An Expanded Definition of Priesthood? Some Present and Future Consequences

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Although as Mormons we are fond of saying that we are in the world but not of it, the boundaries we establish between ourselves and worldly influences become very thin when we consider our lives as members of the Church organization. In its current form as a large, complex, hierarchical organization, the Church exposes each of us to the same organizational dynamics that affect members of any similarly structured organization. These organizational dynamics exert powerful influences on our behaviors — influences which can be as compelling, and certainly less intended, than spiritual forces.

In seeking to predict what might occur in the Church if priesthood were extended to women, it is helpful to focus attention on some of these organizational dynamics. Admittedly, there is a certain incongruity in analyzing such a quintessentially spiritual capacity as priesthood in the temporal terms of sociology and organizational behavior. But the fact that we must look at organizational dynamics before we can begin to understand the issues that would be raised by expanding priesthood to include women is an apt commentary on the complex and sometimes confused role that priesthood authority has come to play in the modern Church. As access to the administrative ranks of the Church — even to such ward callings as clerk and executive secretary — has become more and more contingent on holding the Melchizedek Priesthood, priesthood has become both a spiritual power and a bureaucratic phenomenon.

In thinking how an expanded definition of priesthood would affect members of the Church, I have been intrigued by two questions:

1. What are some of the unintended consequences we experience presently because women do not hold priesthood?

2. If priesthood were extended to women, would the nature of priesthood change?

Although there are several ways of approaching these questions, one useful frame of analysis comes from the work of those in organizational studies who observe the impact of structure on behavior.[1] *Structure*, as I will use it here,

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[1] Looking at the interrelationship between structure and work behavior is such a prevailing current in organizational studies that it is difficult to assign it to just a few specific theorists. Certainly the present focus on job redesign and worker productivity, and Japanese models of organizing work, are based on theories about the interrelation between job design and worker behavior. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New

describes not only the representation of the organization through its formal policies and organizational charts, but also other factors which informally control and influence members. These factors include norms like dress codes, values like "the customer is always right," and culture manifest as "the way we do things here." What is it in the design and day-to-day functioning of an organization or a task unit that affects people's attitudes about both the task and themselves? What kinds of behaviors are induced by what kinds of structures?

The central thesis underlying this type of analysis is that structure communicates, or, as Marshal McLuhan (1964) demonstrated several years ago, the medium is the message. What people learn about themselves and their value to the organization is not what the organization *says* to them or about them, but what they *experience* while they are members of that organization. What they experience is structure:

— How are roles organized? (Are job descriptions rigid? Are people encouraged to take on activities beyond their roles?)

— Who gains access to what roles? (If you're black, don't count on anything above assistant manager?)

— What gets rewarded? (Strict interpretations of company policy? Creativity? Second-guessing the boss?)

— What does the organization chart look like? (How many layers of middle managers are there? Do many people report to the top?)

— How are decisions made? (Consensus? Fiat? In private deals?)

— How is the physical space laid out? (Which functions are near senior management? Who gets put in the annex?)

Messages communicated by structure are far more powerful than any statements issued by a corporate communications office or an employee relations function. People can't be told that participation is a value in their organization, and believe it, if it takes four layers of middle managers to approve and act on their decisions. People can hear that everyone's contribution is of equal value, but they won't believe it, when only certain contributions are recognized in public forums or are rewarded with other, more desirable assignments.

People are quick to sense when the espoused philosophy is out of synch with the structure — with what they are actually experiencing. In our own organizational lives, we all, at one time or another, have experienced this kind of schizophrenia. Certainly it exists in many areas within the Church, with discrepancies between our theology and our Church organizational experiences. Enough examples of this uncreative tension exist for several articles, but this tension can also lend understanding to the issues created by women's exclusion from priesthood. We need to ask what the present structure of priesthood communicates to both women and men about their abilities and potential.

York: Basic Books, 1977) effectively synthesized the ideological roots of this approach and proposed her own seminal theory, which I use throughout this paper. For a condensed version of her work, see "The Job Makes the Person," *Psychology Today*, May 1976. Other major thinkers would include James Thompson (1967) and J. Richard Hackman and J. Lloyd Suttle (1977).

Structure not only talks to people, it also helps shape them. People's behavior in organizations is a direct response to their experience in that organization. We constantly change, either for good or ill, as our organizational circumstances change. We are not static individuals, fixed in a repertoire of behaviors at age twenty-one, or thirty, or fifty. As adults, we continue to develop, respond, and change; and it is our *organizational* lives that are probably the most effective predictors of whether we will be energetic, ambitious, motivated individuals or lazy, recalcitrant benchwarmers.

Research support for the notion that jobs play a significant, even pivotal role in shaping adult behaviors, has been an important and evolving idea in the field of management theory in recent years. It has given support to the image of a fluid, dynamic relationship between the person and his/her organization. It has also helped clarify that when people's behavior becomes problematic, it is important to assess their organizational situation before ascribing their negative behaviors to such personal factors as socialization, gender, or race (Rigor and Galligan 1980).

Using this structural perspective to analyze the current situation of women in the Church leads us to some important insights. As the Church is presently structured, it is only through priesthood that one can attain major administrative roles; it is only with priesthood that one is entitled to make any final decisions. Although theologically we feel secure in stating that God created men and women equal, structurally we communicate inequality. Women are often cited as the backbone of the Church and extolled for the many hours of service they contribute. Yet the range of contributions open to them is quite limited compared to that of men, simply because of the priesthood requirement. No matter what role they serve in, women are further circumscribed by organizational rules which require that all decisions be approved by priesthood authority. They are even more constrained by organizational policies (or perhaps just norms) which limit their choices for lessons and group activities for Relief Society and Mutual. One need only compare the elder's quorum lesson manual with the Relief Society lesson manual to observe the far more structured and didactic approach taken towards women. This is evident both in the language of the manuals and the teachers' outlines provided for lessons. It would be interesting to assess differences in instructions given to men and women through lesson manuals as well as any differences in language and tone.

As an experienced observer of women in management in all types of organizations, both large and small, for the past twelve years, I have seldom seen women with more titular power and less real power than in the present women's auxiliaries.[2] The higher a woman rises in the Church organization, the less power she obtains, so that organizationally, the presidents of the women's auxiliaries are among the most powerless women in the Church. They oversee large organizations devoted to women's activities yet cannot make any decisions regarding those women. Women at the ward level hold them ac-

[2] For an excellent analysis of how this loss of power occurred, particularly the role played by the Correlation movement within the Church in the 1960s, see Marie Cornwall (1983).

countable for the programs and products issued by their organizations. But in fact, they have little or no control over final content or budget, and limited autonomy in defining the scope of their leadership activities. The perceptions held by members that they are accountable can only add further burdens to already difficult leadership positions.

Since Correlation, women auxiliary presidents or committees they appoint provide only suggestions for lesson content. Working within strict guidelines prepared by the correlated curriculum plan, their suggestions must be reviewed by both an editing department and by correlation review. Women sit on these committees, but men chair them. The lessons themselves are written by committees in the Curriculum Department composed of both men and women who have a Church calling for that assignment. However, men chair the committees — even when the committee is preparing material for Relief Society and Young Women lessons — and they are supervised by employees of the Curriculum Department who are men. Finished lessons are submitted to the auxiliary presidents and their boards. Although the lessons may represent substantial changes from those originally suggested, the auxiliary presidents have little control over the final form of their major product (Cornwall 1983). Although male auxiliaries experience the same loss of control over materials, the effect on them is mitigated somewhat because in other areas of Church activity, they still have opportunities to be decision makers. Women have no access to any decision-making positions, so their disfranchisement, even in an area where men suffer similarly, is more destructive. Perhaps the visible cooperation between the three women's presidents, begun during the summer of 1984 with regular meetings and the housing of all three in the Relief Society Building, signals a new cooperative relationship that can effect other administrative changes as well.

From a structural perspective, the messages that this structure communicates to women are, at best, problematic. Without authority to make independent decisions, even over matters of concern only to them, without access to the major decision-making forums of the Church, with fewer role choices available, and with far fewer opportunities for contributing within the Church hierarchy, women's experience in the Church is substantially different from that of men.

There are, of course, many women in the Church who do not explicitly experience the Church in the terms of personal powerlessness that I have described. Undoubtedly there are good numbers of women who feel they have more than enough opportunities already. But busyness is not the issue. What is key is the value publicly assigned to the task, the status and recognition it commands. Although we're told that all callings are of equal value, certainly this is true only in the sight of God. Among ourselves, we attribute greater value or personal worthiness to one calling over another. Again we need to ask, what messages are being communicated to women because of such differences in the opportunities available to them in the Church? And we must wonder whether an organization which believes in the perfectibility of its members, and teaches that we are all equal in the sight of God should feel content

with a structure that communicates such disparate messages to men and women.

We need to be concerned about these disparities of opportunity. Research has shown that such inequalities can have dramatic consequences on the behaviors of individual members. Opportunity in organizations is defined as the chance to grow and develop, to be acknowledged for skills one possesses, to feel encouraged and rewarded to pursue new skills, to feel honored for one's contributions. Opportunity has been shown to influence many of the behaviors that are most central to the healthful operation of an organization, behaviors that provide energy to the system and that inspire people to contribute. At least five major categories of behavior are affected by opportunity (Kanter 1977, Ch. 6; Wheatley 1981):

1. The first set of behaviors that opportunity influences centers around self-esteem. No matter how secure we might seem to be in valuing ourselves, each of us is susceptible to the reflected image of self we gain from others. Those who receive positive messages about their abilities through comments and rewards come to value themselves more highly. Those who feel locked into repetitious tasks or who feel invisible to others, gradually lose the self-esteem they once possessed. It is not uncommon to hear experienced and talented people voice genuine doubts about their abilities in the face of continual rejections. In the business world, men in their mid-forties who have been bypassed for promotion often become highly self-critical, losing confidence in skills they once felt proud to display. Frequently, what has changed for them is not their skillfulness, but the messages sent to them by their organization.

2. As a close corollary to self-esteem, opportunity also impacts on one's aspirations. If the organization seems to be reinforcing and rewarding, one develops aspirations to match those messages. Several years ago, Hannah Holborn Gray became Provost of Yale University. At the time, a reporter asked her if she were interested in becoming a university president. She denied any such aspirations. When, a few years later, it was announced that she was to become the first woman president of a major private university — the University of Chicago — the reporter reappeared. "What made the difference?" he asked. "I don't know," she replied. "Being asked, I guess."

We saw the reverse of this positive phenomenon when affirmative action laws first came into being. Many managers, in their search for women to promote into managerial ranks, focused on talented secretaries. To their surprise, these women frequently met their offers of training and promotion with rebuffs. The situation was frustrating for the managers and uncomfortable for the secretaries, but it was also predictable. People who have been stuck in one organizational slot have, in response to that stuckness, curtailed any aspirations they might have held initially. In the absence of such aspirations, they fail to envision themselves in any other position. When a new position is offered to them, they respond negatively because there is no internal vision of themselves that matches this new opportunity. People who consistently experience little or no opportunity gradually suppress any larger vision of themselves and, in the end, present themselves to others as tentative, self-doubting, and content to stay where they are.

3. Opportunity also affects the extent to which members remain committed to their organization. Those who experience personal growth and recognition tend to feed their positive experiences back to the organization. They become motivated to do more, to spend extra hours working, to look for additional ways to contribute. But for those who have experienced negative feedback or no feedback, the response is the opposite. Gradually, they withdraw from a setting which cannot or does not provide them with positive experiences or with new occasions for growth. Their withdrawal may be complete; they simply drop out of the organization entirely. Or it may be less obvious; they continue to do what is asked but at minimally acceptable levels. Or they may transfer their energy to another arena, some other organization or activity, where the response is more positive. We all need positive reinforcement, and people seek it where they can find it — if not in one setting, then in another.

4. People low in opportunity often get labeled by others as gossipers. Such a phenomenon again results from blocked opportunity. If the task is not rewarding, or if the organization is not supportive of our skills, we tend to turn to our peers for comfort and recognition. But the recognition to be obtained from friends may have less to do with how well we perform the task than with how skilled we are in some other area of particular interest to them. They may value us for our sports knowledge, our recipes, or our gardening tips. In the time we spend working together, more energy may go into this kind of information exchange than into the task itself. This diversion of energy from task to gossip or chatter is symptomatic of an opportunity problem. People who experience high opportunity respond to recognition of their importance and value by becoming exceedingly focused on the task; they waste little time in exchanges that are not related to completing their work.

5. The last major cluster of behaviors that opportunity affects has to do with problem-solving. People high in opportunity tend to be proactive in addressing needs and problems. If they perceive a potential problem, they act on their own initiative to solve it before it becomes a major issue. But for the stuck, organizational problems reflect their personal discontent. Instead of acting to resolve issues, they tend to sit passively by and grumble. If someone suggests a solution, they are the first to criticize it. Since their own experience of the organization has been predominantly negative, they may derive some satisfaction from seeing the organization in trouble.

Even from this brief description of how opportunity affects behavior, a compelling case can be made for the need to examine opportunity issues in the Church. Our current organizational structure, where the priesthood prerequisite prevents women from contributing in many arenas, creates the potential for many negative behaviors in women which do neither them nor the Church any good. Where Mormon women have become hesitant and self-doubting, where they have withdrawn their enthusiasm and commitment, where they have become complaining or nonparticipative — any and all of these instances are indications that an opportunity problem exists. Such problems represent a loss of energy to the Church. More importantly, for individual women, such problems represent lost chances for growth and spiritual develop-

ment. There is a special irony that any Mormon would experience a sense of blocked opportunity, for theologically, with the doctrine that human beings are potential gods and goddesses, we are the church of maximum opportunity. This doctrine of potential godhood illustrates the wonderful effects of high opportunity, for think what this concept does for our sense of self, our aspirations, and our commitment to pursue worthiness.

Hopefully, this analysis sheds some new light on the problems experienced within the Church because of the present structure of priesthood. Looking into the future, what then might happen if priesthood were expanded to include women? Although it is interesting to speculate on how wards would function with a new array of priesthood holders, a more basic question worthy of speculation is how women's inclusion could affect the very nature of priesthood. My question is not how women would behave in exercising priestly responsibilities, but rather whether functions of priesthood would change once women were included. Again using an organizational lens, we can draw analogies from women in other settings to get some sense of what might occur within the Church organization.

One of the clear lessons to be gleaned from observing the movement of large numbers of women into roles formerly restricted to men is that women do make a difference. As more and more women move into any particular job or profession, there is a discernible *decrease* in the status of that job. This "tilt phenomenon" can be noted in the history of several roles, but a few examples will illustrate the effect.

Up until the early 1950's, bank tellering was a male dominated profession. It was treated as an entry-level position, a precursor to upward mobility within the bank. Since that era, more and more women have taken on that work, so that now women comprise nearly 90 percent of all bank tellers (Conference Board 1978, 14). The job no longer represents the beginning of a management career in banking; instead it has become a dead-end position for most of its occupants. For those aspiring to bank management careers, other entry points have been created.

Women have dominated the field of education as teachers throughout most of our history. In the early 1960s, in response to the challenge to best the Russians in space and technology, emphasis was placed on upgrading our schools. A major strategy was to lure more men into the teaching profession, as one means of improving the quality and status of public education.

Even in jobs that require long years of training, such as law and medicine, this same tilt is observable. During the late 1800s, women were represented in the field of medicine. As medicine became more specialized and more revered, women were relegated to the supportive role of nurse. However, in the past few years, both law and medicine have opened access for women, so much so that women's participation in schools of medicine and law varies from one to two-thirds of any graduating class. This dramatic influx of women, however, is occurring at a time of increased public scrutiny and pressure on both professions. There are demands to demystify law, to make its language more accessible to lay persons and its costs more competitive; there are increasing

pressures to cut medical costs and to return to a more personal and holistic approach to health care. Both professions are in the midst of profound changes that will ultimately effect both their practice and their status (Bok 1983). I feel safe in predicting that, in the next several years, both professions will experience a loss in status and salary levels and that it is no coincidence that large numbers of women will be part of these professions as this downward trend continues. Although the pressures for change in these professions are numerous, no one influence will have as great an effect on diminishing their status as the fact that perhaps as many as 50 percent of their practitioners will be women.

This tilt phenomenon leads to some interesting speculations about the possible effects of opening priesthood to women. Women's inclusion into priesthood could result in at least two very different scenarios. In the first, a two-tier system of priestly roles would develop, with a status ranking far more delineated than now exists between high priests and other Melchizedek priesthood offices. Discrimination between men and women priesthood holders would follow these status boundaries. At the first level, men and women would both function as elders, performing personal ordinances of family blessing, baptizing, confirming, anointing the sick, and sealing the anointing. The second level of priesthood, that of high priest, would be for men only and would still be the sole route to important administrative roles such as bishoprics and stake presidencies.

In a second scenario, priesthood and administrative functions would be separated from one another. Priesthood would be seen as a function of personal spirituality to be used to bless, anoint, baptize, confirm, heal, and administer other sacred ordinances. It would be separate from a leader's calling or administrative ability. Access to purely administrative roles would be based on other criteria; women might participate in these roles, although it is doubtful that they would occupy such positions in any significant numbers. If extending priesthood to women resulted in these effects, it might be the fastest means of sorting out true priestly functions from the administrative encumbrances that continue to grow and surround it. In other words, it might be the quickest and most effective means for eradicating unrighteous dominion.

This is not to suggest that women would exercise priesthood with more humility or virtue than men — only that Church members would expect less of priesthood or imbue it with less secularly based symbols of status if women were priests. In fact, opening priesthood to include all worthy adult members of the Church might provide us with a simple means of *restoring* priesthood to its rightful place, the administration of sacred rather than secular functions.

This analysis leads us, then, into something of a paradox. In the present Church structure, where so much is contingent upon priesthood, women suffer from a lack of opportunity. This can result in negative or diverted energy, in a loss of commitment to the Church, and in a loss of personal and even spiritual growth for large numbers of women. However, if priesthood were expanded to include women, priesthood might diminish in status, the criteria for admission to administrative office might simply change, and women might still be

excluded from increased opportunities to contribute to the Church. Obviously, even if granting women priesthood were to occur, other organizational dilemmas would not be solved.

Is it such a lose-lose game? For me, the dilemma does not create a sense of hopelessness for improving women's role in the Church. Instead, it points to the importance of beginning now to separate priesthood functions from administrative activity. Before priesthood can be expanded — if it ever is — a tremendous amount can be done to improve women's position within the Church and to clarify the priestly role. We need first to develop greater clarity about what priesthood is and where its power is appropriate, to sort out spirit-centered needs from bureaucratic exigencies. Having done this analysis, it would be easier to find ways to increase the range of contributions open to nonpriesthood holders. If we were clearer about what priesthood is, it might also feel less fearsome to think about including women.

What I am suggesting is a series of incremental steps focused on expanding opportunities for inclusion and decision-making to women. Such incremental changes would free up tremendous amounts of energy in those women who currently feel blocked or stuck. It is surprising to witness how quickly people's behavior becomes energetic and positive when their opportunities are increased even slightly. The process of creating opportunity has to be on-going, but effects are immediate and dramatic even with small positive changes.

But we cannot develop significantly different incremental changes without first reevaluating priesthood. All activities and roles need to be reviewed and criteria established for their performance. Where priesthood power is not essential to effective performance, we need to open those roles to women. Such a reevaluation will be difficult, given the primacy that priesthood has achieved in the Church during the past several decades; but without it, we are locked into a situation that impedes the full use of women's contribution and gradually corrodes the visions they hold for themselves.

Opportunities for growth and recognition can be created if we:

— increase women's chances for meaningful participation;

— give more recognition for what is already being accomplished;

— increase women's control over their own activities.

Within the Church, changes in four key areas would create increased opportunity for women and girls:

1. Improve women's access to decision-making forums.

— Examine meetings from which women presently are excluded. If women were to contribute, would it help the decision-making process? If so, open such meetings to women's auxiliary heads or other relevant women leaders at the ward, stake and general levels of the Church.

— Within the corporate offices of the Church, employ more women in a greater variety of positions.

— Develop and emphasize leadership training skills for women so that they can more effectively participate in meetings.

2. Increase access to ward callings and duties. Several ward callings and offices have evolved into priesthood callings. Such callings should be reevalu-

ated to determine if priesthood is a necessary prerequisite. Where it is not, women should serve in those offices equally with men.

3. Improve women's influence over their own organizations.

— Create more recognition and communication between women's auxiliary presidents and Church women by having them travel more widely.

— Revise and streamline the decision-making process. Eliminate layers of decision-makers now required to approve curriculum, programs, etc.

— Support the newly instituted regular meetings among three women's auxiliary presidencies.

— Provide management training for women's auxiliary presidencies in such areas as communications, delegation, planning, running effective meetings, creative problem-solving.

— Institute salaries for all General Board members.

— Improve Relief Society lessons by emphasizing teacher development, developing themes rather than lessons, and creating flexibility of choice for what lessons are appropriate for each ward.

— Expand or restore a definition of compassionate service that includes larger, more long-term projects such as hospices, home care for the elderly, etc.

4. Develop greater visibility for women's activities.

— Give equal space in ward newsletters to women-related activities.

— Give equal recognition to girl's youth activities.

— In sacrament meetings, have equal numbers of men and women speakers, and men and women prayer givers. End informal practice of men being the closing speaker. Have women speak on scriptural issues.

— In General Conference, have more women visible and participating, and speaking on scriptural issues.

— Develop support for more women's conferences that include attention to a range of issues, including leadership training.

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