

A Lament

Molly McLellan Bennion

Eight times the Lord lamented that it grieved him to lose the branches of His vineyard (Jac. 5). Surely it grieves him to lose the women who have left the Church or quietly disengaged from active Church involvement. It grieves me. I miss them terribly.

When I joined the Church in 1967, I had just found *Dialogue* on the shelves of a college library. That discovery profoundly influenced my decision to join the Church. Soon after, Mormon women formed study groups to explore the implications of the women's movement on their religious lives, and scholars mined the rich history of nineteenth-century Mormon women. Sunstone started its symposia, and we met and dialogued with the researchers, thinkers, and writers enriching and exciting us all. I brought Mormon scholars to my Houston home where friends and strangers gathered to explore gospel doctrines and Church history. Later in Seattle, I began chairing a satellite Sunstone Symposium, and 250 people came. Women organized national and regional retreats, attracting many active Mormon women eager to discuss the female and the gospel with strangers. For about twenty years, I felt part of a community of seekers and finders. We who needed to know, who loved to learn, and who found new questions at the end of each new answer were not alone. It was a heady time.

The headiness is gone. Today Church is the loneliest place I regularly go. Not that I don't enjoy associating with the Saints of my ward and stake. I do. I have known some of them more than eighteen years, and I know them to be honorable and good people. We have served and blessed each other, and we will no doubt continue to do so, as often out of real love as dutiful commitment. Yet I am lonely at church for I so rarely see any person—and most particularly for the narrow focus of this essay, any woman of any age—with whom I feel comfortable discussing my intellectual and gender interests. Most of those women are gone. Women who

worked tirelessly in the Church for decades are gone. Women, like my own daughter, who are raising young families are gone. Women who have just stepped out into the adult world are gone.

And it is not just a phenomenon of inner-city university wards like mine. Nationally and locally, many women of all ages are gone. The 250, half of whom were women, who once came to each Northwest Symposium have dwindled to 55. Some are still active in the Church; many are not. Some of the women who once wrote intriguing and valuable papers for the three women's issues of *Dialogue* and other Mormon publications are gone or no longer expressing themselves publicly. Perhaps they no longer consider the historical, sociological, and religious issues that compelled them two decades ago. But I do, and I need their insights to do it well. Perhaps they have silenced themselves for fear of criticism or even sanction. As I understand the scriptures, a respectful and loving fear of God is all the fear he encourages. Other fears must be minimized lest they shackle and shrink the human soul.

Some of the missing attend other churches. Some have found non-traditional spiritual outlets. Some express no interest in religious issues. But they are not the chaff. We are not better off without them. We need them. And I think they need us, but then I still believe in the godliness of Mormon doctrines and ordinances. But if I forget for a moment the importance of those ordinances, I must admit that many of the women we have lost seem to be living admirable Christian lives. The goodness of those I know personally moves me to worry more for my own salvation than for theirs, even as I believe Church activity could be a blessing to them and know they could be a blessing to us. Many I know are godly women who sincerely sought, but could not find, a home in Mormonism. Many had been born and raised in the Church and could at first not imagine life without it. So why are they gone and why are others dangling one foot out the door?

My answers must be tentative for my sample is personal and anecdotal, not scientific. I rely on my perceptions and the perceptions of others. Those conclusions are somewhat faulty, no doubt, but real enough to cause some to make the dramatic decision to leave the Church. It is time for a scientific study of the absent. Roughly 75 percent of my university-centered stake is inactive. But I want to know more than how many they are. I want to know *who* they are and, in their own words, why they are no longer with us. In the meanwhile, in the tradition of the three

women's issues of *Dialogue* and their rich assortment of short personal essays, I offer this lament for the women no longer present or honestly vocal.

Some women have found it difficult to see themselves in the Church. We all need role models. We need to see ourselves or our potential selves in our leaders. In the same way that elementary schools need some male teachers to help boys value learning too, we need female religious leaders to help us value ourselves and our religion. Those few we have are seldom seen. Their backgrounds, personalities, and strengths are never chronicled like those of male leaders. We know them little so they are less available as role models.

One of my best friends in the Church and her family of six left as she and her husband, both lifelong members, compared the respect and encouragement they perceived the Church organization giving their daughters with that which it gave their sons. The boys were as visible as their leaders whether reporting on the exciting river rafting trip or passing the sacrament. My friends felt girls were just expected to be silent and present. It wasn't a message they wanted their girls to hear so they left.

For good and ill, women are in the workplace. For most it is an economic necessity. For others it is a passion without which they do not think they can fulfill the measure of their creation. Rarely as an objective—more as a byproduct—in the workplace we are validated and encouraged. We all want to be where we feel respected, and I know women who do not feel respected at Church. Decision-making, team-building, raises, promotions, letters of commendation, and hearty praise from co-workers all feed our need to develop our talents, to make a difference, and to be recognized for our contributions. Success spurs us to embrace greater challenge and make greater contributions—until we get to church.

Inside the walls of our chapels and classrooms, most of the talents we have developed and yearn to share with our brothers and sisters seem not to be wanted. The Church encourages us to use our leadership talents in the wider community when the needs of our children are met. That's good, but it doesn't totally erase the pain of knowing that the Church itself just doesn't want the same leadership talents. Yes, we hear from the pulpit that women are valued. We just do not see that value in action often enough.

In every ward I have ever attended, some of the women who came to sacrament meeting did not attend Relief Society. Just prior to my call as a

Relief Society president, one of my past stake presidents, informed that I rarely attended Relief Society, asked me why. I explained that my choice was a painful one. On the one hand, women's college graduate that I am, I love women. I love dialoguing with women. I have real compassion for the gender-based realities and decisions of our lives. Women have been critical sources of understanding my own nature and my life. Other women have helped me understand my place in the universe better than have any men. So I missed being with the women. Yet when I attended, the cruel pressures to make my sisters "Molly (and they didn't mean me!) Mormons" and the mind-numbing boredom I suffered wounded me. Furthermore, boredom is exhausting. I want to leave Church refreshed and invigorated, healed from the wounds of one week and energized to face the challenges of the next. Instead, I join many other women in leaving my Sunday meetings weary, frustrated, demoralized, and hungry, both spiritually and intellectually. Frequently, only the sacrament and the joy of being among good people feed my spirit.

My conversation with that stake president happened twenty-five years ago. Things have changed. Some are better. Where my Relief Society president then would not help me find a part-time babysitter so I could attend law school and practice law, my Relief Society president today sends such help-wanted notices to each sister by email. But some things are worse. Then our lessons quoted women and expressly used examples from women's lives. Today we learn excellent principles by valuable exposure to modern prophets. That is good. But we must learn those principles with rarely a mention of a woman or a gender-specific challenge, experience, or blessing. Lesson after lesson bears no expressly female imprint. That makes it more difficult for some women to see themselves in the Church. That is not good. Quite comfortable with the new concept of eternal gender, I do not believe that women are just junior men. We are not the abbreviated versions possible out of a mere rib. Consequently our lives and issues cannot simply be assumed or extracted from those of men. They deserve their own space.

One of my favorite inactive sisters is a very elderly woman. As her remaining years shrink, she can no longer abide the very maleness of our meetings. Her priesthood-holding husband beat her for decades, and she is simply too uncomfortable where maleness so pervasively trumps femaleness. She longs for female faces and voices. I understand, yet I miss her perceptive comments and her intelligent wit.

But should women need role models in a religious context? Some would argue that the Lord directs priesthood holders to do just what he would do for women. They would argue that the status quo is, by definition, the work of the Lord. Whether we expect priesthood leaders always to do exactly what the Lord would for women depends on our view of the revelatory process. It does seem to be a process. Free agency usually necessitates process. The Lord works with our readiness for revelation as well as his own timetable. He is not a great puppeteer. He gives us, leader and follower alike, plenty of opportunity to grow by trial and error so that we may come to him with the right questions and answers to earn the next revelation. Programs and customs evolve with the leaders charged to administer them. It is naive to think either that any idea coming from headquarters is the Lord's dearest desire or that the suggestion of change is heresy. It is heresy to believe in the infallibility of anyone.

So if we cannot count on the Lord to force all leaders to develop policies perfectly suited to maximize the growth of each of his children, can we count on him to inspire every priesthood holder to understand, in consultation only with the Lord, any number of other men and perhaps a few women, the needs and desires of every woman he serves? Hardly. Again free agency, that most precious and frightening of doctrines, argues for more elusive and harder-fought understandings.

My husband and I have been married thirty-eight years. We love each other deeply. We each know the other better than does anyone else. Yet we are so often amazed at the new things we learn about each other. Many of those discoveries are gender based. We approach feelings and issues differently because of varying knowledge, experience, and biology.

In the heat of the women's movement, I thought there were fewer differences between men and women than I do now. Research and experience document for me that, although there are fewer differences than sexists would claim, there are some apparently biological differences no amount of equal rights would erase. Those differences do not argue against equal rights and opportunities; they just exist. *Vive la différence!* My husband and I find that biologically based differences are frequently the most difficult to anticipate and understand. It is important that we listen and try to empathize with each other. It takes love, consultation, time, and humility. If my husband's priesthood has not been sufficient to teach him my needs and desires, if he could not shortcut the hard work of understanding how best to be my partner by relying on priesthood revelation on

demand, how can I expect inspiration alone to teach priesthood leaders how best to serve women, either in general or in particular, without intensive consultation with women? Some who have left the Church did not see Church men taking the time and care to understand and serve women well.

The lack of role models and of evidence that women's input is considered at every level of decision making are not the only reasons we have lost wonderful women. Some women have left as they grew older and felt the fear of running out of time to make life count. Church meetings often seem lengthy, inefficient, repetitive, and a waste of precious time. Faced with fewer opportunities for service and heightened frustration with LDS meetings, women look for other avenues of social service.

They also look to understand and connect with God. Sometimes our institutional life fails to create a climate of spiritual seeking and finding. A spiritual malaise may be building in our ranks. Hungry for spiritual connection, some of my friends have turned to other religions and New Age systems. I see no reason not to study and borrow from those traditions to enrich our ways. If we believe there is truth in many quarters, we should be comfortable seeking that truth. But what message are we sending that convinces our sisters that they must leave to explore the new fields of spiritual awakening? There are no doubt many answers, but one may be that we have brutally truncated the source list for gospel learning. Manuals that once included source material from women, Mormon and non-Mormon, no longer do. The Church magazine is increasingly a series of articles by the Brethren, excellent in their own right, but nonetheless not female and not inclusive of other sources of wisdom. Do these changes tell us if we venture outside the scriptures and sermons from General Authorities that we are already fading from true blue? I think they do.

We also repeat the same lessons in the same ways. It's another source of the boredom that people who value life's import and brevity find so frustrating. Those oft-repeated lessons move very superficially through the scriptures on our four-year rotation. How about a year-long course on Paul, the lives of modern prophets, notable women in Church history, the women of scripture, Old and New Testament archeology, comparative religion, particular modern challenges to living a female Christian life, or any number of fascinating subjects?

Some women have left because they believe women should have the priesthood. My own view is analogous to the arguments for and against

the ERA. When my stake Relief Society president asked me “unofficially” to join sisters lobbying against the ERA, I said no. I also said no to friends lobbying for the amendment. Although I did favor the ERA, I didn’t think it necessary to oppose Church policy publicly to see the positive changes I supported for women. (I also could not support, privately or publicly, participation in the lie of an “unofficial” protest group riding on a bus filled by Church request and funded by no one would say whom.) Though I thought the ERA would hasten equal rights, I believed the equal protection clause of the Constitution would do the trick. That has proved to be the case.

Just as the equal protection clause provided an alternative to the ERA, everyone’s more closely living the gospel of love provides an alternative to priesthood ordination for women. Like the ERA, ordination seems like a fast track to actualized equality, but the practical effects of equality are possible without it. Having the priesthood would give some women reason to stay, but I don’t believe it is necessary to ensure that women view themselves positively and have ample avenues to serve and grow.

I can believe God preferred to have men hold the priesthood at this time. I don’t know why, and I will continue to pray that it be otherwise, but I don’t know why not either. Practical arguments can be made for both. That list is long and would require another, much longer, essay. We could, for instance, weigh the inevitable good from using more of women’s talents against the downside of exposing us all to the risk of unrighteous dominion, something we observe few people can resist. But the pros and cons of priesthood for women do not determine my conclusion that the absence of the priesthood for women should not be a reason why women should leave the Church any more than it is an excuse to dismiss and marginalize them. The point is: I don’t think whether or not women hold the priesthood should make any important difference in the functioning of the Church or in our spiritual lives. Our challenge is to live the gospel, to see that, regardless of priesthood, each person is and feels loved, that each person is helped to be all she can be, and that each person has ample opportunities to share her gifts.

It is here that we are falling short. We can succeed without an extension of the priesthood to women. For example, the priesthood is necessary for ordinances, but it does not seem necessary for many teaching and administrative posts. Even if it were, women could be included in consultation and appear on every podium much more than they are now.

Women could be prominent in general conference. High counselors could often invite women to speak with them; bishops could use women as the closing speakers as often as men. Women could conduct meetings at which men presided and pass the sacrament blessed by men. Women could be used to lead special projects and exercise spiritual gifts. We could create greater symbolism and greater opportunities to serve without changing the priestly functions of the male priesthood.

I once had a bishop who understood this well. He called a woman to be his secretary and attend all bishopric meetings. He told me she was actually included to be another counselor, a voice for women, because this wise, dedicated, and highly educated man realized that, whatever his gifts and inspiration, he so often needed the instant advice of a similarly wise woman simply for the different perspective and avenues of information she brought to the table. I believe the Lord was pleased. We ban women from the councils of power in ignorance of our need for their gifts, their need to share them, and their need to see other women using their gifts. What in the status quo argues persuasively against the benefits of such a change?

My closest friend in my ward recently began attending Quaker meetings. I miss her whenever I am in church, but most poignantly when there is an empty seat beside me in Relief Society or when the seat is filled by a darling young woman who does not read Church history or theology or, for that matter, much more than a gothic novel. Of course, she may well be a finer Christian than I. I would most likely enjoy getting to know her and learning valuable lessons from her. But she cannot fill the void. I remain lonely and saddened by the loss and waste of the strong souls no longer with us.