

WHAT MAN CAN MATCH A WOMAN WHO IS REALLY CONVINCED?

... JOSEPH F. SMITH

THE MORMON WOMAN AND PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY: THE OTHER VOICE

Cheryll Lynn May

While engaged in some research the other day I ran across a commentary on the Lutheran doctrine of "justification by faith" that lies at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. The doctrine was described as heralding a reemphasis upon spirit as opposed to empty form; a reaffirmation of the fact that man could be saved only through the righteous desirings of the heart. No matter how many Pater Nosters were recited, or indulgences purchased, or sins confessed, if a true change of heart had not taken place, the absolutions granted by the Church authorities meant nothing. As the old protestant homily goes; "Question, 'Is there any angel, any virgin, any patriarch or prophet among the dead that can understand or know the reason of the heart?' Answer, 'No . . . Only I know . . .'" Thus the Protestants established (or re-established) two ideas that were indeed revolutionary in the Christian world of the 16th century; first that the spirit, or motive behind a deed was far more important than its visible content, and second, since God alone could know that spirit or motive, the Catholic Church's claim to be an indispensable intermediary between God and man was rejected. The confirmation of one's righteousness came not from the Church, but through direct, individual communion with the Divine.

To me, the "personal confirmation" doctrine had a comfortable and familiar ring. It seemed to be most compatible with my Mormon upbringing. Mormons are constantly reminded of Moroni's exhortation and promise at the end of the Book of Mormon that the Lord, through the power of the Holy Ghost, would manifest the truth of his words to all sincere supplicants, and that ". . . by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:5). The scriptural references to a "burning in the bosom" as evidence of the authenticity of any authoritative pronouncement further support the idea that we have the right, and indeed the duty to seek and expect confirmation of the truth of gospel doctrines from the Lord Himself, and not from any intermediary authority.

The compatibility of certain essential protestant doctrines with those of the Church is hardly surprising. Mormons often point with pride at Luther as a necessary and honored forerunner of the Restoration. It is equally clear, however, that only in the nineteenth century, to Joseph Smith, was the Gospel restored in its fullness. While some of the insights revealed to Joseph Smith merely enlarge upon Protestant themes, others quite flatly

contradict them. So while we as members of the Church can warmly applaud the "personal confirmation" theme espoused by Luther and his followers, we cannot join him in the repudiation of the power and authority of an earthly priesthood, however logically this step might follow from his premise. The existence of a hierarchically organized priesthood with wide-ranging authority to act in God's name is obviously a central pillar of the Gospel. It is through the priesthood that the membership of the Church is organized, and only through priesthood authority can most of the ordinances and covenants of the Church be performed.

Since we find in the Gospel a reaffirmation *both* of the "Catholic" authority principle and the "Protestant" principle of personal confirmation, the two must be intended to complement each other, or at least not to contradict each other. However, from our admittedly narrow earthly perspective, the implications of the two principles are not always easily reconcilable. It seems to me, rather, that an emphasis on one or the other principle lies at the heart of many differences within the Church concerning both doctrine and practice. Whether the disputants call themselves "conservatives" and "liberals," or "iron rods" and "liahonas," or use other titles, a basic root of their differences seems to lie in their attitude toward priesthood authority. The first group tends to stress the importance of unquestioning obedience to priesthood authority and letter-perfect compliance with all commandments, while members of the second group accept pronouncements of Church Authorities as general guides to conduct which become valid for the individual when he receives a personal confirmation or testimony that the stated policy or commandment is indeed the word of God.

The frequent passion and mutual intolerance displayed by both liberals and conservatives on this authority question might indicate a degree of insecurity on both sides — a nagging feeling that considerable merit might lie on the other side of the argument, spurring the antagonists to renewed vigor in the struggle, not only to convince the unenlightened, but to quiet the restive whisperings in their own souls. In any case, for whatever reason, the "dynamic tension" both within and between individuals in the Church caused by friction between the priesthood authority and personal confirmation principles remains at a high level. The tension becomes most acute, of course, when the signals from priesthood authorities and those received in personal communion with the Divine appear to conflict with one another.

For men in the Church, the danger of running into a situation where priesthood authority says one thing and the "inner voice" another may be reduced by a sort of built-in doctrinal "escape hatch." While the Mormon priesthood organization is similar to the Catholic in regard to the central role it plays in Church affairs, the Mormon model is a much more democratic one. Rather than a small, specially trained elite, the L.D.S. priesthood is composed of practically all active adult males. Thus within the Church, in a certain sense, each man becomes his own priest, the individual supplicant and the priesthood intermediary become one in the same person. While the hierarchical structure of priesthood organization limits the authority or jurisdiction of most priesthood holders to a rather narrow area, the double role of layman-priest played by most Mormon men provides a

comforting justification for exercising a good deal of independent judgment concerning Church doctrine and policy. Since the Mormon elder is himself the holder of particular priesthood keys, he can, ostensibly without guilt or anxiety, rely on his own resources in making any gospel-related decisions rather than turning to some higher authority.

For women in the Church, however, the lines of division between the two versions of the authority principle are drawn much more sharply. While both priesthood authority and reliance on personal confirmation can point a man toward his inner resources and individual communion with the Divine, for a woman, reliance on priesthood authority *must* involve reliance on another person. Often, of course, the voices of "inner authority" and priesthood authority coincide, and the potential problem is eliminated. Some would insist that indeed the two authorities, if properly in tune with the Lord, *must* agree. But all of us know either from personal experience, or from accounts of others, incidents where at least an apparent conflict between the two voices existed, and I am of the opinion that this conflict is more *likely* when the two sources of authority do not reside within the same person. If the two authorities *should* differ, what is one to do? Where does priesthood authority end and personal responsibility begin? These questions for many women in the Church are more than interesting theological exercises; they are matters of urgent personal concern.

Carol's story is a good case in point. She was brought up in a loving and devoted L.D.S. family, and was eager to continue her education at B.Y.U. Once at the "Y" she found the academic atmosphere even more stimulating than she had imagined, and with great relish she plunged into her work and other campus activities. She appeared to be a model B.Y.U. student, but by her sophomore year she was increasingly beset by guilt and anxiety. She found within herself deepening resistance to the model of proper Mormon womanhood most often outlined in Religion classes and Devotional Assemblies. The Mormon woman, many authorities repeated, was violating her most sacred calling if she pursued any interests and ambitions beyond those of helpmate and mother. Graduating from B.Y.U. without the "MRS" degree was considered, at the very least, unfortunate. Desires in a Mormon woman for continuing graduate education (except as an excuse to pursue eligible Mormon men) or for independent professional careers were condemned as selfish and unnatural. As the months went by Carol came increasingly to the realization that *she* was one of the selfish and unnatural women these authorities were condemning. She wanted to be a political scientist. She wanted to teach in college. She wanted to help train young people to be good citizens and responsible leaders. Where had she gone wrong? Not that she rejected the ideal of marriage. She had come from a loving family and wanted to help raise one of her own. She anticipated interrupting her career or at least gearing it down to a part-time basis during the children's pre-school years, and thought that this sacrifice of her career was far outweighed by the rewards of parenthood. She realized that duties to her husband might involve other interruptions and disruptions of her professional life, but life is full of such trade-offs, and she felt that as long as she kept the right priorities in mind, the combination of

roles she wished to play was basically compatible. Why did the prospect of such a combination raise such scorn from any Church authorities?

She made a concentrated attempt to eliminate the conflict. With the preponderant weight of priesthood authority on one side, and her single inner voice on the other, surely the priesthood authorities were correct and she merely needed to more rigorously put herself in tune with the Holy Spirit. So she worked at it. She fasted and prayed and read scriptures. She visited a B.Y.U. counselor every week for two years to try to exorcise these unnatural ambitions. But the message of the inner voice only became more loud and insistent. She still wanted to be a wife, a mother and a college teacher. Finally, Carol made her choice. Perhaps the advice of these authorities was right for many women; it was wrong for her.

It would appear, if the wisdom of decisions is measured by degree of happiness and fulfillment, that Carol's choice was a good one. She has not found the role of wife and helpmate incompatible with that of college teacher. She is expecting a child soon, and when it comes, as she is well aware, the role conflicts will become more acute. But her husband actively encourages her career and is more than willing to give the kind of support that will allow her to at least "keep a hand in it" while the children are young. While Carol does not regret the decision she made to disregard the advice of some Church authorities, it has not been an easy one to maintain. She sometimes wonders if she has merely done a good job of rationalizing a personal desire that in reality contradicts the wishes of the Lord. Dependence on a personal confirmation can obviously make one more susceptible to immediate social and cultural pressures than reliance on authority residing in an institution, which, by its very nature, must move slowly. Is the "inner voice" upon which she has placed ultimate reliance a voice other than her own? The qualms of guilt and self-doubt continue. The decision to counter the admonitions of many of the elders was not just a "one shot" affair. She feels constantly compelled to re-examine her motives and conclusions. The priesthood authority principle was much too integral a part of her religious training for her to do otherwise.

Carol's story is but a variation on a theme which I have found surprisingly common among women of the Church in recent months. For some, the realization that they did not possess a personal testimony of the universal validity of the "Kinder-Kueche-Kirche" role for all Mormon women came during their early teens. For many others, this realization dawned, or at least came into focus for the first time, only after they had married and begun to raise their own families. Women have reacted to this apparent inconsistency in a variety of ways; some by trying to ignore it, some by repenting their way out of it, some by having another baby to get their minds off the problem, some by actually rejecting the role as invalid for them. In any case, few of them have escaped a good deal of confusion and anxiety in trying to cope with the problem.

In trying to analyze the source of this apparent disparity and its implications, several points come to mind. First, not *all* priesthood authorities are equal in their prescriptions of proper roles for Mormon women. Feminine roles that might be condemned in the abstract as incompatible with

woman's highest duties are often accepted in good grace if the woman in question has managed to play the role of wife and mother effectively while at the same time performing yeoman service for the Church and community or making contributions in the arts and professions. One can also note this divergence between general condemnation and particular approval in publications such as the *Church News*, which often points with pride to an outstanding L.D.S. woman as "one of our own." While all elders would perhaps agree that the primary responsibility of Mormon women (and, of course, Mormon men) is to spouse and family, the amount of leeway allowed in interpreting that responsibility varies considerably.

Second, it is interesting to note that the view of many priesthood authorities concerning the proper role of women has *narrowed* over time. The winter 1970 issue of the *Utah Historical Quarterly* gives many examples of the scope of "women's work" during the first two generations in Utah. Leonard Arrington's article in this issue provides further documentation of this point.

The model of womanhood held up today by some Church authorities may be dictated more by transient social and cultural pressures than by eternal principles. If this is the case, its failure to evoke a confirming testimony for each woman of the Church is not necessarily an indication of her lack of receptivity to the Spirit. In other words, this is a matter about which faithful members might differ without the sincerity of their faith being brought into question.

But I think that most of the Elders are motivated today in their insistence on woman's exclusive place in the home by a growing alarm at the apparent disintegration of the institution of the family both within this country and throughout the western world. Many authorities have observed that ours is a century characterized both by large numbers of women working outside the home and by weakening family structures and have concluded that the former must have in some way contributed to the latter. But a cause and effect relationship between these two factors is far from proven. Even a brief look at the past history of this country, and indeed of every previous human society, would indicate that whatever has held the family together for the last several thousand years, it has not been the prodigious amount of time spent by the mother "developing" her children. While most women have stayed "at home" in the broadest sense of the term during most periods of recorded history, the great majority of them were forced to tuck childcare duties into spare minutes when more pressing breadwinning and household duties weren't calling them. I do not wish to imply that since families in the past have remained strong despite the relatively small amount of undivided attention given to children, that this model cannot be improved upon. I believe that in most cases children *do* benefit during their early years from the lion's share of mother's care and attention. But this proposition varies greatly from the view that the only way to keep the family together is to keep mother at home at all times and at all costs. After the children start to school, it is increasingly difficult to maintain that a woman's singular devotion to the motherhood role will make the most positive contribution either to her development or to that

of her children. Several experts have suggested, as a matter of fact, that in extremely child-centered homes where mother is always there to help with everything, children can tend to be deficient in initiative, effort, and self-reliance.

Some Church authorities seem to assume that as long as a specified number of hours per day is spent with one's children, that they will automatically gain all the benefits of a loving family environment. This assumption loses sight of the fact that time spent with children has a qualitative as well as a quantitative dimension. While some women are serenely contented with a life devoted exclusively to serving their families, many others find their zest for childcare and homemaking greatly increased by spending a certain number of hours each week outside the home. The likelihood of discontent with the exclusive maternal role becomes greater as children grow older and the mother's heaviest time demands are lifted. The great majority of Mormon women have their last child in first grade by the time they are forty and yet few of them have the training and support to use during the ensuing thirty years of their active lives any but a small fraction of their potential for contributing to culture and society.

This paper began with the introduction of two gospel principles, that of personal confirmation or testimony, and that of priesthood authority. Both principles are supported by a broad foundation of scripture and modern-day revelation. Yet, particularly for a woman in the Church, adherence to one or the other principle might at times lead her in different directions. When a conflict arises, to whom should she listen? This is far too weighty a question for one individual to decide for another. I will close with my personal and tentative conclusions on the matter.

First, priesthood authority, whether embodied by a father, a home teacher, a bishop or an apostle, is a special gift from God and not to be taken lightly. If one finds within himself no confirming testimony of a particular authority's words, he has the duty to diligently seek to reconcile the conflicting signals through study, prayer, and every other method likely to increase his spiritual receptiveness. But, second, authorities sometimes disagree, and, being human, some of their preferences might be motivated by social and cultural conditioning rather than by immutable gospel imperatives. So, if after all attempts to bring the inner and outer voices into accord, one still does not succeed, I would choose to follow the inner voice. For me, the central core of the Gospel is the individual personal relationship between God and man. In most cases, priesthood authority acts to promote and enrich this relationship; when it does not, it must, for me, take second place.