

how a person feels about the hot topic of female ordination, she or he can push for improvements in the way LDS women are treated at the local level.



## **Negotiating the Paradoxes: Neylan McBaine's *Women at Church***

Neylan McBaine, *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact*, Greg Kofford Books, 2014. Paperback: \$20.43. ISBN: 1589586883.

*Reviewed by Julie M. Smith*

Neylan McBaine's book *Women at Church* includes the following interview excerpt:

On one Sunday in my ward, the final assigned speaker was a woman. She seemed flustered to be in the last slot, was apologetic to the audience and lamented that we weren't going to get the final word in the meeting from a priesthood holder. And then she gave her talk.

The stake president happened to be visiting, and after she finished he stood to make a few comments. He thanked her for the talk, and acknowledged she was just being self-deprecating. But he said it was his responsibility as presiding officer in the stake to correct misinformation. He then affirmed that there is nothing wrong with scheduling a sister to speak in the last slot in sacrament meeting, that that is perfectly appropriate. When we don't do that, it is just a tradition.<sup>1</sup>

McBaine's response to this incident is "I want to shout 'Hooray!'" The irony of the story—that a woman was *not* the final speaker in the meeting and that the final word *did* come from a priesthood holder—exemplifies the many paradoxes

surrounding the role of women in the LDS Church in general and in McBaine's book in particular.

The first half of *Women at Church* explores current Mormon doctrines, policies, customs, and rhetoric related to women; McBaine frames the issue in terms of the pain that these cause some women. This framing makes the discussion accessible and non-threatening to the widest possible audience. It also meshes nicely with the metaphor of the body of Christ; although McBaine doesn't develop this imagery, the idea that pain in any part of the body is a concern to the entire body should inculcate the notion that women pained by various aspects of the church should not be written off or shouted down.

But this framing can also be problematic. One solution to the problem of pain is to explain why the practice should not be regarded as painful, but this rhetoric is itself problematic for most LDS feminists.<sup>2</sup> And the primary concern when considering a practice or doctrine should be whether it aligns with the gospel, not whether it causes pain; one would not, for example, want to jettison fasting just because many people find it distressing. Plus, presenting pain as necessarily negative does not integrate well with Mormon rhetoric on the sanctification that suffering can bring. Focusing on pain could lead to a utilitarian calculus where the status quo is justified because most women do not find it painful. And the pain narrative reifies stereotypes of women as emotional creatures who are associated with feelings rather than intellect.

At one point, McBaine presents a compelling alternative to the pain framing: it is focused on the question of what women need from their church experience that they are not getting.<sup>3</sup> So instead of arguing, for example, that the lack of scripture stories about women is painful, she could have pointed to the legitimate need women have to see models of lives similar to their own in the scriptures. Had she used this framing, the aforementioned problems would have been largely avoided.

And yet despite the framing, the first half of the book is an excellent inventory of the issues that concern some Mormons, presented in the least divisive manner possible. By quoting from interviews, McBaine is able to lay out controversial viewpoints

(from an anonymous interview: “My faith loss stems from the oppression of women in the church”<sup>4</sup> and from Fiona Given: “We might hope to one day . . . offer healing blessings and other blessings in behalf of family members”<sup>5</sup>) without undermining her credentials as an unfailing supporter of the institutional church. She includes other provocative ideas as well: for example, when you tell women that they are naturally good nurturers, the ones who aren’t will develop a distrust for the speaker.<sup>6</sup> And while it is not its purpose, the first half of the book is an excellent history of the last decade of Mormon feminism.

The second half of *Women at Church* explores what changes—changes permitted by the current iteration of the *Church Handbook of Instruction*—might be implemented at the local level to augment the visibility, voice, and authority of women. But by restricting the discussion to only those local changes that McBaine deems aligned with the handbook, several problems may arise.

First, it treats the handbook as sacrosanct—not a helpful attitude for LDS who may already tend toward canonizing it. And since McBaine herself provides examples where the handbook is violated (with, presumably, the approval of Church leaders) in order to meet the needs of women,<sup>7</sup> limiting the discussion to the confines of the current handbook is questionable.

More seriously, sporadic and localized change sends the message that the empowerment of women is not integral to the kingdom but rather something that may or may not occur based on the preferences of a few (male) local leaders. A girl who grows up watching her older sister bake the sacrament bread, hand out programs, conduct sacrament meeting music, and visit teach with their mother—but then experiences the young women’s program under the direction of a bishop who scuttled all of those programs—may internalize the message that her contribution to building the kingdom is an optional accessory. This is an ironic stance for a book deeply concerned with what messages current LDS practice sends. Because a local response to a structural problem denies the structural nature of the problem, local efforts to empower women deny that their limited opportunities are actually a problem.

Further, if one imagines a spectrum of wards in the Church—extending from those doing an exemplary job empowering women to those most actively restricting them—would it not be the case that the wards *most* in need of change would be the *least* likely to institute it locally? And couldn't this dynamic lead to vast disparities among wards, which could increase “ward shopping,” which would in turn further polarize wards? One of the benefits of centralization is consistency; this uniformity also limits the contention that might occur with more autonomy and variety. Local change can be very divisive: conservative members generally accept liberalizing policies when they come from the general Church leadership due to their commitment to heeding general authorities, but may be less accepting of changes implemented locally. And more liberal members may fume if their local leaders are unwilling to adopt changes that are implemented elsewhere. One example that McBaine focuses on is the possibility of women becoming more involved in the blessing of their babies by either holding the baby, holding the microphone, or being assigned to bear testimony immediately after the blessing.<sup>8</sup> The handbook states that only Melchizedek Priesthood holders may “participate” in a baby blessing.<sup>9</sup> Does holding the baby constitute “participating”? That is debatable, which means that there is a significant potential for acrimony if it were in fact to be debated in every ward in the Church. Another change that McBaine explores is having the Young Women visit teach with their mothers;<sup>10</sup> in the discussion that accompanied a review of McBaine's book at the blog *By Common Consent*, a bishop related that he decided to do this and announced the plan in his ward's Relief Society. But his stake president determined that this practice was contrary to the handbook.<sup>11</sup> While the bishop handled the situation with equanimity, it is easy to imagine that the same people who are troubled by current Church policies would find this series of events agonizing. So while McBaine presents her suggestions as all falling within the guidelines of the handbook, there is doubt as to whether they will be perceived that way. At the very least, all of them violate “the unwritten order of things” since they contradict current practice. There is a sense in which McBaine's

leadership in advocacy for local change to meet an ideological outcome is quite as foreign to Mormonism as anything Ordain Women has done.

Fourth, the first half of the book describes many gender-asymmetric policies, including the extreme disparity in General Conference speakers and some aspects of the temple ceremony, for which there are no local solutions. This means that there is a profound disconnect between the two sections of the book; many of the problems explored in the first half are not addressed by the solutions offered in the latter portion.

Despite these drawbacks, there is no doubt of the benefits of McBaine's approach. By positioning her suggestions within what is (arguably) allowed by the current handbook, McBaine will avoid being dismissed as an apostate. Because the Church has recently made a variety of minor policy changes along the lines of those advocated by McBaine, she is able to harness that extant trajectory in order to position her suggestions as faithful. Church members who read the book will be empowered to instigate change locally and if these efforts are met with success, surely the result will be more optimistic than a fruitless focus on changing general-level Church policies and doctrines. Just because all of the changes that LDS feminists might want to see cannot be achieved does not imply that it is preferable not to pluck the low-hanging fruit of local traditions. McBaine has provided a model for discussing gender issues in a way that does not call one's faithfulness into question, framed problems in a non-adversarial manner, and positioned the idea that women should have a greater voice as obvious; each of these is a benefit to Mormon feminists. McBaine's approach also channels the Mormon ethic of rolling up one's sleeves and working hard to improve Zion within one's sphere. The process of local change that McBaine envisions may also contribute to a greater level of comfort with the idea of innovation in general, which might some day be leveraged on a larger stage. And future high-level Church leaders who participated in congregations where women had greater visibility and voice will approach gender issues from a different frame of reference.

McBaine announces at the outset that her work is practical and pastoral, not historical, theological, or scriptural.<sup>12</sup> But without history, theology, and scripture as bedrock, her suggestions can appear to be managerial maneuvering to meet a marketing goal instead of advocacy for practices rooted firmly in the restored gospel. Feminists may bristle at what appears to be an effort to make the Church *look* good on women's issues without it actually *being* good on those issues. For example, McBaine mentions having the stake Relief Society presidency sit on the stand during stake conference.<sup>13</sup> This would increase their visibility and imply a level of parity with the stake presidency. But given that the stake presidency has substantially greater authority, influence, and autonomy relative to the stake Relief Society presidency, is implied parity a legitimate message to send?

And the brief forays that she does make into history, theology, and scripture are tenuous; this can be seen in her treatment of how two modern ideas influence thinking about women in the Church. As for the idea that equality requires sameness, she pushes back using theological reasoning and scripture,<sup>14</sup> but she leaves unexamined the second idea: the assumption that women should have a greater voice and visibility. But why should we grant that women should inhabit this greater sphere while rejecting the notion that equality requires sameness? And if we assume that women should have greater voice and visibility, then why are we limiting ourselves to policies congruent with a handbook that is severely restrictive? Why should Latter-day Saints be more committed to the current handbook's restrictions on women than to, for example, a long tradition of women giving healing blessings?<sup>15</sup> If we limit ourselves to the handbook (which requires women to have a very limited sphere in Church leadership), then shouldn't we assume that this limited sphere is the proper sphere and efforts such as McBaine's to increase women's voice and visibility are misguided? At one point, McBaine bemoans that many Church members regard female General Conference speakers as lacking sufficient authority to make them worth listening to,<sup>16</sup> but she does not explain why—in a Church where authority is believed to derive from priesthood office—one should regard female

speakers as authoritative. And it could certainly be argued that efforts to increase “visibility” are antithetical to Christianity. Furthermore, it is difficult not to bemoan the lost opportunity when she does not reference scriptural texts featuring women that so clearly support the cause for which she is advocating.<sup>17</sup> That she does reference scripture on occasion makes the lacuna of women’s stories all the more disappointing.

When the history of twenty-first century Mormon feminism is written, McBaine’s book will probably merit a prominent place as one of the few texts able to both frame the issue in a manner that traditionalists will be able to engage and to suggest concrete solutions that are likely to be implemented. If the goal is to encourage conversations about the place of women in Mormonism on a practical, grass-roots level, the book succeeds admirably. If the reader approaches this book wanting it to be the definitive word in twenty-first-century Mormon feminism, she will be sorely disappointed, since serious theological, historical, and exegetical work is not here—not to mention any consideration of changes not permitted by the current handbook. But if the reader sees McBaine as filling one particular niche—the ability to explain the problem to those who cannot see it and to suggest non-threatening local changes—she will appreciate this book.

### Notes

1. Neylan McBaine, *Women in the Church* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 111.

2. In an interview at the publisher’s website, McBaine explained that she avoided the words “feminist” and “feminism” in the book since they “bring with them preconceived biases.” (See <http://gregkofford.com/blogs/news/15177249-q-a-with-i-women-at-church-i-author-neylan-mcbaine>) She did frequently employ language about “using” women (see McBaine, pp. 40, 62, and 75) that, although her sense is positive, some readers may find grating.

3. McBaine, 74f.

4. *Ibid.*, 25.

5. *Ibid.*, 51.

6. Ibid., 144.
7. Ibid., 62.
8. Ibid., 79.
9. See *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 20.2.1.
10. See McBaine, 72.
11. See <http://bycommonconsent.com/2014/08/28/book-review-mcbaine-women-at-church/#comment-336099>.
12. See McBaine, xvi.
13. Ibid., 129.
14. Ibid., 59–60.
15. See Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37 (Winter 2011): 1–85.
16. See McBaine, 135.
17. See, e.g., Numbers 27:1–11, 1 Samuel 1, and Mark 7:24–30.



## **E-mails with a Young Mormon about Adam Miller’s *Letters to a Young Mormon***

Adam S. Miller. *Letters to a Young Mormon*. Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2014. 78 pp. Paper: \$9.95. ISBN: 978-0-8425-2856-6.

*Reviewed by Russel Arben Fox and Megan Elaine Fox*

**Russell Arben Fox:** Okay, Megan, I’ll start.

Miller prefaces his book with the statement that “Here, my work is personal. I mean only to address the real beauty and real costs of trying to live a Mormon life.” The thing is, I’m not sure I know what he intends the phrase “a Mormon life” to mean. On the basis of his chapters, it presumably involves some sense of personal agency and responsibility, a devotion to work, an awareness of sin, a desire for faith, a habit of praying, etc. Many of