

The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood

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When the topic of women holding the priesthood in the LDS Church comes up, it is often met with bad jokes (“I hold the priesthood every night when he comes home from work,” or “Maybe women will hold the priesthood when men become mothers”), and a not-so-subtle display of fear among both men (“What are women trying to do, usurp the male role in the home and church?”) and women (“I wouldn’t want all that responsibility — would *you?*”). Usually these church members are convinced that their views are shared by all faithful members, including “the Brethren,” and are consistent with our Church’s history. While an examination of that history leaves unanswered the question of women’s ordination to the priesthood, the historical overview of LDS women’s relationship to priesthood suggests a more expansive view than many members now hold.

Although I have found no case where women have claimed ordination to the priesthood, there are accounts of women being “ordained” to specific callings and of women who exercised powers and spiritual gifts now assigned only to male priesthood holders. These practices and the endorsement of them by such Church leaders as Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Heber J. Grant, and others, have left many unanswered questions.

When Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society on 17 March 1842 (see Minutes), he gave the women an autonomy currently unknown in that organization. He instructed the sisters to elect their own president who would then select her counselors. Then he “would ordain them to preside over the society . . . just as the Presidency preside over the church.”

Elizabeth Ann Whitney moved that Emma Smith be made president. Sophia Packard seconded it. Emma chose Elizabeth Ann Whitney and Sarah M. Cleveland as counselors. Joseph then “read the Revelation to Emma Smith, from the . . . Doctrine and Covenants; and stated that she was ordain’d at the time the revelation was given [in July 1830], to expound the scriptures to all; and to teach the female part of the community.” He continued by saying that she was designated an “Elect Lady” because she was “elected to preside.”

John Taylor then “laid his hands on the head of Mrs. Cleveland and ordain’d her to be a Counsellor to . . . Emma Smith.” He followed the same procedure in “ordaining” Elizabeth Whitney. Susa Young Gates later emphasized that these women were “not only set apart, but ordained.” At the third meeting, 30 March 1842, Joseph addressed the women and told them “that the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood . . . he was going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch’s day — as in Paul’s day.” On 17 May Newel K. Whitney accompanied Joseph Smith and told the

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women: "In the beginning, God created man, male and female, and bestow'd upon man certain blessings peculiar to a man of God, of which woman partook, so that without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth — it takes all to restore the Priesthood." Although Whitney had recently been initiated into the endowment and his remarks most certainly reflect his awareness of women's forthcoming role in that ordinance, his words also reflect an anticipation that many held in that era: women's role within the Church was to include priesthood powers — at least in some form. On 28 April 1842 Joseph Smith told the women: "I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time." It is important to remember that "keys" were commonly associated with "priesthood" and that Joseph turned the key to women rather than in their behalf as the standard *History of the Church* would report (HC 4:607).

The change can be traced to George A. Smith who, in 1854, was assigned to complete Joseph Smith's history. In working on the manuscript from 1 April 1840 to 1 March 1842 — including the Relief Society minutes in question — he revised and corrected the already compiled history, using "reports of sermons of Joseph Smith and others from minutes or sketches taken at the time in long hand." He mentioned using Eliza R. Snow's writings as well and said he had taken "the greatest care . . . to convey the ideas in the prophet's style as near as possible; and in no case has the sentiment been varied that I know of" (Jessee, 1973, 458). He did not, however, comment on this particular passage from the minutes or explain his reasons for changing "I turn the key to you" to "I now turn the key in your behalf." George A. Smith's interpretation has stood in Church publications from that time to the present.

By the time the Relief Society was organized, women had already exercised such spiritual gifts as speaking in tongues and blessing the sick.¹ These practices made a natural entrance into the Relief Society. After the close of the fourth meeting, 19 April 1842, Emma Smith, Sarah Cleveland, and Elizabeth Whitney administered to a Sister Durfee. The following week, she testified that she had "been healed and thought the sisters had more faith than the brethren." After that meeting, Sarah and Elizabeth blessed another Relief Society member, Abigail Leonard, "for the restoration of health."

In the next meeting, Joseph Smith specifically addressed the propriety of women giving blessings: "If God gave his sanction by healing . . . there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water." There were women ordained to heal the sick and it was their privilege to do so. "If the sisters should have faith to heal the sick," he said, "let all hold their tongues" (28 April 1842).

¹ For examples of women participating in healing in Kirtland, see Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, "Sweet Council and Seas of Tribulation: The Religious Life of the Women in Kirtland," *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 151–62. See also Linda King Newell, "Gifts of the Spirit: Women's Share," forthcoming in a volume edited by Lavina Fielding Anderson and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. Part of that essay was published in "A Gift Given, A Gift Taken: Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick Among Mormon Women." *Sunstone* 6 (Sept./Oct. 1981): 16–26, from which some material has been adapted for this essay.

After the death of Joseph Smith in June 1844, the Relief Society did not meet. The following spring, however, several women must have approached Brigham Young about resuming regular meetings, for in a meeting of the Seventies he declared that women “never can hold the Priesthood apart from their husbands. When I want Sisters or the Wives of the members of the church to get up Relief Society I will summon them to my aid but until that time let them stay at home & if you see females huddling together . . . and if they say Joseph started it tell them its a damned lie for I know he never encouraged it” (Seventies Record, 9 March 1845).

These minutes leave some questions. Certainly Brigham was not saying that Joseph did not organize the Relief Society. That was an established fact. What, then, did he mean when he said that Joseph did not start “it”? Perhaps the clue lies in the first line, Women “never can hold the Priesthood apart from their husbands.” Confusion over the relationship of the Relief Society to priesthood authority would deepen, but vital links had already been established between the Relief Society and the exercise of spiritual gifts, priesthood, and the temple.

“Blessing meetings” that had been a feature of both Kirtland and Nauvoo spiritual life continued. In them, the Saints often combined the laying on of hands for health blessings, tongues, and prophecy. Eliza R. Snow’s diary contains numerous references to these occasions. For example, on 1 January 1847, she wrote of receiving a blessing “thro’ our belov’d mother Chase and sis[ter] Clarissa [Decker] by the gift of tongues,” adding: “To describe the scene . . . would be beyond my power.” (Snow, 1 Jan. 1847). This group of women would teach the next several generations of Mormon women about spiritual gifts.

Another practice grew out of the ordinances the Saints had received in the Nauvoo Temple. Washing and anointing the sick became a common practice among Church members, particularly women. It was customary for the person administering a blessing to anoint with oil the part of the body in need of healing — for example, a sore shoulder or perhaps a crushed leg. For instance, in 1849 Eliza Jane Merrick, an English convert, reported healing her sister: “I anointed her chest with the oil you consecrated, and also gave her some inwardly . . . She continued very ill all the evening: her breath very short, and the fever very high. I again anointed her chest in the name of the Lord, and asked his blessing; he was graciously pleased to hear me, and in the course of twenty-four hours, she was as well as if nothing had been the matter.” (Merrick 1849, 205) One can easily see the inappropriateness of men anointing women in such cases.

There were, however, those who questioned the propriety of such practices by women and the two strands of confidence and doubt began to intertwine. Mary Ellen Able Kimball’s journal records a visit on 2 March 1857 to wash and anoint a sick woman who immediately felt better. But after returning home,

I thought of the instructions I had received from time to time that the priesthood was not bestowed upon women. I accordingly asked Mr. Kimball [her husband, Heber C.]

if woman had a right to wash and anoint the sick for the recovery of their health or is it mockery in them to do so. He replied inasmuch as they are obedient to their husbands they have a right to administer in that way in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ but not by authority of the priesthood invested in them for that authority is not given to woman.

Mary Ellen concluded with the kind of argument that would calm women's apprehensions for the next four decades: "He also said they might administer by the authority given to their husbands in as much as they were one with their husband" (March 1857).

On other occasions, the concept of women holding the priesthood in connection with their husbands was reinforced when husbands and wives joined together in blessing their children. Wilford Woodruff's namesake son, just ordained a priest, was about to begin his duties. The future Church president summoned his family on 3 February 1854. "His father and mother [Phoebe Carter Woodruff] laid hands upon him and blessed him and dedicated him unto the Lord" (Woodruff 4:244). On 8 September 1875, George Goddard recorded a similar incident about his sixteen-year-old son, Brigham H. On his birthday, "his Mother and Myself, put our hands upon his head and pronounced a parents blessing upon him."

While these applications of faith were loving and natural, the question of women's having priesthood authority remained unsettled. Zina Huntington, a plural wife first of Joseph Smith and later Brigham Young, received a patriarchal blessing from John Smith, Joseph's uncle, in 1850, which stated: "the Priesthood in fullness is & Shall be Conferd upon you" (Smith 11:6).² Sarah Granger Kimball, whose idea it was to organize the women of Nauvoo, had used the priesthood structure as a pattern for the Relief Society in her ward, complete with deaconesses and teachers (S. Kimball 1868). However, John Taylor, who had originally ordained those first officers in March 1842, explained that "some of the sisters have thought that these sisters mentioned were, in this ordination, ordained to the priesthood . . . [but] it is not the calling of these sisters to hold the Priesthood, only in connection with their husbands, they being one with their husbands (JD 21:367-68). This 1880 statement stood as the official interpretation.

On 23 December 1881, the anniversary of Joseph Smith's birthday, Zina Huntington Young records in her diary that she washed and anointed one woman "for her health, and administered to another for her hearing," then reminisced about the days in Nauvoo. "I have practiced much with My Sister Presendia Kimball while in Nauvoo & ever since before Joseph Smith's death. He blest Sister's to bless the sick." Then on 3 September 1890, she noted that Bishop Newel K. Whitney had "blest the Sisters in having faith to administer to there own families in humble faith not saying by the Authority of the Holy Priesthood but in the name of Jesus Christ." She thus made a direct distinction between the women's blessings and priesthood blessings. Six months earlier

² Statements such as this are sometimes dismissed as references to the church's highest ordinance, the "second anointing" or "fulness of the priesthood," but that ordinance does in fact confer priesthood power on women. See Buerger 1983.

she had visited her sick son and administered to him (Young, Journal, 5 March 1890).

But statements about healing by women and priesthood functions had been creating confusion among some Church members for several years. In 1878, Angus Cannon, president of the Salt Lake Stake, had announced, "The sisters have a right to anoint the sick, and pray the Father to heal them, and to exercise that faith that will prevail with God; but women must be careful how they use the authority of the priesthood in administering to the sick." Two years later on 8 August 1880 an address by John Taylor on "The Order and Duties of the Priesthood" reaffirmed that women "hold the Priesthood, only in connection with their husbands, they being one with their husbands" (JD 21:368).

A circular letter from the First Presidency that October spelled out that women "should not be ordained to any office in the Priesthood; but they may be appointed as Helps, and Assistants, and Presidents, among their own sex" and that anointing and blessing the sick were not official functions of the Relief Society since any faithful Church member might perform the actions. Women could administer to the sick "in their respective families." This acknowledgment raised another question: What about administering to those outside the family circle? They gave no answer, although the practice of calling for the elders or for the sisters had certainly been established. Another question was whether women needed to be set apart to bless the sick. In 1884, Eliza R. Snow asserted: "Any and all sisters who honor their holy endowments, not only have the right, but should feel it a duty, whenever called upon to administer to our sisters in these ordinances, which God has graciously committed to His daughters as well as to His sons" (Snow, 1884).

Two differing points of view were now in print. Eliza Snow and the First Presidency agreed that the Relief Society had no monopoly on the ordinance of administration by and for women. The First Presidency, however, implied that the ordinance should now be limited to the woman's family without specifying any requirement but faithfulness. Eliza Snow, on the other hand, had said nothing of limiting administrations to the family — indeed, the implication is clear that anyone in need of a blessing should receive it — but said that only women who had been endowed might officiate.

When precisely the same act was performed and very nearly the same words were used among women in the temple, among women outside the temple, and among men administering to women, the distinction — in the average mind — became shadowy indeed.

Despite the growing ambiguity as the nineteenth century closed, the leading sisters had successfully maintained their right to exercise the gift of blessing and had been supported by the Church hierarchy. The twentieth century would see a definite shift.

Louisa "Lula" Greene Richards, former editor of the *Woman's Exponent*, wrote a somewhat terse letter to President Lorenzo Snow on 9 April 1901 concerning an article she had read in the *Deseret News*. It had stated: "Priest, Teacher or Deacon may administer to the sick, and so may a member, male or female, but neither of them can seal the anointing and blessing, because the

authority to do that is vested in the Priesthood after the order of Melchizedek.” Lula wrote:

If the information given in the answer is absolutely correct, then myself and thousands of other members of the Church have been misinstructed and are laboring under a very serious mistake, which certainly should be authoritatively corrected. Sister Eliza R. Snow Smith [her correspondent's sister], from the Prophet Joseph Smith, her husband, taught the sisters in her day, that a very important part of the sacred ordinance of administrations to the sick was the sealing of the anointing and blessings, and should never be omitted. And we follow the pattern she gave us continually. We do not seal in the authority of the Priesthood, but in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There is no record of Lorenzo Snow's reply.

Over the next few years, an emerging definition of priesthood authority and an increased emphasis on its importance would remove spiritual responsibilities from women and link those rights with priesthood alone. The statements authorizing the continuance of women's blessings only signaled their dependence on that permission. Sometime during the first decade of the new century, the Relief Society circulated a letter called simply “Answers to Questions.” Undated, it ended with the notation: “Approved by the First Presidency of the Church.” It may have been a response to an unsigned 1903 *Young Woman's Journal* lesson that claimed “Only the higher or Melchizedek Priesthood has the right to lay on hands for the healing of the sick, or to direct the administration, . . . though to pray for the sick is the right that necessarily belongs to every member of the Church” (“Gifts” 1903, 384). This may be the earliest published claim that only the Melchizedek Priesthood had authority to heal. The Relief Society's approved letter, however, clearly indicated that any endowed woman had authority to perform such services and that these blessings were not confined to her family. The letter also cautioned the women to avoid resemblances in language to the temple forms, and although the blessings should be sealed, the sisters did not need a priesthood holder to do it.

But the early generation that had taught that women held the priesthood in connection with their husbands was passing. In 1907 the *Improvement Era* published the query: “Does a wife hold the priesthood with her husband? and may she lay hands on the sick with him, with authority?” Speaking for a new generation, President Joseph F. Smith answered:

A wife does not hold the priesthood in connection with her husband, but she enjoys the benefits thereof with him; and if she is requested to lay hands on the sick with him, or with any other officer holding the Melchizedek priesthood, she may do so with perfect propriety. It is no uncommon thing for a man and wife unitedly to administer to their children, and the husband being mouth, he may properly say out of courtesy, “By authority of the holy priesthood in us vested” (Smith 1907, 308).

During the opening years of the twentieth century, a clearer definition of priesthood emerged, bringing with it a redefinition of the role of women. In 1901 B. H. Roberts, a member of the third presiding quorum, the Seventies, lamented how “common” the priesthood seemed to be held and insisted that “respect for the Priesthood” went far beyond respecting the General Authori-

ties to include "all those who hold the Priesthood . . . presidents of stakes; . . . Bishops . . . the Priests, who teach the Gospel at the firesides of the people . . . and the humblest that holds that power" (CR Oct. 1901, 58). Thus, the priesthood was defined not only as a power from God but also as the man upon whom it was conferred. Statements like this dovetailed with the practice of referring to all ordained male members as "the priesthood."

By 1913, it is evident that the priesthood — meaning, by this time, the authoritative structure of the Church — had authority also over those gifts that had once been the right of every member of the household of faith.

The Relief Society General Board minutes for 7 October 1913 record a growing concern of President Emmeline B. Wells: "In the early days in Nauvoo women administered to the sick and many were healed through their administration, and while some of the brethren do not approve of this, it is to be hoped the blessing will not be taken from us" (4:124). This seems to be the earliest acknowledgment that the Church hierarchy disapproved of the practice.

In response to President Joseph F. Smith's statement that the auxiliaries "are not independent of the priesthood of the Son of God," the Relief Society explained in its February 1914 *Bulletin*, that all systems have their law. The Church has "the law of God" and defines priesthood as

the power to administer in the ordinances of the Gospel . . . Those who preside over the auxiliary organizations receive their authority from the presiding Priesthood. Women do not hold the Priesthood. This fact must be faced calmly by mothers and explained clearly to young women, for the spirit that is now abroad in the world makes for women's demand for every place and office enjoyed by men, and a few more that men can't enter. Women in this Church must not forget that they have rights which men do not possess.

The writer does not specify these rights but assures women that even the superior woman will marry "the right one," identifiable because "he will be just one or more degrees superior in intelligence and power to the superior woman." In any case if he holds the priesthood, "women everywhere . . . should render that reverence and obedience that belongs of right of the Priesthood which he holds." (pp. 1-3)

An October 1914 letter to bishops and stake presidents from President Joseph F. Smith and his counselors established an official policy on "washing and anointing our sisters preparatory to their confinement." After affirming that sisters may wash, anoint, seal anointings, and bless a woman prior to giving birth, the letter states: "It should, however, always be remembered that the command of the Lord is to call in the elders to administer to the sick, and when they can be called in, they should be asked to anoint the sick or seal the anointing."

By 1921 the statements concerning women and their relationship to the priesthood had become increasingly narrow. In April Conference, Rudger Clawson of the Quorum of the Twelve told the church members: "The Priesthood is not received, or held, or exercised in any degree, by the women of the Church; but nevertheless, the women of the Church enjoy the blessings of the

Priesthood through their husbands" (CR April 1921, 24–25). Later in the same conference, Charles W. Penrose of the First Presidency referred to Elder Clawson's remarks and added his own commentary:

There seems to be a revival of the idea among some of our sisters that they hold the priesthood. . . . When a woman is sealed to a man holding the Priesthood, she becomes one with him . . . She receives blessings in association with him. . . . Sisters have said to me sometimes, "But, I hold the Priesthood with my husband." "Well," I asked, "what office do you hold in the Priesthood?" Then they could not say much more. The sisters are not ordained to any office in the Priesthood and there is authority in the Church which they cannot exercise: it does not belong to them; they cannot do that properly any more than they can change themselves into a man. Now, sisters, do not take the idea that I wish to convey that you have no blessings or authority or power belonging to the Priesthood. When you are sealed to a man of God who holds it and who, by overcoming, inherits the fulness of the glory of God, you will share that with him if you are fit for it, and I guess you will be (CR April 1921, 108).

This more detailed explanation did not clarify a great deal. Even if a woman were "one" with her priesthood-holding husband, she still could not *do* anything as a result of that union. Furthermore, President Penrose conveyed the impression that priesthood does not exist apart from priesthood offices. He then reported women asking him "if they did not have the right to administer to the sick" and he, quoting Jesus' promise to his apostles of the signs that will follow the believers, conceded that there might be

occasions when perhaps it would be wise for a woman to lay her hands upon a child, or upon one another sometimes, and there have been appointments made for our sisters, some good women, to anoint and bless others of their sex who expect to go through times of great personal trial, travail and 'labor;' so that is all right, so far as it goes. But when women go around and declare that they have been set apart to administer to the sick and take the place that is given to the elders of the Church by revelation as declared through James of old, and through the Prophet Joseph in modern times, that is an assumption of authority and contrary to scripture, which is that when people are sick they shall call for the elders of the Church and they shall pray over them and officially lay hands on them (CR April 1921, 198).

Even though President Penrose here cited the authority of Joseph Smith and even though Joseph Smith had certainly taught the propriety and authority of elders to heal the sick, the Prophet had cited that same scripture in the 12 April 1842 Relief Society meeting but, ironically, had made a far different commentary: "These signs . . . should follow all that believe whether male or female."

Another clarification of women's position came in 1922 when the First Presidency, then consisting of Heber J. Grant, Charles W. Penrose, and Anthony W. Ivins issued a circular letter defining the purposes of each auxiliary. The Relief Society was first: "Women, not being heirs to the priesthood except as they enjoy and participate in the blessings through their husbands, are not identified with the priesthood quorums" (Clark 4:314–15). The pattern of removing women from the realm of anything associated with the role of male priesthood had now been established, clarified, and validated.

The strength of that pattern can be seen through a letter from Martha A. Hickman of Logan who in 1935 wrote to the Relief Society general president, Louise Yates Robison, asking if it were "orthodox and sanctioned" for the women to perform washings and anointings of women about to give birth. "We have officiated in this capacity some ten years, have enjoyed our calling, and been appreciated. However, since . . . questions [about "orthodoxy"] have arisen we do not feel quite at ease. We would like to be in harmony, as well as being able to inform correctly those seeking information." (Hickman 1935)

Sister Robison answered the query through Martha Hickman's stake Relief Society president in Logan.

In reference to the question raised [by Martha Hickman], may we say that this beautiful ordinance has always been with the Relief Society, and it is our earnest hope that we may continue to have that privilege, and up to the present time the Presidents of the Church have always allowed it to us. There are some places, however, where a definite stand against it has been taken by the Priesthood Authorities, and where such is the case we cannot do anything but accept their will in the matter. However, where the sisters are permitted to do this for expectant mothers we wish it done very quietly. . . . It is something that should be treated very carefully, and as we have suggested, with no show or discussion of it. (Robison and Lund 1935)

Clearly, blessings not performed by male priesthood holders were now suspect.

The next year Joseph Fielding Smith, soon to become president of the Quorum of the Twelve, wrote to Belle S. Spafford, new Relief Society general president, and her counselors, Marianne C. Sharp and Gertrude R. Garff: "While the authorities of the Church have ruled that it is permissible, under certain conditions and with the approval of the priesthood, for sisters to wash and anoint other sisters, yet they feel that it is far better for us to follow the plan the Lord has given us and send for the Elders of the Church to come and administer to the sick and afflicted" (Clark 4:314). It would certainly be difficult for a sister to say that she did *not* wish to follow "the plan the Lord has given us" by asking for administration from her sisters rather than from the elders.

The letter from Joseph Fielding Smith officially ended women's blessings where they had not already stopped. Although some modern cases of women blessing have recently come to light,³ there is no further evidence of blessings being given in conjunction with the Relief Society. During the next three decades other pronouncements by Church leaders further stressed the male role

³ Since the publication of part of this essay in 1981 (n. 1), about ten women have told me of their experiences in exercising spiritual gifts. Two women, in separate instances, each blessed and healed a child in her care. Neither of these women had ever discussed the blessing with anyone before for fear it would be considered "inappropriate." Another woman gathered her sister's frail, cancer-ridden body in her arms and blessed her with one pain-free day. Several women together blessed a close friend just prior to her hysterectomy. One daughter told of a blessing administered to her by her mother for the relief of intense menstrual cramps. Others asked that their experience not be mentioned — again fearing that what had been personal and sacred to them would be misunderstood and viewed as inappropriate by others. Of course, the same kinds of blessings, when performed by priesthood holders, are commonly told in public Church meetings as faith-promoting experiences and are accepted by members of the Church in that spirit.

of the priesthood. J. Reuben Clark, Jr., a member of the First Presidency, defined the priesthood in 1940 as “the authority of God bestowed upon men to represent Him in certain relationships between and among men and between men and God.” But in the remainder of his talk President Clark referred to himself and other male members as “the Priesthood” rather than men with priesthood authority, power, or callings (CR April 1940, 152–54).

In 1956 when Apostle Marion G. Romney spoke of spiritual gifts in general conference, he made no mention of women: “Righteous men, bearing the holy priesthood of the living God and endowed with the gift of the Holy Ghost, who are magnifying their callings . . . are the only men upon the earth with the right to receive and exercise the gifts of the spirit” (CR April 1956, 72).

Apostle John A. Widtsoe’s influential revision of his *Priesthood and Church Government* discusses the powers of priesthood. The chapter on spiritual gifts examines each in turn after an introduction announcing that “spiritual gifts are properly enjoyed by the Saints of God under the direction of ‘such as God shall appoint and ordain over the Church’ — that is, the Priesthood and its officers” (Widtsoe 1954, 38–39). The discussion of revelation, discernment, healing, translation, and power over evil makes no acknowledgment that these gifts may exist outside the priesthood-ordained group.

About women, Elder Widtsoe wrote the oft-quoted passage: “The man who arrogantly feels that he is better than his wife because he holds the Priesthood has failed utterly to comprehend the meaning and purpose of Priesthood.” Why? Because “the Lord loves His daughters quite as well as His sons” and “men can never rise superior to the women who bear and nurture them,” and “woman has her gift of equal magnitude—motherhood” (Widtsoe 1954, 89–90).

From the 1950s to the early 1980s, equal citizenship for women in the kingdom seems to have been replaced with the glorification of motherhood, thus ignoring both the single or childless woman and also ignoring fatherhood as the equivalent of motherhood. Limiting the definition of priesthood to chiefly ecclesiastical and administrative functions tends to limit the roles of both sexes. Anything traditionally considered “male” in the Church has come to be attached exclusively to the priesthood, and this emphasis stresses — even magnifies — the differences between the sexes rather than concentrating on expanding the roles of both.

While it can be argued that the mother’s functions of pregnancy, birth, and nursing are balanced by the father’s giving a name and blessing, baptizing, confirming, and ordaining his children, these acts do not remove from the father the responsibility of day-to-day nurturing. And even though the father is often permitted in the delivery room to witness the birth of his children and be a part of the birth process and bonding, the mother is still not invited into the blessing circles. If women do, indeed, hold the priesthood with their husbands, their presence should be welcomed, particularly since non-priesthood-holding fathers are sometimes allowed in the blessing circle. All this aside, the responsibilities of fathering are being increasingly stressed by Church

leaders, moving us toward a more inclusive priesthood model: brotherhood-sisterhood, motherhood-fatherhood, all functioning in the larger realm of shared priesthood.

The motherhood-priesthood "equivalence" also ignores the fact that women from the beginnings of Church history did not sacrifice their important role as mothers while participating fully in the spiritual gifts of the gospel. Nor is there evidence to suggest that women's spiritual activities or their independence within the Relief Society organization in any way diminished men's priesthood powers or their exercise of them.

Although many works designed to explain the "exalted place" of Mormon women have recently appeared, they have generally been historically shallow.⁴ However, as recently as January 1981, James E. Faust of the Quorum of the Twelve told a group of Mormon psychotherapists: "The priesthood is not just male- or husband-centered, but reaches its potential only in the eternal relationship of the husband and the wife sharing and administering these great blessings to the family (Faust 1981, 5). And the 1980-81 Melchizedek Priesthood study guide quotes President Joseph Fielding Smith: "There is nothing in the teachings of the gospel which declares that men are superior to women Women do not hold the priesthood, but if they are faithful and true, they will become priestesses and queens in the kingdom of God, and that implies that they will be given authority" (McConkie 3:178).

Although the pendulum has swung far from Joseph Smith's prophetic vision of women as queens and priestesses, holders of keys of blessings and spiritual gifts, the statements of Elder Faust and President Smith may signal a theologic reevaluation of the woman's role. A rediscovery of the history of Mormon women's spiritual gifts has also awakened interest in the idea of mothers and fathers jointly anointing and blessing their own children; of husbands receiving, like Wilford Woodruff, blessings *from* their wives (CR Oct. 1910, 20; Oct. 1919, 31); of mothers standing in the circle when their babies are blessed; of women blessing each other or their children (a mother's blessing) in times of special need; of women as well as men jointly exercising spiritual gifts on behalf of each other. A broader, more inclusive understanding of priesthood could strengthen marital and family ties and once again allow unmarried women to share more fully in the gifts of the spirit which were once common in the household of faith. This could mean a reexamination of the LDS policy of ordaining women to priesthood offices or it could simply mean making changes in the *General Handbook of Instruction* which would reverse the tide that has stripped women of these opportunities through over a hundred years of policy development.

⁴ The most ambitious, Oscar W. McConkie, *She Shall Be Called Woman* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), asserts that the eternal nature of women is different in essence from that of men, that women's primary role in life (and chief contribution to the Church) is motherhood, that women have "great[er] sensitivity to spiritual truths" and that righteous husbands are "the saviour of the wives." Withal, he acknowledges the equal responsibility of fathers in rearing children and states "many of the brethren, who are otherwise disciplined Christians, exercise unrighteous dominion over women" (pp. 117, 4, 124).

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