

If Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood since 1843, Why Aren't They Using It?

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IN AUGUST 1984 I PRESENTED MY FIRST Sunstone Symposium paper: "The Missing Rib: The Forgotten Place of Queens and Priestesses in the Establishment of Zion."¹ In it I declared my belief that women receive priesthood through the LDS temple endowment. Nine years later, in August 1993, I participated with Maxine Hanks, Michael Quinn, and Linda Newell on a Sunstone Symposium panel entitled "If Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood since 1843, Why Aren't They Using It?" The title was taken from Michael's chapter in the book, *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine, and to which Linda and I also contributed chapters. This panel was especially significant to me because it showed that in the nine years since my first paper the discussion had moved beyond the initial inquiry of whether women should or do hold priesthood. Although this remains a hotly debated question, even among Mormon liberals, it appears that the climate of opinion is changing in the wake of mounting historical evidence and theological argument. In the brief essay which follows, I do not reassert the arguments supporting women's right to priesthood, but focus on certain problems raised by the assumption that women have priesthood authority.²

1. Margaret M. Toscano, "The Missing Rib: The Forgotten Place of Queens and Priestesses in the Establishment of Zion," *Sunstone* 10 (July 1985): 16-22.

2. For full discussions of this question, see Carol Cornwall Madsen, "Mormon Women and the Temple," *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, eds. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 80-110; Linda King Newell, "The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood," *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 23-48; D.

"If Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood since 1843, Why Aren't They Using It?" To answer this question, I will first address two other preliminary questions: What is priesthood? And in what sense do women have it? The view of priesthood promulgated in the modern LDS church is based in part on Bruce McConkie's definition from *Mormon Doctrine* that "priesthood is the power and authority of God delegated to man on earth to act in all things for the salvation of men."³ While not a bad definition as far as it goes, this formula has been used narrowly in the church to the detriment of both men and women. For example, there is the problem of what is meant by delegation. In response to those of us who have argued that the endowment confers priesthood, Boyd Packer recently stated that "ordination to an office in the priesthood is the way, and the only way, it has been or is now conferred."⁴

I see several problems with Elder Packer's statement. First, it fails to deal with the historical development and use of the priesthood in this dispensation. The priesthood was at first undifferentiated into offices and callings. This happened in steps between 1829 and 1844. Moreover, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were not ordained to offices by the heavenly messengers. They simply had priesthood conferred upon them, which authority contains the right and the keys to create the various priesthood orders and offices, which are merely "appendages" to the more comprehensive authority of the priesthood (D&C 84:29-30, 107:5).⁵

Brother Packer also fails to deal with any of the historical and scriptural texts dealing with the transmittal of priesthood. Strangely, he quotes Doctrine and Covenants 124, which says that without the temple there is no place that the Lord can come to restore the "fulness of the priesthood" (v. 28; cf. vv. 34, 42). But then he ignores the text's implication that the temple confers the fulness of the priesthood and reasserts that the laying on of hands is the only way priesthood is conferred.

Brother Packer also ignores such scriptural texts as Alma 13, which does not speak of priesthood ordination by the laying on of hands but by a ritual that prefigures the redemption of Christ (vv. 2, 8, 16), suggesting the temple ritual, not the laying on of hands. For in the temple the tokens

Michael Quinn, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843," *Women and Authority*, 365-409; and Margaret and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 143-220.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1958), 534-35.

4. Boyd K. Packer, "The Temple, The Priesthood," *Ensign* 23 (May 1993): 20.

5. See also Margaret Merrill Toscano, "Put on Your Strength O Daughters of Zion: Claiming Priesthood and Knowing the Mother," *Women and Authority*, 414; Quinn, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood since 1843," 375.

of the Lord's crucifixion are given to us to symbolize that the purpose of the priesthood is to connect us with Christ and help us follow in his path.⁶

Brother Packer quotes the Fifth Article of Faith as an argument against temple priesthood and as proof of how priesthood must be conferred: "a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority." But the temple can also be seen as reinforcing this pattern. Every woman and man who has been endowed in the temple has had hands laid on their heads anointing them to become priestesses and priests. And the anointings are performed by those who have the authority to do so within the priesthood structure of the church. Temple priesthood is not a "free-floating" authority as Elder Packer claims. Since it is tied to an ordinance in the control of church leaders, it very much follows the requirements stated in the article of faith.

It should also be noted, though, that the article of faith states that in addition to the laying on of hands by one who has authority, there must also be a calling from God through prophecy. The usual assumption in the church is that this calling comes only through church leaders. The scriptures do not say this. The Book of Mormon in particular emphasizes the importance of an unmediated calling which comes directly from God.⁷ Alma 13 describes priesthood ordination as a two-step process: a person must obtain both a "holy calling," which is equated with foreordination by God through faith, and a "holy anointing" into a priestly community.

We often forget in the church that priesthood has two aspects—what Doctrine and Covenants 121 calls the "rights" and the "power." The rights, the legal authority to act within the scope of the church, are given by ordination to priesthood and church offices or a setting apart to church callings. But the power of the priesthood comes only from God. It comes through faith and divine love as a spiritual gift.

Priesthood power is "free-floating" in the sense that it is not in the control of church leaders or any other human agency. It is connected with the Holy Spirit, which the Gospel writer tells us is like the wind because it blows where *it* wants, not where we want it to go (John 3:8). The essence of priesthood is the power of God. The revelations define this power as a literal substance, the glory of God, which is equated with light, truth, intelligence, and love. This glory proceeds from the presence of God to fill all space. It is the life of God. It quickens all things. It is the power by which

6. Alma 13 contains several phrases which Joseph Smith typically links with the fulness of the priesthood: "holy ordinance," "holy order," "high priesthood of Melchizedek" (see Toscano and Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox*, 180, 198-99).

7. See Paul James Toscano, "Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 13 (Dec. 1989): 8-17.

all things are governed, not by rules and threats, but with the authority of truth and love (D&C 88, 93).

Doctrine and Covenants 121 teaches that the rights of the priesthood are "inseparably connected" with these powers which are given only from heaven. I believe that priesthood rights and power are meant to serve as a check and balance system to prevent the abuse of both ecclesiastical and charismatic authority, to promote the spiritual equality of every member, to include the voice and vote of each member in the governance of the church, and to integrate our need for both order and freedom, structure and life. I also believe that these two elements of priesthood are dangerously out of balance in the church today because we ask only if a person is properly ordained but not whether a person is filled with the spirit and power of God. The priesthood is out of balance in the church because we see it in terms of corporate management, order, correlation, and hierarchy, not in terms of spiritual gifts and fruits, not in its relation to the gospel as a means of transforming each soul into the image of God. The priesthood is out of balance because we have used it to set up a system of inequality that creates barriers between men and women, members and leaders, general authorities and local leaders, the Saints and their God. The priesthood, which was meant to create a Zion community where all things are held in common, has become instead a stratified system which divides on the basis of gender, race, class, wealth, position, and age.

We need to repent and recenter the church on the foundation of Christ's gospel of love and equality. One way to begin correcting this imbalance is to acknowledge the priesthood of women and to include them in the councils of the church.⁸ To do this we need not abandon Mormon tradition, nor do we need new revelation (although more is always good). There is plenty of evidence in Mormon texts to demonstrate that women have both the rights and the power of the priesthood. The rights have been conferred through the temple. The power has been given by God. This is evident in the lives of the faithful women of all dispensations from Sarah the princess of peace to Huldah the prophetess, from Eliza R. Snow the high priestess to Chieko Okazaki the healer.

This brings us back to our main question: If women have the priesthood, why aren't they using it? It must first be acknowledged that many women *are* using their priesthood in private and quiet ways. Women are giving blessings and using other spiritual gifts such as revelation without asking permission from church leaders. Sister missionaries are preaching the gospel as ministers of salvation. Women temple workers are perform-

8. I am not suggesting that the inclusion of women will eliminate all problems. The only cure for sin is the gospel. But the distribution of power reduces the possibility of its misuse.

ing ordinances and passing on priesthood authority to other women. Relief Society presidencies are exercising their keys in behalf of their sisters. And women all over the church are using the power of God to bless their own lives and the lives of others too.

Much of this, however, is being done without a conscious realization on the part of women that they are exercising priesthood. And whatever is not named lacks the force and authority of that which is clearly defined and consciously used. Not only that, but women's self-esteem is damaged because they think men have a greater right than they do to receive and use the power of God. Many Mormon women are not using their priesthood because they don't know they have it. Consequently, many women are failing to develop their own spirituality because they think they need a male priesthood holder to intercede between them and God. The whole church is suffering because the power and spirituality of women are restricted to narrow categories and confined to small groups. Women's voices and concerns are not being heard because they have little or no say in the governance of the church.

While women do not need and should not ask permission from male leaders to use their priesthood in private ways or accepted venues, it is impossible for them to use it in visible ways or in official capacities without an acknowledgement of women's right to priesthood. But is there evidence that women have the right to offices? Although there is no historical evidence of women being ordained to church offices, there are statements which equate Relief Society offices with priesthood offices, making the Relief Society a parallel organization to the priesthood quorums.⁹ Though I believe that women need their own autonomous organization and publication, I also believe that they cannot be equal or valued in the context of church government until they are part of the larger, comprehensive body of the priesthood and are included in the highest councils of the church. Separate but equal is never really equal because gradations are usually created on the basis of differences. Nor does separation promote understanding and interconnectedness among different groups.

I believe that women have the right to church offices and priesthood positions by virtue of their temple endowments. Joseph Smith said that all "priesthood is Melchizedek; but there are different portions or degrees of it." The priesthood bestowed in the temple is the same priesthood given by the laying on of hands, but it is a fullness of that authority and embraces all other authorities, appendages, and offices.¹⁰ It is true that women cannot

9. Toscano and Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox*, 182; Quinn, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood," 373-5; Linda King Newell, "Gifts of the Spirit," *Sisters in Spirit*, 116.

10. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1980), 59; Toscano and Toscano,

be ordained to offices in the church without official acknowledgement of their priesthood or acceptance of their authority by the president of the high priesthood; nevertheless an important beginning is seeing how the fulness of the priesthood given in the temple carries with it the inherent if latent right to perform ordinances and constitute offices.

Why aren't women using their priesthood? Because they are prevented from doing so by the current policy of the church which many assume to be the will of God without examining the historical evidence or theological assumptions behind this policy. But many women are saying that even if the present policy were changed, they would not want to participate in the priesthood structure of the church. Two major reasons are being given for this response, both of which are compelling to me.

First, many women feel they do not want priesthood that is derived from and defined by men. They do not want simply to be incorporated into a male system which would then coopt their energies and talents and subordinate female concerns and desires to the service of the male structure. This is a legitimate concern. How can women function in the priesthood system without losing their personal autonomy and authority?¹¹ I do not have a complete answer to this question. I am struggling with it, in the same way feminists are struggling with comparable questions dealing with women's relationships to all patriarchal structures. But I do know this: Women cannot simply be incorporated gradually into the male system. They must have immediate access to the highest councils of the church if there is ever to be any equality. I also believe that there must be a major transformation of the entire Mormon priesthood structure and that women must have an important and equal role in redefining and restructuring it. We must rethink the meaning and essence of priesthood. We must reconnect the priesthood with the gospel. We must revive the spiritual dimension of priesthood. And we must move away from outmoded models of control and hierarchy toward the establishment of shared power and priesthood community.

This brings us to the second reason why many women do not use or want to use the priesthood. (And I believe many men feel the same way.) Women do not want to be a part of an abusive, hierarchical system. The question is this: Is it possible to participate in the priesthood system of the church without advancing the abuses that are being done in the name of the priesthood? Let me say first that I think much good has and is being done with the priesthood. Many are using it to serve and love others. However, the problem is deeper than simply a misuse of power; the

Strangers in Paradox, 151.

11. Men face a similar but not identical dilemma, which is really the question of individual rights versus the common good.

problem is systemic. The very structure of the present priesthood hierarchy sets up abusive power relationships and promotes false concepts of priesthood authority which encourage the misuse of power even by very good people. Here are some of the worst problems I see:

1. The priesthood is used to set up a stratified system of power based on gender, age, race, class, and wealth. Male general authorities, who are predominantly white and affluent, are on the top, while women and children are on the bottom. Spiritual and temporal inequality is fostered, and many groups remain invisible and voiceless.

2. Sharp divisions have been created between members and leaders. Leaders do not have to be accountable to members. They can keep secrets about church finances, history, and procedures, while members are expected to reveal their personal sins and finances.

When disputes arise between leaders and members, the leaders are believed over members; and members have no recourse and little chance of getting an impartial or fair hearing. Members cannot question leaders, and if they do so in public they risk being labelled as apostates. The spiritual gifts of members are not valued on an equal footing with those of leaders.

3. There is an emphasis on ecclesiastical office rather than spirituality, truth, and love. Church office is seen as competence, and deference is given to office rather than to truth. Leaders can contradict the gospel or act against the teachings of Jesus without accountability to those they presumably serve.

4. Priesthood is seen as the right to command, and leaders expect obedience simply because they said so. Whatever the leader says is correct by definition.

5. The checks and balances on the abuse of power have been overlooked. Common consent has been reduced to a loyalty test, and the appeal process is a sham.

6. Emphasis is put on a good public image, the use of titles, and the show of respect for church authorities. In a recent general conference Russell Nelson talked about "proper priesthood protocol" and the sacred nature of titles for church officials.¹² How is it that we have come to a place where titles are considered more sacred than the individual members of the church?

The excommunications which have taken place in the last year dramatically highlight the consequences for those who challenge the authoritarian nature of this system. As I have watched my family and friends being severed from the church one by one, I find myself in a continual state of mourning. My mourning is not simply for my personal losses because of

12. Russell M. Nelson, "Honoring the Priesthood," *Ensign* 23 (May 1993): 38-40.

my husband Paul's excommunication or the threat of possible church discipline against me. Though I prize my membership and value the ordinances, I am not afraid of losing my salvation because I know that it rests in the hands of Jesus Christ himself, not with any church leader. What I mourn is the loss of community among the Saints. What I mourn is the loss of a great religion. I love Mormon theology and scriptural texts. I love the temple and believe that priesthood is an eternal principle. But I have seen all of these things used in damaging ways to control people's lives.

Instead of being an instrument for spiritual empowerment to lead each individual to God, the priesthood is too often used to compel obedience to an earthly power system which privileges some people above others. I believe that the priesthood has become the chief idol of the modern church because it is the object we are asked to give allegiance to, above Christ himself.

If the temple, the scriptures, the priesthood, or any other gift from God is seen as more holy than God or the individual members in whom the Spirit of God dwells, then they are idols which must be torn down, rent like the veil of the temple. The priesthood, the temple, the church must be taken down stone by stone and rebuilt again on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ and his love which calls for the spiritual equality of all members, whether rich or poor, black or white, young or old, male or female.