

# Being a Mormon Woman or “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?” . . . Isn’t That Enough?

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I HAVE BEEN A CONSCIOUS CHRISTIAN all my life, although defining what “Christian” means is problematic. You could say I was “born again,” but that comes on like too much evangelical bad breath. Let’s just say I’ve been tight with Jesus for as long as I can recall.

In high school I was president of my United Methodist youth group. My best friend was an “inactive” Mormon, whose home teachers were trying to “reactivate” the family. I remember going to her church with her once and having the other teenagers press me about what religion I was. They weren’t satisfied when I said I was Christian. “No, what *religion*. . . Lutheran? Methodist? Presbyterian?” They seemed to think the Christian world was still locked in the nineteenth century sectarian squabbles they’d read about. These kids—who called the last book in the Bible “Revelations” and who didn’t know the Lord’s Prayer—were all eager to teach me the truth.

I spent ten months hearing the missionary discussions, defending Mormons to my Protestant friends and trying to defend mainline Christianity to the Mormons. After recognizing that the Mormons had a complex history (and present) and after seeing saints and sinners in both churches, I didn’t know what to do. During the fall of my freshman year at Wellesley College, while talking to some missionaries in my dorm room, I had a life changing experience with the Spirit. I don’t even remember what we were talking about, but something nearly tangible confirmed to me that there is a unique, emphatic, and imperative power to the priesthood. I remember saying my prayers that night—2 October 1969—amazed that the God I’d known and loved all my life was alive in the Mormon church. Apparently he wanted me there, too.

That’s not to say he explained why he wanted me there or clarified

any of my intellectual questions or eliminated the church's funky history or conflicted present. But that dorm room experience and a few other significant ones are the "truest" encounters I have had in my life. It's ramifications require—and develop—a muscular faith.

The task in this essay is to write about being a Mormon woman. Mormons emphasize gender a lot. Aren't we all children of God? Beyond a certain level, isn't there something essentially *human* that God is trying to redeem and save, regardless of our maleness or femaleness? To the extent that there are inequities and prejudice, isn't part of our task to create compassion and equity?

As a newly minted Mormon, I resonated with Judy Dushku's comment at an Institute class in Cambridge, Massachusetts, back in 1970. She said her colleagues were dumbfounded when she told them, "Of course I'm a feminist. I'm a Mormon, aren't I?" Judy's point of view made perfect sense to me.

Over the years the word "feminist" has become weighted with political, theological, and emotional baggage—another "f" word many Mormons won't use. Back then, in its uncluttered meaning, every enlightened person was surely feminist, I thought. And of course Mormons—recipients of further light and knowledge—were feminist, right? This, it seemed to me, was the "oh, say, what is truth" mind set I had joined, and I was thrilled.

During my first decade in the church, I recognized aspects of life as a Mormon that seemed distinctive. These included lay service without much whining, very little ecclesiastical jockeying for position, service offered generously in the ward and beyond, willingness to sacrifice for a greater good. Especially among the women I saw commitment, determination, and hope in God's promises eventually fulfilled. I was reared in the church with the beginnings of *Exponent II*, whose no-nonsense motto was "Am I not a woman and a sister?"

I also noticed that the pioneer experience affects the collective brain stem of the Mormon community. I noticed a mountain-centeredness and rivalries that apparently carry weight involving Salt Lake Valley and Utah Valley or "Zion" and "the mission field." These still show up when in our prairie state, Illinois ward, we are forced to sing "Firm as the Mountains Around Us."

I sat in a Relief Society class 20 years after my conversion. The teacher launched into a lesson on the patriarchal order and outlined a doctrine of "God speaks to Man, Man speaks to woman." Aware that there were new members and visitors that day, and prodded by my own discomfort, I raised my hand and kindly, gently (or so I thought) said, "When I hear that kind of stuff, I want to run away screaming." The teacher's response was quick and sharp: "Well, it's a good thing I'm teaching this lesson, and you're not."

That was an “Aha!” moment for me about what it means to me to be a Mormon woman in the church today. Not a happy “aha” moment. This sorry experience and other discouragements challenged my willingness to stay in this place. For me, being a Mormon Christian is sometimes not as comfortable or as spiritually nourishing as being a Methodist Christian. I occasionally feel like a stranger and a foreigner, an unwelcome visitor in the household of faith.

I have seen in recent years many of the church’s best and brightest baling out—or being forced to bale. This is a cause of great heartbreak and loneliness. Here is my advice to those who are considering this route: To the extent that you have been affected and have a say in the matter, don’t go. Don’t go. If for no other reason than that I need you. Maybe you have seen those magic eye books where the surface details are essentially irrelevant to the deeper image available if you get your eyes lined up just so. As for me, I have seen the deep image—felt that pulse, that divine juice—beneath the sometimes majestic and sometimes morbid details on the surface of church experience. Because I have seen, I am tethered to this place whether I “like” it all the time or not. I remain here by choice, by commitment, and by covenant.

What drew me to the church in the first place was the brash claim that the gospel is composed of all truth. Brigham Young wrote, “We believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.”<sup>1</sup> What an expansive view! The world is drenched in truth. This is something to celebrate. We have so much to learn from so many quarters, and God is so gracious. Who could not love this? In the places where the church doesn’t embrace truth, I am not obliged to go along. I am wed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I am Christ’s woman, living my life of faith among the Mormons.

In 1st Corinthians Paul says, “It hath been declared unto me. . .that there are contentions among you. . .[E]very one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas, and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?” (I Cor. 1:11-13) This is an interesting list. “I am of Paul” could translate into “I am of Packer or Holland or Maxwell” or whomever your favorite apostle might be. “I am of Apollos” could mean, “I am of my liberal bishop in Boston or my conservative bishop in Tennessee,” etc. “I am of Cephas” refers to Peter, the head of the church. That’s an appealing one for many. “I am of President Hinckley” many might say, and feel confident they’ve picked the right answer. I’d rather just stick with “I am of Christ.” It’s his name I carry.

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1. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1971).

My friend Cathy Stokes is an African-American woman of substantial presence and command. She was one of the first black Relief Society presidents and has been in many church public relations films and campaigns. Cathy sometimes describes her approach to involvement in the church with the words from a gospel song, "There's plenty good room, plenty good room, plenty good room in my father's kingdom. . .so choose your seat and sit down." If Cathy wants to sit somewhere, she sits. She has been a mentor and example to me for years. She visited us often when my children were little. When my son Chase was five, he saw pictures of my childhood and said, "I see Aunt Holly and Aunt Susan. But where's Cathy Stokes? Isn't she your sister, too?"

During the nail-biting stage of preparing this essay, I asked Chase—who is now seventeen—what he thought of when I said the phrase "Mormon woman." "I think of you and Ann Stone and Cathy Stokes," he said. I was amazed, amused, and delighted. He has around him all sorts of Mormon women, and he picked out three who are all committed misfits! I asked him what traits he thought we had in common that would qualify us for this title. "I guess it's something about being matter-of-fact and determined," he said.

Here is one last image to add to these musings on being a Mormon woman. May 6th was Enrichment Night for our ward. Ann Stone was the beleaguered but stalwart enrichment leader. That night featured a Mother-Daughter Jello-Rama, which had been advertised with a cheesy ad to convey the campy tone Ann was after. When I arrived, I walked through the foyer past the chapel doors. The other ward was having a baptismal service and their meeting was just beginning. I made my way to the kitchen counter where the Relief Society sisters huddled over an array of Jello concoctions. They were magnificent. There was not-quite-gelled green Jello. There was stained-glass Jello, jigglers, a yummy pretzel-strawberry-cream-cheese wonder, an elaborate jello version of the Candyland game board. And best of all—Ann's contribution—gray Jello in the detailed shape of a brain. Mothers and daughters bonded over craft projects. Quilters worked on a contribution to the Heifer Project auction to provide a cow for a family in a developing country. I laughed and visited with my sisters while the strains of "Jesus came to John the Baptist. . . ." echoed down the hall. I felt as at home as I ever do among Mormons. Sacred ordinances, service, quilting, Jello, and sisterhood. That night I felt like a Mormon woman.