

Counseling the Brethren

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The scent of shaving lotion startled me. It was like finding a “No Trespassing” sign in some familiar patch of woods. I’d walked through that door a hundred times, would teach Sunday School in the same classroom an hour later, yet the spice in the air made me an adventuress. “Hey, Sister Ulrich, this is a priesthood meeting,” an elder teased from the end of the row as I sat down. His good humor made me feel more comfortable, but less exotic. He knew I’d been invited.

The elders’ quorum had turned to Timely Topics. The new teacher, who was interested in the nature of prejudice, decided that if the brethren were going to learn something about the status of women in the Church, they might as well hear it from an authority. The notion of having a woman instruct the priesthood seduced him, and he extended the assignment from an invitation to answer a few questions to an opportunity to teach the class. If anyone was going to object, he reasoned, they’d do it anyway. Fifteen minutes could damn one as well as fifty.

Despite his bravado, I think he was a little nervous about what I might say. Perhaps I agreed to come too eagerly. “Don’t be too hard on the brethren,” he had cautioned the week before. He needn’t have worried. Though I’ve been seen near the feminist rack in our local bookstore, I continually surprise myself with my conservatism. I issued no manifestoes. Though I would probably vote for a woman president, I can barely imagine a woman bishop. Some would call this a failure of nerve. Perhaps it is. It certainly transcends reason. I simply do not feel like a second-class citizen in the Church, even though my feminist convictions tell me that I should. I’m not sure I can explain this, but I’d like to try.

In the first place, I spend little time thinking about hormones—or the hereafter. I recognize chemical differences between men and women, but I doubt that they have anything to do with spirituality, intelligence, or the capacity to love little children. Nor am I convinced that any earthly institution gives us more than a whiff of the divine. Heaven may look like the Lion House. Then again it may look like the Ulrich living room. Or neither. I’ll just have to wait and see. Meanwhile Earth carries its own explanations—and compensations—for the ecclesiastical order of the Church.

As I grew up, the priesthood meant having more time in the bathroom on Sunday mornings after my father and brothers left for church. It also meant their comforting hands on my head when my jaw was swollen shut from the mumps and I couldn’t sleep. Meetings. Ordinances. But never Privilege. I inherited my older brother’s place on the debate team as well as his Saturday job scrubbing the kitchen floor. In our house the priesthood was a calling, not a rank. If I’m comfortable with it now, it must be in part because none of the men in my life—father, brothers, husband—has ever issued a command.

Yes, I promised to obey. Conditionally. I attach great significance to that qualifying clause. In the seventeenth-century certain radical Protestant sects invited social chaos by teaching that a woman need obey her husband *only as he obeyed the Lord*. In the twentieth-century, I see no harm in acknowledging tradition by

promising to do the same. At the very least, the patriarchal order puts father in the home. I'm all for that.

It probably has something to do with keeping men in the Church as well. It's a commonplace that women fill more pews than men. Cotton Mather noticed it in the 1690s. Protestant ministers still worry about it today. Mormon women are no different. I'm quite sure we could eclipse the quorums if given the chance. Some people explain all this energy by saying that women are more spiritual, or that our experience of childbearing and rearing places us closer to God. That may be, but it also places us closer to the telephone. I don't mean to be flippant, but only to point out that the order of the Church can be viewed structurally as well as metaphysically. Homemaking may be a full-time job, but it has the advantage of flexible hours. In our society it also leaves women with a surplus of ego to invest, both factors which contribute to a high level of performance in volunteer work. Thus, I view the priesthood not as discriminatory but as compensatory; it pushes men toward home and church when their traditional roles would pull them away, giving them an edge in the very areas where for so many years women have reigned supreme—and solitary. It's nice to have them around. If the priesthood were a profession, I'd feel differently. As it is, I applaud the ordination of my Episcopal sisters without feeling anxious about my own.

I don't mean to belittle the priesthood. It *is* the power to act in the name of God—in certain specific and well-defined areas. I consider it the principle of order in the Kingdom, a device for binding us together. Men pass the sacrament and collect tithing, but they have no monopoly on spiritual gifts. Those are free to all who ask. When we call upon the elders in sickness or ask for a father's blessing, we are not bowing to their superiority, we are acknowledging our membership in the tribe.

I know there are those who go further, who take the priesthood-motherhood dichotomy as a sociological-psychological model. I think they are wrong. One winter when my husband was in graduate school, I got up at 5:30 on Wednesdays to attend an institute class taught in our ward by the local mission president. He was an impressive teacher, and the class was intellectually as well as spiritually uplifting. Bound by babies and a student budget, I relished the hour's abstraction. One morning, the president turned to the subject of education, telling of an interview he had had with a young elder about to be released.

"What are your plans?" he had asked.

"I'm not sure, President. Before I came on my mission I had worldly ambitions, but now that I've really been touched by the gospel, I know that those things don't count. I'm going to go back to the farm, find a wife, buy a cow, settle down to raise a family, and serve the Lord."

The President lectured that missionary—as he lectured us—on the value of an education. It was the familiar Mormon sermon, delivered with unusual wit and little-known anecdotes about famous men. "Find out what you're good at," he had told the elder, "and learn to do it well. The Lord will find a way to use you in upbuilding the Kingdom." Law. Medicine. Engineering. Business. All were honorable means of glorifying God. I was caught in the spirit of the message, and for a moment I was a student too. Then, snagged by reality, I raised my hand.

"Do you give the same sermon to your lady missionaries?" I asked. I think he was surprised. He laughed, then backed off. "Do you want to hear my sermon

on women?" I didn't. I wanted the straight answer he hadn't yet thought of. To hear that "men are motivated by power, women by love" was useless. It sent me home with a cow.

The president meant well. I'm sure he had a genuine regard for female abilities; his own wife was an energetic and effective missionary. Yet he was guilty of a common fallacy—reading the priesthood as a sexual metaphor. Women who agonize over their status in the eternities suffer from the same error. Perhaps a male monopoly of ecclesiastical office points to deep-seated and inherent differences between the sexes. Perhaps it foreshadows the eternal destiny of women. But before I came to either conclusion, I'd want to do a little experimenting with the here and now. For myself, I've found most of the barbed wire in my head. A well-filled day has a way of leaping metaphysics.

True, times change. Yet in this particular spot in the twentieth-century, I suffer less from discrimination than from a multiplicity of expectations. I remember confessing tearfully to a friend one day as we watched our toddlers in the wading pool, "I just can't make up my mind! I want to be both Emma McKay and Mary Bunting (then president of Radcliffe)." I hadn't yet heard of Ellis Shipp and those other professional women of early Utah who taught us that home and career might be righteously joined. With time I too have discovered the pleasure of wearing many hats, but there are days when I take comfort in definition. Precisely because it is blatantly and intransigently sexist, the priesthood gives me no pain. One need not be kind, wise, intelligent, published, or professionally committed to receive it—just over twelve and male. Thus it presumes difference, without superiority. I think of it as a secondary sex characteristic, like whiskers, something I can admire without struggling to attain.