We thank the sisters of the Church for being such great defenders of the church, in word and in deed. We love and respect you!”, then quotes Joel’s prediction of prophetic gifts for “your sons and your *daughters*” and of an outpouring of the Lord’s spirit “upon the *handmaids*” in the latter days.

Rather than a narrow focus on mothering tasks alone, this speech is widely based, positively stated, and actively encouraging. It counsels women to make a broad range of choices, fulfill potential, and exercise agency. It clearly communicates love, appreciation, encouragement, and respect for women. This tone, which permeates President Kimball’s address was, in my memory, a trend-setting approach to women that was generally typical of the addresses of other General Authorities and of the women leaders during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

I feel that President Benson was completely sincere in such statements as: “I pay tribute to the mothers in Zion and pray with all my heart that what I have to say to you will be understood by the Spirit and will lift and bless your lives in your sacred callings as mothers” and in his tribute to his own wife. The tone in the “Mothers of Zion” address may seem more narrow, rigid, and authoritarian than it really is, simply because the contrast is so great with what women have been accustomed to hearing. The basic information about the importance of motherhood is very similar in both addresses; the second address may seem controlling and coercive simply because of how it is said, not because of the information itself.

Certainly, similar prescriptive language is used in President Benson’s address to fathers given at the October 1987 general conference: “You have a sacred responsibility to provide for the material needs of your family. . . . Adam, not Eve, was instructed to earn the bread by the sweat of his brow.” Being financially supported is “the divine right of a wife and mother. While she cares for and nourishes her children at home, her husband earns the living for the family, which makes this nourishing possible.” He rebukes men who “because of economic conditions . . . expect the wives to go out of the home and work” and reiterates the “importance of mothers staying home to nurture, care for, and train their children in the principles of righteousness” (pp. 48, 49).

I am concerned about three issues: (1) Children are defined as the woman’s not as the couple’s. (2) There is not a syllable in this speech that recognizes the responsibilities of divorced fathers to continue to supply economic support for their children and that at a time when the percentage of nonpayment of child support is a national scandal. (3) Third, and perhaps most important, there is no acknowledgment of work as anything other than as a means of providing money. Are there no reasons besides monetary ones why men work? What about status, power, ability to control and make things happen, association with peers and friends, the stimulation of growth, the self-esteem of responding successfully to challenges, and the ability to make a difference in a community, business, or industry?

True, one could argue that parenthood supplies many of the same satisfactions and challenges for men as for women. True, many men have unsatisfying or limiting jobs. But these conditions aside, I find that this second speech is similarly out of touch with current economic realities and leaves untouched and unexplored the psychological realities of men and women by its strict focus on gender-assigned tasks.

I also find it unbecoming for men to urge women to do a job that the men themselves express no desire to do. It arouses in me the suspicion that they might not choose to do it themselves, even if they had that ability. For example, how different would be the tone of a man giving an address that said, "My dear sisters, it has been a source of great longing to me all my life to bear a child, to feel that little body growing within me, to experience birth, and then to nourish that child from my own body. I realize that my assignment to the priesthood is of equal value to the Lord and that the work I do there is extremely important; but I can't help wishing that I could also have the opportunity to experience the joys and challenges of your role. Because I can't, I plead with you to fully appreciate the unique blessing that you have been given."

I wonder why groups of men have not discussed President Benson's address to them, why I have sensed no emotional reaction and not even much interest. As I have asked among my circle of male acquaintances for responses, most didn't pay much attention to it. One man joked, "I remember exactly how I felt. Disappointed. He [President Benson] prefaced his talk by saying the meeting had been great and he was debating about just having his talk published but dismissing the meeting. And then he decided to give it anyway." Another one said, "I could tell it was supposed to be the other side of the coin for the mothers' talk, but I'm not sure that it really evens things up to just be sure you've dumped on everybody." Still another shrugged, "It was nothing new." These responses do not shed much light on a basic underlying question: Why did women hear the counsel addressed to them so personally and react so passionately while men seemed to consider the counsel addressed to them as optional?

I'm happy with strong statements about the centrality and value of family life. But I want them addressed evenly to both fathers and mothers. I want them to address the economic and social realities of childrearing in this generation. I do not want to hear motherhood equated with priesthood again — ever, as long as I live. I want an acknowledgment of the diversity of family types in the Church, not the monolithic insistence on only one model. I want the Church to respect, support, and help all types of families, not just one. I want the Church to acknowledge that our lives have many facets in addition to that of parenting and to respect and support those facets. I want to find in my church a source of love, communion with God, and celebration of community rather than separation, isolation, and guilt.

We have heard such uplifting addresses in the past. I look forward to the time when we will hear them again.

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