Women and Priesthood

RLDS Priesthood: Structure and Process

Paul M. Edwards

It sometimes appears that RLDS members are more impressed with receiving an inspired document from the Prophet than they are with what it says, thus reminding one of Augustine's comment that most folks "pay more attention to the dishes than to the food which is served on them." But the 1984 document is far different for there is considerable emotion and controversy about it.

Two paragraphs of the document deal with the ordination of women. The first (paragraph 9, Section 156, RLDS Doctrine and Covenants) states:

> I have heard the prayers of many, including my servant the prophet, as they have sought to know my will in regard to the question of who shall be called to share the burdens and responsibilities of priesthood in my church. I say to you now, as I have said in the past, that all are called according to the gifts which have been given them. This applies to priesthood as well as to any other aspects of the work. Therefore, do not wonder that some women of the church are being called to priesthood responsibilities. This is in harmony with my will and where these calls are made known to my servants, they may be processed according to administrative procedures and provisions of the law. Nevertheless, in the ordaining of women to priesthood, let this be done with all deliberateness. Before actual laying on of hands takes place, let specific guidelines and instructions be provided by the spiritual authorities, that all may be done in order.

Paragraph 10 further explains:

> Remember, in many places there is still much uncertainty and misunderstanding regarding the principles of calling and giftedness. There are persons whose burden in this regard will require that considerable labor and ministerial support be provided. This should be extended with prayer and tenderness of feeling, that all may be blessed with the full power of my reconciling Spirit.

While the discussion of the 1984 document tends to revolve around the ordination of women, it is important to note — though I do not notice a lot of people noting it — that this document also contained some significant insights concerning the priesthood, and, as well, further understandings about the temple. While not so dramatic, both have significant implications for the

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Church. There is a very open and firm statement concerning the obligations of the priesthood.

> It is my will that my priesthood be made up of those who have an abiding faith and desire to serve me with all their hearts, in humility and with great devotion. Therefore, where there are those who are not now functioning in their priesthood, let inquiry be made by the proper administrative officers, according to the provisions of the law, to determine the continuing nature of their commitment. (D&C 156:8)

Ever since the 1968 and 1972 documents (Sections 149, 194A, and 150), gave consideration to the construction of a contemporary temple in Independence, there has been considerable speculation about what was envisioned in the edifice. Part of the answer was provided here:

> The temple shall be dedicated to the pursuit of peace. It shall be for reconciliation and for healing of the spirit. It shall also be for a strengthening of faith and preparation for witness. By its ministries an attitude of wholeness of body, mind, and spirit as a desirable end toward which to strive will be fostered. It shall be the means for providing leadership education for priesthood and members. And it shall be a place in which the essential meaning of the Restoration as healing and redeeming agent is given new life and understanding, inspired by the life and witness of the Redeemer of the world. (D&C 156:5)

Our interest here, however, is with the ordination of women in the priesthood of the RLDS Church. In understanding this, some brief comments about the RLDS priesthood structure might be helpful, for it is different than the Latter-day Saints procedure.

For the RLDS, calls to the priesthood have traditionally been a matter of personal "awareness" that an individual — a man, so far — has both actual ability and potential. And that such talent, balanced with dedication and interest, is to be used in the service of the Creator. There is considerable stress on potential, feeling that the office helps make the person as well as the person the office. Within the RLDS movement, persons are generally called in an ascending manner from deacon, teacher, priest, elder, high priest, though many start well up the ladder. Age, level of maturity, and the specialization of talents are primary considerations.

There is no minimum or maximum age, but the first call usually comes early in the young person's career, say in the late teens or twenties. Calls to the office of elder are consistently presented for persons with a period of service in a previous priesthood office. Calls to the high priesthood come for those who are identified as persons of experience and wisdom and for whom administrative assignments are envisioned. Bishops and Seventies are called into orders to perform specialized functions, stewardship and evangelism, respectively.

In the main, priesthood responsibilities are outlined in the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, and tend to be described along functional lines. The deacon's role, less defined than others, is to look after the comforts and safety of the Saints assembled. The priest is to "visit the house of each member, and . . . exhort them to pray vocally and in secret," and to attend to all family duties. Elders are to conduct the meetings of the Saints "according to the commandments and revelations of God." High priests' duties include responsibilities to

oversee, to administer, counsel, and lead the people. This latter office contains the orders of the leadership of the Church: Presiding Bishopric, Twelve, and First Presidency.

Calls to the Aaronic Priesthood, as well as for elders, are made through either the presiding elder (congregation) or stake president, the stake high council, and the stake conference. Often prior approval is given by the congregation involved. For those called to the high priesthood, a call is initiated by the stake president or the metropole president and then should be approved by the apostle in the field, the director of field ministries, the First Presidency, and finally by the stake high council, the stake conference, or the World Conference.

As far as I am aware there is no written policy on just how the Church is to deal with inspired documents. The question of how such a document gets to the conference has, historically, been set by the Prophet, and it is the nature of the document which has determined the process of acceptance. Early in the Church, inspired direction to the body was taken either to the quorums — conferences were not a part of the original understandings of organization — or were expressed by Joseph Smith and simply recorded.

The RLDS Church was born in a branch business meeting and its tradition of conference action is very important. The law of common consent requires that a conference of the people assembled must act upon the documents. The first documents of the movement — up through Section 117 — were sent first to the quorums and orders for their consideration, after that to the elders who were, at the time, the most representative body until the conference was fully organized. The 1878 Cincinnati Edition of the Doctrine and Covenants — the first edition the RLDS accepted as such — was approved by the RLDS Church in conference, and this approval carried all previous revelations printed in that volume.

Section 121 was given as simple instruction in 1885. It was accepted by the conference but was never sent to the quorums. Some documents were unaddressed as far as identifying the receivers and were assumed to be business for the quorums and the conference. There was a point, just after the turn of the century, when the quorums considered them serially — that is, moving from the Twelve to the Presiding Bishopric, then to the high priests, seventies, and elders.

In 1916 what was presented came as a report to the Joint Council of the First Presidency, Bishopric, and Twelve, was sent to the quorums after Council consideration, and then to the conference. In 1920 what was to become Section 133 was sent to the conference first and then to the quorums, primarily because it dealt with the function of some of the quorums themselves.

In 1972 the procedure was amended to provide a chance for questions by those delegates and members of the conference who did not have the document available through a quorum session. So, in effect, the entire conference organization has been apprised of the document prior to the time that it came to the floor of the conference. The current document (Section 156) came addressed to the councils, quorums, orders, and members of the World Conference.

While the document comes to the conference legislative assembly it is not really dealt with in a legislative manner. There are discussion and questions, even, at times, serious argument for or against the document but no consideration that would allow for the acceptance of one part and not another or that would allow the amending or alteration of the document itself. Such documents are traditionally accepted or rejected in total. Within the quorums, there were few attempts to make alterations, even to table aspects of the document. But these are automatically out of order. The legislative body may consider it paragraph by paragraph, but it then votes on the document in its entirety. President Smith, following tradition, is not in the chamber for the discussion or vote, and his councilors (or on occasion the Presiding Patriarch or chairman of the Council of Twelve) chair the conference.

Reactions to Section 156 have varied. There have been very few instances I have observed where persons, male or female, have indicated any violent disbelief or dislike for the direction received. After all, a refusal to accept this document and to follow the dictates of the conference action involves far more than simply disagreement. Up until the time that it was approved, the door was wide open for argument, discussion, or questions concerning the validity of the idea or the spirit of the document. But once it had been approved by the quorums and accepted by the conference — especially by such a significant margin — it was the law of the Church. To continue to oppose it is to oppose the Church. And, as is often the case, those most likely to question a new concept on the grounds of its implied liberalism are also those who feel very strongly about obedience to the Church. This was, for a significant number, a test of faith in the Church and as such was an affirmation of the Prophet and the institutional movement.

This does not mean, however, that there has not been considerable reaction. On the negative side I found these sorts of objections: (1) It suggests a God who changes. After all, if God had seen fit for women to be in the priesthood of the Church why were they not originally involved? The seriousness of this question comes from our people's limited understanding of the nature of God and of open canon. (2) There is considerable concern about the violation of tradition. It has always been a male priesthood. In significant ways a change now means a whole new interpretation of that which many feel does not need alteration. After all can women be "patriarchs"? (3) Some have suggested that women are unqualified. This is a much more emotional point than others and is heard from both men and women. *Unqualified* is used in a variety of ways and in degrees, but the general meaning is that women are unfit to hold such offices. This seems to stem from a feeling left over from previous decades, that women are not rational enough. (4) There is a question about what it will do to male ego. While this may seem a little strange — no one has worried much about female ego for awhile — it is serious. How can a man keep control of the household when he is a deacon and she a high priest? (5) Questions of adjustment seem almost overwhelming at the moment. What do you do when a priesthood call is needed at 2:00 A.M. and the only person you can find to go with you is of the opposite sex? That seems to be

heavy on the minds of some persons who are not secure with the intrasexual nature of today's world. It is also interesting to note that many women who want other women to be treated equally do not seem to want their husbands to have lunch with them. Equality is generally seen as a less personal relationship. Those who hold priesthood and who have some idea about how intensely personal and intimate it can sometimes be worry about how well men and women will handle this.

On the positive side, there was a lot of soul searching and more than one person spoke eloquently concerning his or her personal dislike of the alteration in tradition but affirming strong support of an idea whose time had most certainly come. There was strong support for the Prophet and the courage shown in this willing acceptance of a controversial position. Many also felt that the role of women was the central issue facing the Church domestically and saw this document as a powerful statement about the future. They saw it as a significant sign of the Church's willingness to deal with the modern world. I have also observed a great deal of cautious optimism, particularly among women. This is not the end of our difficulties nor does it answer all the questions women had been raising. Now that there are no scriptural or administrative grounds for noninvolvement, those concerned recognize there are very special problems for those who must now consider priesthood in a different light. There is concern as well that this move might carry with it further support for the traditional priesthood system which, in the minds of many, needs serious additional consideration. Few have voiced a desire to abolish priesthood altogether but now question more seriously if the system is operating as it should.

In terms of personal reaction, I cheerfully confess that when I first heard the document read I was shocked. I kept thinking of Epstein's Third Law: "If you think the problem is bad now, just wait until we've solved it." My condition of shock held for some time. Perhaps I have not really gotten over it yet. My shock was not disbelief nor unhappiness over the document. I was proud of Wallace B. Smith for his courage and concern. I found myself unable to deal with the immediacy of it. I recall those years when I rose every morning anticipating the joy of marking off one more day of my army enlistment. On the day of my release I felt a real loss. Well, in some respects this describes my feeling.

I considered the document to be a very valid statement. I have felt for some time that well over half the talent in the church was being limited by our tradition of an all-male priesthood. But now, what was I to do?

Perhaps the real significance of it — and of the power behind it — is seen in the fact that for over an hour that first day, one man after another rose to tell of his experience. They were often seriously opposed to women in the priesthood — sometimes had spoken against it hostilely — but now testified that they found the change valid and felt it should be made. Men I respected, and whom I knew to be more conservative than I, dug deep into their own souls and saw a truth. Of course, some spoke against it. But they did so with serious concern, quietly and without rancor, feeling strong passions mellowed by the concern of the group.