

Being a Woman

AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE

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By Sharon Eubank
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Many years ago, my friend and her husband were doing leadership training in rural Ghana, and a woman came up to her afterward and said very emotionally, “This is a woman’s church.” My friend asked the woman what she meant. She said, in essence, “We have the glorious Relief Society, which teaches us about spiritual things and everyday things that bless our families and us. And at the same time your husband is in the next room teaching our husbands that they must treat their wives and children with kindness and gentleness. We have the temple, so my children who are dead will be mine forever. Everything I want I find in this church. This is a woman’s church.”

Is this a woman’s church? With a few colorful exceptions, my personal experience has been largely one of empowerment. So rather than answer the question for you, I will rely simply on what I have witnessed around the world. I’m not a scholar, an academic, or a Church spokesperson. But I want to go on record from my own experience that my life is rich and noble and infinitely better as a woman because of the gospel and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Far from being restrictive and conservative, the Church’s doctrine on women’s roles in the family, Church, community, nation, and temple—and how men and women relate and interact in concert—is the most moderate, powerful, enlightened, and energizing doctrine I have ever heard expressed. So I say to my sisters that what you are hungry for as a woman, as a Christian, as an intellectual, as an eternal being is here in the doctrine of Jesus Christ in the Church.



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**PRESIDENT SPENCER W.
KIMBALL**



God’s Doctrine Holds Men and Women Equally Accountable

The gospel of Jesus Christ applies to both men and women, and God’s doctrine holds both equally accountable, without a double standard. God doesn’t tolerate pornography, adultery, abuse, neglect, inequality, or oppression, regardless of our gender.

This doctrine also gives us our knowledge of where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going. It gives us our understanding of our gender as women and men as well as our roles as daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, wives and husbands, and mothers and fathers.¹

Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught, “Prophets have revealed that we first existed as intelligences and that we were given form, or spirit bodies, by God, thus becoming His spirit children—sons and daughters of heavenly parents.”² Intelligence has always existed (see D&C 93:29).

I am a *woman*. With gender came certain attributes and responsibilities.

I am a *daughter*. This role defines who I am in relation to Deity. I have divine parents and have the right, as a daughter, to communicate with Heavenly Father through prayer and to receive revelation through the Holy Ghost.³

I am a *sister*. This role means that I am a Christian, a member of the Church, a sister in the gospel, a disciple, and that I have made covenants that I will sacrifice and consecrate and serve and lead.

I may also have the opportunity in this

life to be a *wife*—if not in this life, then certainly in the next. This role is who I am in relation to a chosen equal partner, a husband. Though we are not the same—since nobody has the combination of gifts and traits that I have or that he has—we use our complementary attributes to try to become one. The word *sealing* is an excellent description of the eternal unifying potential of a marriage created by priesthood authority in a temple.

The role of *mother* is who I am in relation to my progeny. Whether I actually attain this role in this brief span on the earth or afterward, the promise of eternal family is made to those whose marriages are sealed in the temple and by the Holy Spirit of Promise (see D&C 132:19).

Our doctrine is unique on earth, and it’s part of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Think what it means if you understand this doctrine and believe it. To me it gives eternal perspective to everything I do.

Church Is Where We Practice God’s Doctrine

I believe being a member of the Church makes me a part of one of the best development programs ever designed. A broad curriculum of personal development, empowerment, and leadership for women happens simply by doing the things all members do: leadership, public speaking, decision making, persuasive discussion, budgeting, influencing, serving in the community, literacy, research, resource development, gardening, food preservation, family health—it goes on and on.



I believe that misunderstandings regarding women's roles arise when there is a disconnect between the doctrine and the practice of the doctrine. However, through continuing revelation from God to His prophets and to us through the Holy Ghost, we can continue to recognize and eliminate most misunderstandings that surface.

For example, apostles and prophets continue to clarify concepts we have always believed:

- Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said that “when men and women go to the temple, they are both endowed with the same power, which by definition is priesthood power.”⁴
- Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated, “We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be?”⁵
- President James E. Faust (1920–2007), Second Counselor in the First Presidency, explained, “Every father is to his family a patriarch and every mother a matriarch as coequals in their distinctive parental roles.”⁶

1. Keep the Big Picture in Mind

May I now make three suggestions that will help us with our practice of the doctrine? My first suggestion is to keep in mind the big picture provided by the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

Some time ago, as director of LDS Charities, I was in a meeting when I got an urgent plea regarding Christian refugees who were purged from Mosul, Iraq, by Islamic State forces and were pouring into Kurdistan. The Anglican

vicar of Baghdad had 5,000 people jostling for space in his church courtyard, and they had no food to eat. The Latter-day Saint humanitarian missionary couple was asking for emergency funds to purchase rice, beans, oil, and blankets, and we responded immediately so they could get dinner that evening.

Because of my work, these are the kinds of things in front of my face every day. Being forced to see the broad picture so often, I ask myself, what is the best use of my energies? As we seek answers, let us search the doctrines of the gospel. “Looking beyond the mark” (Jacob 4:14) or becoming obsessed with one question or one practice often shifts our focus and time from gospel living.

Bonnie L. Oscarson, Young Women general president, spoke of remaining anchored in the gospel as we seek answers: “We can choose whether or not we are going to stick with what we have already felt. There are not answers to everything, but we choose whether we will be true to what we have felt from the Holy Ghost. Let’s keep working to make things better, but keep our faith in the meantime.”⁷

Our practices will continue to change in the Church as we learn to apply our doctrine in better and more perfect ways. I hope the next generation is even more fair and equal in its practice of the gospel. But I also believe that the large foundational stones are in place and are enough to nurture our faith and our testimonies.

2. Stay Faithful in the Face of Opposition

Opposition isn’t necessarily bad. I believe that opposition strengthens us too. When I visited the Huntington Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, USA, I noticed that huge fans in the exhibit simulated the constant trade winds that strengthen tropical trees to withstand potential hurricanes. The Lord sends us or allows daily “trade winds” in the form of problems and resistance in order to strengthen our roots and make us more flexible. Such challenges are actually a gift.

The following two vignettes from Church history give us perspective on opposition:

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SEE D&C 121:37



The first vignette is Brigham Young's arrival in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, as described by President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008): “No plow had even broken its soil. [Brigham Young] knew nothing of its fertility, nothing of the seasons, the weather, the frost, the severity of the winters, the possibility of insect plagues. [Early explorers] Jim Bridger and Miles Goodyear had nothing good to say concerning this place. Sam Brannan pleaded with him to go on to California. He listened to none of them. He led his people to this hot and what must have appeared as a very forlorn place. When he arrived, he looked across this broad expanse to the salt lake in the west and said, ‘This is the right place.’”⁸

The second vignette is Wilford Woodruff's remembering a statement by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The Prophet spoke in the early days of the Restoration to a small gathering of leaders about the vast doctrinal knowledge that lay ahead for them: “I have been very much edified and instructed in your testimonies here tonight, but I want to say to you before the Lord, that you know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother's lap. You don't comprehend it.”⁹

I share these two stories because they describe how I feel. Being in the right place or having the right doctrine doesn't mean there won't be blinding salt flats and swarms of black crickets or killing frosts



or naysayers, but this is the right place and the right doctrine. And we should be driving on. We understand about as much as a baby on her mother's lap about what the Lord is doing with men and women and priesthood. But the Lord is content to teach us as we are able, as we grow, as we ask. And as we increase in our understanding, we can do as Sister Oscarson said: “Keep our faith in the meantime.”

3. Seek the Holy Ghost

Asking questions and finding answers are at the heart of gaining a testimony of God's doctrine. The Holy Ghost will testify when something is true through peaceful and warm feelings. Linda K. Burton, Relief Society general president, said of this process: “Let's go to the right sources for answers. Why would we believe the Internet and not the prophets? We can figure out how to ask the questions in a way that facilitates cooperation and brings honest concerns to the table. . . . But be patient and humble.”¹⁰

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles teaches us the difference between influences from Satan and



answers from God: “Who is it that whispers [lies] so subtly in our ear? . . . You and I both know who does this—it is the father of all lies. It is Lucifer, our common enemy.”¹¹

The Prophet Joseph Smith, who had more experience getting revelation than anyone in this dispensation, tried to teach us that questions must be approached with a commitment to unity and respect.

This invites the Holy Ghost. In 1839, Joseph wrote in his letter from Liberty Jail that “the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven” and that power in the priesthood must be maintained “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:36, 41). The Prophet taught similar principles to the Relief Society: “Meekness, love, purity—these are the things that should magnify [us].”¹²

Joseph Smith spoke of gentleness and meekness as the means of feeling the Holy Ghost and exercising righteous influence. He said this to both men and women because it affects both halves of the equation in marriage and in the Church. All authority and divine sanction is negated (because the Holy Spirit leaves) as soon as either a man or a woman starts to exercise unrighteous dominion (see D&C 121:37) and fails to lead with meekness, love, and purity.

What Women Hunger for Is in Our Doctrine

There is a hunger among many women in the world to be valued, to find purpose for their energies, to find men who want to build families and be faithful.

I once met a British dancer while traveling on a train in Finland. We were both happy to be speaking English, and as we chatted we asked each other questions: What are you doing in Finland? What do you believe? Learning of my beliefs, she asked, “You don’t smoke or drink? You don’t believe in premarital sex?” And throughout our conversation, she kept coming back to this subject, intrigued. “I suppose if

you dated men who felt the same way, it would work out,” she said. And then later: “Are there any men who feel the same way?” She started off disdainful and ended up wistful. She was hungry for something she heard in our doctrine.

The memory of our meeting on the train has never left me and often reminds me of the well-known statement by President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985): “Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world . . . will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world.”¹³

The doctrine of the identity and roles of women embodies the greatest desires of my heart. Mortal members’ practice of God’s doctrine is not perfect, but it is responsive, living, full of hope and good intent. We believe that God “will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (Articles of Faith 1:9). We can choose to follow that doctrine.

So I will ask again: Is this a woman’s church? My reply is based simply on my own experience around the world. Yes. ■

From an address given at the FairMormon Conference in Provo, Utah, USA, on August 8, 2014.

NOTES

1. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
2. D. Todd Christofferson, “Why Marriage, Why Family,” *Ensign*, May 2015, 50.
3. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 129.
4. M. Russell Ballard, “Men and Women and Priesthood Power,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2014, 32.
5. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 51.
6. James E. Faust, “The Prophetic Voice,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 6.
7. Bonnie L. Oscarson, personal conversation with the author, July 21, 2014.
8. Gordon B. Hinckley, in James E. Faust, “Brigham Young: A Bold Prophet” (Education Week address, Aug. 21, 2001), 1, speeches.byu.edu.
9. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 137.
10. Linda K. Burton, personal conversation with the author, July 21, 2014.
11. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Other Prodigal,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 63.
12. *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 482.
13. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 222–23.