

help us deal with the predominant male imagery relative to God, or will our predominant male imagery relative to God deter us from accepting female ministry?

In the dualistic system of thought, ordination of women was the only answer. There will be pain for everyone. We now have a broader base of discrimination. But there will also be joy for the women set free to touch people at the essence of their being through the symbolic acts of the ordinances.

The priesthood-of-all-believers philosophy still claims my attention. Our over-emphasis on ecclesiastical authority prevents us from perceiving as "ministers" those who act authoritatively through their caring and presence to human need. Acceptance of the "all are called" (RLDS D&C 119:8b) quote cited in the 1984 document signifies the priesthood-of-all-believers attitude. Yet the very act of ordination separates us. There are those who are ordained, and there are the "others."

My primary concern is that resolving the enactment of the ordination of women, which is already so long overdue for we who call ourselves prophetic, will consume the energies needed in answering our greater call. My lament is that we seem unable to make a leap of faith which would carry us beyond concern over who shall sit on the right and who shall sit on the left — who is the lesser and who is the greater. I feel a sense of urgency that we make this leap of faith that would carry us to resolute commitment to justice and equality in a hungry, nuclear-shadowed world where love and worth of persons is still conditional.

## An Endowment of Power: The LDS Tradition

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Latter-day Saints share a belief in and a commitment to the Restoration. The LDS and RLDS churches declare that God spoke to the Prophet Joseph Smith that a people might by covenant be commissioned. Latter-day Saints were given a charge — a mission to prepare the earth for the Savior's second coming — and the power or authority to carry out that mission accompanied the charge. RLDS Church President Wallace B. Smith in the "Inspired Document," now Section 156, issued in April 1984 expressed hope that, "inspired by the life and witness of the Redeemer of the world, his people might move toward giving "new life and understanding" to the "essential meaning of the Restoration as a healing and redeeming agent."

The document itself brings new understanding to the meaning of the Restoration. Who shall be called to share the burdens and responsibilities of the priesthood? The document affirms that all will be "called according to the gifts which have been given them" and that Church members should "not won-

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der that some women of the Church are being called to priesthood responsibilities," by "the ordaining of women to priesthood." Both Paul and Madelon commented on the courage and boldness of President Smith in "bringing such a controversial proclamation" before the Saints. It is apparent, however, from the background provided by Madelon and Paul, that many years of courageous effort on the part of many people preceded the April 1984 issuing of Section 156.

Paul recounted the first RLDS conference discussion of the ordination of women, when Adolphus Edwards was "literally yelled down," a scene remembered and heard with pain, but reminding us that new questions hurt and that oftentimes questioners are hurt and initially receive no official recognition. Madelon's careful chronicling of the eight conferences which have "entertained legislation or discussion respecting ordination of women or expansion of their role" is a history which many of us must study before we can appreciate the significance of the Inspired Document. It represents fourteen years of consideration, hesitation, examination, and frustration. Many LDS Church members experienced somewhat similar frustration in waiting for the 1978 revelation which extended priesthood to blacks. While the deliberations and discussions of LDS Church members and leaders were not carried forth on the conference floor, they were certainly an important part of the process of change.

Those who believe in continuing revelation know that a prophet can push out perimeters of understanding; but sometimes people push the prophet. Their questions and discussions, their "war of words and tumult of opinions" make urgent the asking, or what President Wallace B. Smith termed the "importuning the Spirit on behalf of the Church."

Paul, with his "cautious optimism" indicated that this official decision regarding the ordination of women would not be "the end of our difficulties," nor "answer all the questions women had been raising." Indeed, it would seem it does not begin to answer the questions of structure Madelon is raising, although she admits being heartened by the possibility that both deep-seated misogyny and "a structure which still discriminates" may be recognized and confronted.

Both of these responses suggest that the RLDS Church cannot consider ordaining women or become involved in actually ordaining them without examining its present definition and structure of priesthood. Madelon lamented "the over-emphasis on ecclesiastical authority" and Paul indicated concern with the "overly structured nature of priesthood" within the RLDS Church. President Wallace B. Smith's Inspired Document likewise expressed worry over priesthood members who misunderstand the purpose of their calling: "Succumbing to pride, some have used it for personal aggrandizement. Others, through disinterest or lack of diligence, have failed to magnify their calling or have become inactive. When this has happened, the church has experienced a loss of spiritual power, and the entire priesthood structure has been diminished." Though in many respects our churches have gone separate ways since Nauvoo, we have both acquired very large and complex organizations that have come to be managed bureaucratically, that is, through increasing specialization. For Latter-day Saints, priesthood has come to be exclusively defined and related to functions performed by males. Sometimes it is equated with males themselves.

It is of more than passing interest that this RLDS proclamation on priesthood should include instructions for furthering the building of a temple "for there is great need of the spiritual awakening that will be engendered by the ministries experienced within its walls." These, the document says, will be "the means of a great blessing" for the people, as well as "the means for providing leadership education for priesthood and member."

Similarly, for LDS Church members who have a long and extensive tradition of temple building and temple ordinances, the temple has provided rich blessings. But it is the temple which points to a major difference between our two churches on the question of women and priesthood. The endowment LDS women receive as part of the temple ordinances is and always has been an endowment of power, of authority. "The Church is not now organized in its proper order, and cannot be until the Temple is completed," Joseph Smith told members of the Relief Society on 28 April 1842. He told the sisters he wanted them to be a "kingdom of priestesses" as in Enoch's day or Paul's day.<sup>1</sup> Later, on 27 May 1842, Bishop Newel K. Whitney, who had just received his own temple endowment through Joseph Smith, told a Relief Society meeting "that without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth — it takes all to restore the Priesthood."<sup>2</sup> In the Church's most sacred liturgy women would both receive authority and pass it on to other women. "You sisters who labor in the House of the Lord can lay your hands upon your sisters, and with divine authority, because the Lord recognizes positions which you occupy," Joseph Fielding Smith told a Relief Society general conference in October 1958. "A person may have authority given to him, or a sister to her, to do certain things in the Church that are binding and absolutely necessary for our salvation, such as the work that our sisters do in the House of the Lord. They have authority given unto them to do some great and wonderful things, sacred unto the Lord, and binding just as thoroughly as are the blessings that are given by the men who hold the Priesthood." Women have authority, affirmed President Smith, but added (for reasons I do not understand) "the sisters have not been given the Priesthood."<sup>3</sup>

The idea of an eternal union between man and woman as presented in the temple ordinances may well have affected Joseph's perspective on the growing church organization. In organizing the Relief Society in 1842 Joseph Smith told the women that they were being organized "in the order of the priesthood," or "after the pattern of the priesthood." He said "the Church was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized," and he

<sup>1</sup> "A Record of the Organization, and Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," 28 April 1842, microfilm of holograph, Historical Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter, LDS Church Archives. See also Bathsheba W. Smith, "Remarks," *Woman's Exponent* 34 (July, Aug. 1905): 14.

<sup>2</sup> "A Record of . . . the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," 27 May 1842.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, "Relief Society — An Aid to the Priesthood," *Relief Society Magazine* 46 (Jan. 1959): 4. The history and significance of Latter-day Saint women's involvement in temple ordinances are carefully examined by Carol Cornwall Madsen in "Eternal Womanhood: The Quest for Definition," forthcoming in a collection of scholarly essays about Mormon women.

turned to them a key or keys which authorized them, in the words of Bruce R. McConkie, "to direct, control, and govern the affairs of the society."<sup>4</sup>

Again, these keys of authority were not termed "priesthood." Relief Society offices were distinguished from priesthood offices relatively early; certainly they never became part of the male authority structure. Yet these female Church officers have provided something of a counterpart to male Church officers. Some scholars suggest that the Prophet Joseph Smith may have intended women to have an organizational structure parallel to the men's — a companion organization.<sup>5</sup> The RLDS considered a similar option as the survey conducted under First Presidency direction in some twenty nations proposed: "to create some new offices of ordination open to women only," or "to utilize the laying on of hands for setting women apart to specific roles or functions but not ordination to priesthood."<sup>6</sup> Neither was accepted.

The position of the LDS Relief Society relative to other quorums, namely priesthood quorums, is historically and currently ambiguous. The priesthood reform movement just after the turn of the century defined the Relief Society as an auxiliary to the priesthood, probably a successful definition in terms of practical administration. But ideologically the notion of a parallel or companion organization has persisted among both women and men.

Joseph Fielding Smith indicated that "we speak of [the Relief Society] as an auxiliary, which means a help, but the Relief Society is more than that." Within the Relief Society women

have been given power and authority to do a great many things. The work which they do is done by divine authority. . . . Just as necessary is the labor of the Relief Society in the Church as it is, shall I say? with the quorums of the Priesthood. Now some may feel that I am expressing this a little too strongly, but my own judgment is that the work that you, our good sisters, are doing, finds its place and is just as important in the building up of this kingdom, strengthening it, causing it to expand, laying a foundation upon which we all may build, just as much as it is for the brethren who hold the Priesthood of God."<sup>7</sup>

While LDS women do not hold priesthood offices they have a tradition of liturgical and ecclesiastical authority. But since LDS women today are not generally perceived as having such authority nor perceive themselves as having it, does it really make a difference?

Within the context of our discussion, yes. In the context of expanding the role of women in the LDS Church we have to ask some different questions. Do LDS women need to work toward a different ordination or toward an acknowledgment of the significant power that doctrine and history say is theirs?

<sup>4</sup> "Early Reminiscence" Relief Society, 17 March 1882, in Relief Society Record, 1880–92, LDS Church Archives; "Sarah M. Kimball, Secretary of the LDS Women's Organizations," *Representative Women of Deseret: A Book of Biographical Sketches*, comp. Augusta Joyce Crocheron (Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham & Co., 1884), p. 27; Bruce R. McConkie, "The Relief Society and the Keys of the Kingdom," *Relief Society Magazine* 37 (March 1950): 151.

<sup>5</sup> See Linda King Newell, "A Gift Given: A Gift Taken; Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick, Among Mormon Women," *Sunstone* 6 (Sept./Oct. 1981): 16–25.

<sup>6</sup> "RLDS Women and the Priesthood," *Sunstone Review* 4 (March 1984): 6.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, "Relief Society — An Aid to the Priesthood," pp. 5, 6.



Our foremothers, whatever frustrations they may have experienced within the system, felt endowed with power. An 1880 poster of "Representative Women of Deseret" features photographs of Eliza R. Snow and other officers of the Relief Society, Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association, and Primary Association, as well as other prominent Mormon women writers and leaders. At the top of the poster overarching the clusters of photographs is the sketch of a cloud with a centered crown; from the sides of the cloud extend two hands from whose palms extend rays—of light, of energy, of power?—to the women. These early sisters spoke, taught, and led with authority. They called their sisters to positions of leadership and ordained them to the callings. Their authority took them beyond administration to administer spiritual comfort and blessing to those in need.

Has this female authority been lost or passed away? Is it a matter, as Robert Frost said, of "possessing what we still [are] unpossessed by"?<sup>8</sup> What about the relationship of this authority to other ecclesiastical authority? Is it a second-class authority because it has not placed women in the Church's highest councils, nor helped us to maintain economic independence, nor allowed us some administrative posts that have no relation to priesthood office and yet are reserved for priesthood bearers? Should women forget this authority and work toward gaining the power designated as priesthood? Can women be partners without holding the same ecclesiastical offices as men?

I am intrigued by Madelon's comment on integration versus assimilation. Do women have something unique to offer — different realities, new energy? Do they, as Carol Gilligan suggests, speak with "a different voice"? Would that voice be lost if women were to enter the government of the Church through offices which are male-determined and male-defined? Is it time to hasten an expanded definition of priesthood that includes both male and female, motherhood and fatherhood, sisterhood and brotherhood?<sup>9</sup>

I began this response with reference to the Restoration, which is in my view a process of receiving and implementing truth — line upon line, precept upon precept, grace for grace. Newel K. Whitney's comment that "without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth" should be the basis of some important questions for us. Joseph Smith's question began the Restoration and questions will continue the process. Let me close then with a question, one asked by Joseph Fielding Smith:

You [sisters], through your faithfulness and your obedience, will find your place in the kingdom of God when it is established in its fulness and righteousness. . . . It is within the privilege of the sisters of this Church to receive exaltation in the kingdom of God and receive authority and power as queens and priestesses, and I am sure if they have that power they have some power to rule and reign. Else why would they be priestesses?<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright," *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 348.

<sup>9</sup> The idea of a thoughtfully expanded definition is suggested by Grethe Ballif Peterson, "Priesthood and LDS Women: Six Contemporary Definitions," forthcoming in a collection of scholarly essays about Mormon women.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, "Relief Society — An Aid to the Priesthood," pp. 5, 6.