

I Must Speak Up

Hilda Kathryn Erickson Pack

IN 1981 I DISCOVERED A CHURCH POLICY that saddened me deeply. The following year I wrote several letters seeking change. Now it is more than ten years later. Just recently I found out that a change did occur in policy in 1989. Regrettably, the change made things twice as bad.

Ten years ago I wrote an essay about this matter which, while therapeutic for me, was never published. I now feel compelled to dig it out because I can no longer patiently wait for the "right" change. A modified version of that 1984 paper follows.

* * *

OF WHAT PRICE IS A VIRTUOUS MARRIED WOMAN? "SHE WAS BAPTIZED ON CHRISTMAS EVE"

My companion and I . . . met a lady from England and her family. At this time her husband was in Vietnam . . . she had a strong desire to bring her family of four into the Church. However, for this she needed her husband's permission.

One day shortly before Christmas she said to me, "Elder Affleck, the greatest Christmas present I could have would be to be baptized into the Church and receive the Holy Ghost, and see my family baptized. On that day, December 22, she wrote a letter to Vietnam, telling her husband about the Church and asking for permission to be baptized.

. . . the next morning we got a phone call from this woman. . . . She had received a letter from her husband in which he said, "Leslie, I have found the most wonderful thing! . . . I have joined the Mormon Church." Then he went into specific details about how she could contact the elders.

What a wonderful blessing this family had received! She was baptized on Christmas Eve.

Two years ago, I read the above story in our Sunday ward bulletin (no source was listed). A cold wave immediately chilled my soul. I felt betrayed

and angry. Finally, I felt disbelief. I could not believe there was a church policy that led to this purportedly inspirational story. After all, I was a thirty-six-year-old woman, had been raised in the church, and had always been active (except when I lived as a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote Brazilian town where there was no Mormon church to attend). Yet this was the first time I had ever heard the idea that a married woman must get "permission" from her husband to join the church. Elder Affleck was surely mistaken; it was not church policy, I decided.

My education was not long in coming. When I got home, I questioned my husband. "When you were on your mission, was there a rule that a married woman couldn't be baptized without her husband's consent?" I asked.

"Yes," came Jim's reply, tearing my soul asunder.

Jim got out his *General Handbook of Instructions* #21 (1976) and we read together, "A married woman should not be baptized without her husband's consent."

For a couple of weeks I battled my feelings about this policy. It seemed more wrong and loomed more important to me every day. I asked the missionaries in our ward about it, hoping that the policy was largely ignored.

A tall amiable missionary from Michigan remarked, "Two weeks ago my companion and I finished teaching a wonderful woman, but we couldn't baptize her because her husband didn't want her to join the Church. We were really disappointed. She had a wonderful testimony."

I responded immediately, "That's wicked!"

Startled, he tried to assure me, "Well, since it's the policy of the church, it can't be wicked."

"Does a man need a wife's permission in order to join the church?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"No."

During the next several months I struggled inwardly and outwardly. I discussed this policy with many people. Astonishingly, of all the women I talked to, only one (a returned missionary) had ever heard of this policy before. We women while constantly told to spread the gospel were completely unaware that our friends would not be free to join the church when converted.

One disturbing discussion I had was with a member of the bishopric. After diligent research, he reported that he could only find one possible, if "slightly remote," scriptural basis for it. He opened the Doctrine and Covenants and read:

We believe it just to preach the gospel . . . ; but we do not believe it right to

interfere with bond-servants, neither preach the gospel to, nor baptize them contrary to the will and wish of their masters, . . . (134:12).

I admired his diligence. I was aghast at his response. When I asked if he truly felt that married women are bonded servants to their husbands, he reminded me that he did say the reference was "slightly remote."

On the homefront most of my discussions were impassioned, greatly one-sided, and directed at my husband. As I railed against the injustice of this policy, I noticed that he looked a bit uncomfortable, leading me to believe that he disagreed with me. One day I directly asked him his opinion. Unaccountably, it was terribly important to me to know how he felt. I trembled as I asked, "Jim, how do you feel? Is it right to withhold the blessings of the gospel from married women just because their husbands are contrary to it?"

Only someone who knew good, loyal Jim could understand the difficulty that Jim had to respond, "I wish the church would allow them the blessings of the gospel."

My heart rejoiced. Jim, who rarely disagreed with the church on anything, saw truth and goodness as I did on this important matter. He then suggested that I write letters to the general authorities. I had such definite feelings as to whom I should write and as to what I should say, that even though I knew it was naive to actually hope for change, I nevertheless did hope. In November 1982 I wrote to Elder James E. Faust, Elder Vaughan J. Featherstone, and Elder Neal A. Maxwell. To Elder Faust I wrote of Nephi prophesying of Christ and asking (in 2 Ne. 26):

"Hath he commanded any that they should depart . . . out of their houses of worship? . . . Hath the Lord commanded any that they should not partake of his goodness?" The resounding answer to all of these questions is "Nay" and "Come unto me all ye ends of the earth" and "he hath given it free for all men." Finally, . . . the last verse declares, "he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . all are alike unto God, . . ."

I confess I felt presumptuous quoting scripture to an apostle, but I nevertheless felt compelled to do so.

I wrote to Elder Featherstone who had recently spoken in a meeting for women in our stake, directing much of his speech to women whose husbands were inactive or nonmembers. He promised them that if they lived the gospel to the best of their ability, their husbands would eventually become good church members. After reminding him of this promise, I asked if this promise could be valid for converted women who were presently denied baptism because of their husbands. If so, a change in

policy would allow these women to become members and eventually result in many wonderful families coming into the church.

Jim thought my letter to Elder Maxwell was harsh. Possibly it was, but the policy itself is harsh:

Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* tells a story which reminds me of a policy in the church which seems to be unjust—the policy that a married woman cannot be baptized without the consent of her husband:

... the Arab woman who, having received a blow from her husband, went to complain to her father, ... "Father, you owe my husband affront for affront." The father asked, "Upon which cheek did you receive the blow?" "Upon the left cheek." The Father struck the right cheek and said, "Now you are satisfied. Go and tell your husband that he has struck my daughter, but that I struck his wife."

The story's poignancy comes from the double betrayal received by the Arab woman from the two people in all the world who should have been least likely to do her harm—her husband and her father. She had every right to expect love, kindness, and consideration from her husband. When she received a blow instead, she turned to her father, fully expecting love, kindness, and perhaps some help in dealing with her husband. Sadly, she was treated equally brutally, doubling her injury and her disillusionment.

...

In like manner to this story, but even more compelling in her justified expectation of love, kindness, and acceptance is a married woman today who seeks baptism into the church against her husband's wish. What sort of treatment does this woman, married to a dictatorial husband (the first blow), expect from her Father in Heaven? Certainly she expects to be received, welcomed, loved, and invited to enter his church, receive the Holy Ghost, and find peace. ... Yet, when she asks to be baptized, she receives an infinitely harsher second blow than the Arab woman. ... The Arab woman was only betrayed by mortals with earthly and familial obligations to her. Today's married woman with a testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel is apparently rejected by her Father in Heaven. Ramifications to her (to say nothing of her children) are devastating: the blessings of church membership and the gift of the Holy Ghost are tragically denied her during her ... mortal life.

A husband who obstructs his wife's thrust towards the path of truth and right is lamentable but, unfortunately, believable; a Father in Heaven who rejects a worthy daughter's faith and repentance and wish for baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost is likewise lamentable but, contrarily, totally impossible.

Victor Hugo wrote of man's inhumanity to man. Church policy infinitely outdoes this theme in the apparent theme of God's ungodliness to potential goddesses.

I have wrestled with many possible explanations for this policy and can find no solace. Finally, I feel driven to write a few of my thoughts concerning this matter with a hope that a change might occur, allowing all of God's children to "Come unto Jesus."

If I trembled a bit when I sent my letters, I trembled a little bit more when I started to get responses. My hopes competed with nervousness as I opened the official-looking envelopes. Hope and nervousness both lost out to eventual disappointment. Elders Maxwell and Featherstone said that they had referred my question to the First Presidency. Elder Faust did not reply. Francis M. Gibbons, secretary to the First Presidency, replied as follows:

... This policy has the approval of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve and was adopted as the result of long experience which has shown that in many cases serious marital upset is caused where a sister is baptized without the knowledge or consent of her husband. . . .

Soon after this reply, 1982 came to an end. During that year, I had learned about the policy, refused to believe it was policy, and had been proven wrong. Then I was apprised of its actual enforcement in the mission field. I had struggled in my soul. I had discussed it with my friends, and I had, after conferring with my husband, written letters, hoping that a change would occur.

A change in policy did not occur. I had worried what my reaction might be if a change was not effected. Though disappointed, I didn't despair. I retreated. I thought of George Bernard Shaw's observation, whose words I had clipped from a local newspaper, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man." I wryly decided to try to be "reasonable" for a while and continue with my life and activities.

This past year, 1983, I hardly discussed this policy with anyone. I tried not to dwell on it but continued my daily life, finding the matter easy to ignore when teaching a Girl Scout how to tie a bow-line, when showing a piano student how to play a scale, or when writing race-relations proposals for magnet schools to the school board. The only time it intruded into my consciousness was during those moments when I would think about one of the mothers I was working with, "Wouldn't so-and-so be a wonderful Mormon?" I find I am completely unable to ask what she knows about my church for fear she might want to know more and then be barred from membership.

The policy was harder to ignore while going to church meetings and

reading church history books. Though I tried to forget this policy, I am still often abruptly reminded of it.

I have felt bombarded by church talks that cause me pain about this issue. Many speakers talk on such basic ideas as God's love for each of us, the importance of baptism and the Holy Ghost, freedom of religion, and free will. Knowing church policy regarding baptism of a married woman and then listening to these speeches affirming our basic values was a truly jarring experience. After all, what do you do when policy seems to contradict doctrine? I strove to be reasonable; I tried not to think about it.

One speech, however, challenged this resolve. It was given at stake conference by one of the church's highest authorities living in the San Diego area. The theme was "The Gospel Is for Everyone." We were challenged not to judge people but to tell every person we meet about the gospel. To spur our missionary efforts, the speaker assured us that God can change the most improbable prospect. Over and over he repeated, "God wants everyone," the alcoholic, the thief, the chain smoker, the liar, . . . Do not judge them. God can change them; don't doubt his power.

Impressed with the motivating influence of his speech but still disturbed that God could want all categories of "sinners" but not a virtuous married woman, I felt compelled to talk to this man. As I mentioned to him my discomfort with the fact that, in practice, the gospel is not for everyone because married women are not allowed to freely choose baptism, I had my only unpleasant experience in discussing this matter. He questioned my piety and humility and informed me that whatever the First Presidency decides is right and true is by definition right and true. If I didn't believe that, he feared for my soul. I felt bad about the attack on my personal worthiness. Why, I wondered, had I decided to unreasonably follow my impulse to talk to him instead of adapting myself to Shaw's world? Yet, in this rebuff, I felt for a moment more strongly than ever somehow linked with women denied the gospel: surely they too felt that they were being told that they were somehow not "good enough." Their hurt became even more forcibly my "hurt."

Besides church messages constantly reminding me of this seemingly errant church policy, my reading in church history offered no relief. I discovered in *Saints Without Halos* that in pioneer days, Edwin Woolley, a Quaker, did not approve when his wife Mary was baptized into the Mormon church (apparently the policy was different at that time). He offered her "a new silk dress" if she would deny that Joseph Smith was a prophet. She would not. Later, Edwin himself joined the church.¹ His posterity includes grandson J. Reuben Clark and great-grandson Spencer

1. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *Saints Without Halos: The Human Side of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1982), 53.

W. Kimball. Spencer Woolley Kimball came to preside over a church that denies membership to contemporary Mary Woolleys. What irony! I thought.

Another book reminded me of this issue more obliquely. For many years before I married I regretted that the right to hold the priesthood was denied to blacks. I reflected that they were similar to me: as a single woman I had no priesthood either. Blacks had church membership and the Holy Ghost, which are the most essential church blessings; they could continue to progress as much as I could (though given a vote, I would have voted for them to hold the priesthood). *The Mormon Experience* quotes a black leader as expressing essentially this idea, "Many white people are hoping for a change, praying that the blacks will hold the priesthood, same as the blacks are. But for now, we're on the right train. Maybe we're not the engineer, but it's better than missing the train."² The pertinence of this to present-day church policy is this: Married women with recalcitrant husbands are not even permitted to be "on the train." Blacks are now engineers, but the doors to the train remain closed to the married woman.

Before 1978 many members talked about the possibility of blacks holding the priesthood. Black members formed support groups for each other while hoping to receive the priesthood. Today, in contrast, few people seem to hope that married women might some day receive church membership. This astonishes me. These women have no support group and suffer individually. Would Christ, always concerned about "the one," want us to unlock the door of the train?

We declare with soberness that the Lord has now made known His will for the blessing of *all* [my emphasis] His children throughout the earth who will hearken to the voice of His authorized servants, and prepare themselves to receive *every* [my emphasis] blessing of the gospel.

This joyous message—announced as revelation in 1978—is at variance with LDS policy. This revelation, quoted in *The Mormon Experience*,³ has been applied to the blacks in granting them priesthood but not to married women who wish for church membership even though the message states that it is the Lord's will to bless "*all . . . who will hearken . . . and prepare themselves to receive every blessing of the gospel.*"

Recently, my husband came home with his newly revised *General Handbook of Instructions* (1983). Irrational though it was, my heart leapt with

2. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 323.

3. *Ibid.*, 324.

hope. Then I read, "A married woman should not be baptized without her husband's consent."

And so my third year of knowing about this policy begins anew with disappointment. I risk abandoning last year's accommodation delineated by Shaw as I write this essay, still scarcely able to conceal the hope for a change that I "unreasonably" have. The rightness of allowing a married woman freedom of religion seems so self-evident that I keep hoping to find out that the policy opposing it is somehow just a typographical error.

While I await the proof-reader's discovery, my soul agonizes, "Of what price is a virtuous married woman?"

* * *

That is the essay I wrote in January 1984. Since then, I have continued to be blessed with church activity and service. A year ago, I was released as stake primary president, a calling which brought me almost unimaginable joy. Yet the more joy I receive from my church membership, the more pain I receive from knowing of the denial of these blessings to others.

A little over a year ago, in March 1993, I complimented a member of our stake presidency on his recent speech about individual responsibility and choice. Then I mentioned my struggle in viewing this common Mormon concept of free agency as being inconsistent with the church policy of denying married women the right to choose to be baptized. He apparently saw the contradiction and said that he would check on it. Ten minutes later he was back.

"The policy has been changed," he announced.

My heart leaped in eager anticipation.

"Now both a husband and a wife must receive permission from a spouse before he or she is allowed to be baptized."

"Oh, no," I responded in despair.

This changed policy is in the General Handbook published in 1989. The revised policy seems doubly bad to me. Potentially twice as many people are now denied the blessings of the gospel. A terrible thought comes to me. What if, in reviewing policies, some church authorities vaguely recalled, from my letters of so many years ago, my objections to the former policy? What if, not remembering them exactly, they felt that the objection had been that men and women were not treated equally and so they made this adjustment? If so, my calling attention to this policy resulted in an even greater injustice. Of course, I have no way of knowing if my letters had any residual influence, but the idea that they might have contributed to this change is excruciating.