



The Work of Latter-day Saint Women: “Unselfish Devotion to This Glorious Cause”

“There is no limit to the good that our sisters can do.”

From the Life of Joseph Fielding Smith

At a general Relief Society meeting on October 2, 1963, President Joseph Fielding Smith said, “We, the Brethren of the Church, honor and respect our good sisters for their unselfish devotion to this glorious cause.”¹

In making this declaration, President Smith spoke from years of experience. He had spent a lifetime serving alongside faithful Latter-day Saint women. This service began in the late 1880s, when he was about 10 years old. At that time, Latter-day Saint women were encouraged to gain an education in medicine and health care. His mother, Julina L. Smith, followed this counsel and received training to serve as a midwife. She often awoke him in the middle of the night so he could drive their horse-drawn carriage to a home where a baby was about to be born. Serving with his mother in this way, young Joseph Fielding Smith saw an example of the strength and compassion of the women of the Church.² Sister Smith later served as a counselor in the Relief Society general presidency.

President Smith had great respect for the Relief Society, which he said “is a vital part of the kingdom of God on earth.”³ His second wife, Ethel, served as a member of the general Relief Society board for 21 years. Sister Amy Brown Lyman, who served with Ethel on the board and later served as general Relief Society president, said: “Sister Smith was one of the most brilliant women I ever knew. I considered her the finest writer and speaker [on the] board.”⁴ In this capacity, Ethel attended stake conferences to provide instruction for



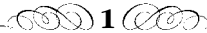
Throughout the history of the Church, women have played essential roles in the Lord's latter-day work.

local Relief Society sisters. She and President Smith went on some Church assignments together, and the two of them often shared the pulpit to teach the members.⁵

After Ethel died, President Smith married Jessie Evans. Jessie went with him almost every time he traveled to teach the Saints. She had a beautiful singing voice, and President Smith always wanted her to sing at the meetings they attended. Elder Francis M. Gibbons, who served as a secretary to the First Presidency, recounted: “Whenever Joseph Fielding presided, he wanted her to perform if for no other reason than that he never tired of hearing her sing. Beyond that, however, her well-trained contralto voice, singing sacred hymns, added a special touch of spirituality to the meetings, inspiring the listeners and elevating his own capabilities in delivering the spoken word. Later, through the persistent and playful urging of his wife, Joseph would occasionally join Jessie in a duet, blending his own fine baritone voice with hers. On these occasions, they would usually sit together on the piano bench while Jessie played the accompaniment, moderating her usual, full-throated voice so as not to drown out the singing of her husband.”⁶

As President of the Church, Joseph Fielding Smith regularly worked with Sister Belle S. Spafford, the Relief Society general president. Sister Spafford later spoke of her experience working with him: “President Joseph Fielding Smith, a man of tenderness and great love for the people, evidenced at all times a depth of understanding of the work of the women of the Church, and he passed this on to the Relief Society presidency countless times and in many ways, opening our vision and directing our ways.”⁷

Teachings of Joseph Fielding Smith



The scriptures tell of faithful women who have had responsibilities in the Lord’s Church.

We may read in the Pearl of Great Price that after the consequences brought upon Adam and Eve by the fall, Eve preached the discourse. It is brief but wonderfully full of meaning and is as follows:

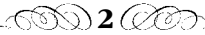
“. . . Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.” [Moses 5:11.]

“And Adam and Eve blessed the name of God, and *they* made all things known unto their sons and their daughters.” [Moses 5:12; italics added.]

We learn from this that Eve as well as Adam received revelation and commandment to teach their children in the ways of eternal life.⁸

We read that in [early] days of Israel women were active and had duties to perform [see Exodus 15:20; Judges 4–5].⁹

In the New Testament we read of a great number of faithful women who sought and gave counsel. Many of these followed the Lord and ministered to him [see Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42].¹⁰



In the latter days, Relief Society sisters play vital roles in the restored Church of Jesus Christ.

On the 17th day of March, 1842, the Prophet Joseph Smith met with a number of the sisters of the Church in Nauvoo and organized them into a society which was given the name of “The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo.” . . . That this organization was by revelation, there can be no doubt. This truth has been abundantly demonstrated throughout the years and today its value and necessity are abundantly attested.¹¹

Surely the Church of Jesus Christ would not have been completely organized had not this wonderful organization come into existence. . . . This restoration would not have been complete without the Relief Society in which the sisters are able to accomplish a divinely appointed service so essential to the welfare of the Church.¹²

The “Female Relief Society of Nauvoo” was organized by the Prophet Joseph Smith assisted by Elder John Taylor. The Lord had revealed that the women of the Church should be organized into a society, for there was important work for them to do in aiding to “bring forth and establish the cause of Zion.” [D&C 6:6.] This labor

of the sisters was primarily to be for the benefit, encouragement, and advancement of the women of the Church that they might be prepared in all things for a place in the celestial kingdom. The responsibility was also given them to aid in the work of mercy and relief from distress and suffering of the poor, the sick, and afflicted throughout the Church. All through the years since that organization, the sisters of this society have been true to their calling and have magnified themselves in their faithfulness in that work. No task assigned has been too hard; no responsibility neglected, and through their ministrations thousands have been blessed.¹³

The Relief Society . . . has grown to be a power in the Church. Absolutely necessary—we speak of it as an auxiliary, which means a help, but the Relief Society is more than that. It is needed.¹⁴

I wish to commend the sisters of this great organization for their integrity and faithfulness which have been manifest constantly since the days of Nauvoo.¹⁵

The Lord is pleased with your labors. You, through your service, have helped to build up and strengthen the kingdom of God. Just as necessary is the labor of the Relief Society in the Church as it is—shall I say?—with the quorums of the Priesthood. Now some may feel that I am expressing this a little too strongly, but my own judgment is that the work that you, our good sisters, are doing, finds its place and is just as important in the building up of this kingdom, strengthening it, causing it to expand, laying a foundation upon which we all may build, just as much as it is for the brethren who hold the Priesthood of God. We can't get along without you.¹⁶

[Relief Society sisters] are members of the greatest women's organization in the world, an organization which is a vital part of the kingdom of God on earth and which is so designed and operated that it helps its faithful members to gain eternal life in our Father's kingdom. . . .

The Relief Society was established by the spirit of inspiration, has been guided by that spirit [ever since], and has instilled into the hearts of countless of our good sisters those desires for righteousness which have been pleasing to the Lord.¹⁷



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Relief Society sisters help look after the temporal and spiritual welfare of God’s children.

The Lord through his wisdom has called upon our sisters to be aids to the Priesthood. Because of their sympathy, tenderness of heart, and kindness, the Lord looks upon them and gives unto them the duties and responsibilities of being ministers to the needy and to the afflicted. He has pointed out the path which they should follow, and he has given to them this great organization where they have authority to serve under the directions of the bishops of the wards and in harmony with the bishops of the wards, looking after the interest of our people both spiritually and temporally.

And the Lord can call upon our sisters to go into the homes to comfort the needy, to aid and assist the afflicted, to kneel with them

and pray with them, and the Lord will hearken to the sisters' prayers when they are offered sincerely in behalf of the sick, just as he will listen to the prayers of the elders of the Church.¹⁸

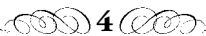
The purpose and duties of the Relief Society are many. . . . My father, President Joseph F. Smith [said:] "This is an organization that was established by the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is, therefore, the oldest auxiliary organization of the Church, and it is of the first importance. It has not only to deal with the necessities of the poor, the sick and the needy, but a part of its duty—and the larger part, too—is to look after the spiritual welfare and salvation of the mothers and daughters of Zion; to see that none is neglected, but that all are guarded against misfortune, calamity, the powers of darkness, and the evils that threaten them in the world. It is the duty of the Relief Societies to look after the spiritual welfare of themselves and of all the female members of the Church."¹⁹

It is the duty of the Relief Society, not only to look after those who are members of the Relief Society, but their labor should extend beyond those borders. Wherever anybody is in trouble, needs help, in difficulties, sick or afflicted, we call upon the Relief Society. . . . They can perform a great and wonderful work by encouraging the wayward, helping them, bringing them back into activity, helping them to overcome their weaknesses or sins and imperfections, and bringing them to an understanding of the truth. I say there is no limit to the good that our sisters can do.

. . . I don't know what in the world our stake presidents and bishops in the wards would do if they didn't have these good sisters of the Relief Society upon whom to depend; whom they can call to their service, many times, to handle situations that would be very delicate, that is for our brethren, but which our sisters may perform to the very greatest advantage. It would be a wonderful thing if all the members of the Church were perfect. If that were the case we would all have less responsibility, both the men and the women, but that time has not come. We have members among our sisters who need encouragement, a little help spiritually as well as temporally, and nobody can do it better than our sisters who belong to this great and wonderful organization.

In this work the sisters may lend their aid in encouraging and helping the wayward, indifferent, the careless, just as the brethren of the Priesthood are called upon to do in behalf of the wayward, careless, and indifferent among the brethren. We should all work to bring to pass righteousness and endeavor to bring back into activity those who have drifted and neglected the duties of the Church.²⁰

From [its] humble start under the most difficult conditions, when the membership of the Church was small, we have seen this Society grow. . . . The good that has been accomplished in the care of the poor, care of the sick and the afflicted, and those who are in physical, mental, or spiritual need, will never correctly be known. . . . All of this has been accomplished through the spirit of love in accordance with the true spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ.²¹



**The Lord expects women to seek for light and truth
that they may be entitled to celestial glory.**

The gospel means just as much to our sisters as it does to the brethren. They are just as much concerned in it as are the brethren. And when the Lord said to the Prophet Joseph Smith, “Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them shall all be fulfilled,” [D&C 1:37] he did not limit that commandment to the male members of the Church. . . . It is just as important that our sisters understand the Plan of Salvation as it is for the men. It is just as essential that they keep the commandments. No woman is going to be saved in the kingdom of God without baptism for the remission of sins and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . .

. . . When the Lord said that no person could be saved in ignorance [see D&C 131:6], I think he meant women as well as he did men, and I think the women of the church are under the obligation of studying the scriptures.²²

The Lord requires of the women, as well as of the men in the Church, that they know his divine will and have an abiding testimony in their hearts of the revealed truth pertaining to salvation in the kingdom of God. The Lord did not reveal The Book of Mormon

for the benefit of those who hold the Priesthood only, but for every soul who seeks the truth, male and female alike.²³

The Lord expects the sisters to be qualified with a testimony of the truth to understand the doctrines of the Church just as he does those who hold the Priesthood. If we gain exaltation, which we hope to obtain, it is necessary that we prepare ourselves by knowledge, by faith, by prayer. And when the Lord said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” [Matthew 6:33; 3 Nephi 13:33] he was not talking just to a body of men, it was a mixed congregation.²⁴

Every woman baptized into the Church has the hands of the elders laid on her head for the gift of the Holy Ghost that she may have the guidance of that Spirit in all truth. It is the will of the Lord that none may be without divine guidance which will reveal to them the truth and enable them to discern the light from the darkness and, thus, be fortified and given power to resist all false doctrines, theories, and notions, which are so prevalent in the world today.²⁵

Our sisters are entitled just as much to the inspiration for their needs of the Holy Spirit as are the men, every bit. They are entitled to the gift of prophecy concerning matters that would be essential for them to know. . . . When they pray they should pray earnestly, expecting to have an answer to their prayers. The Lord will hear them, if they are earnest, true, just as well as he will the brethren.²⁶

The Lord has promised to all, males and females alike, the gift of the Holy Ghost on conditions of faithfulness, humility, and true repentance. They are required to study and to know the truths of the gospel and to prepare themselves by study, faith, and obedience to all commandments to seek for light and truth that they may be entitled to celestial glory.²⁷



Through the priesthood, God offers to His daughters every spiritual gift and blessing that can be obtained by His sons.

I think we all know that the blessings of the priesthood are not confined to men alone. These blessings are also poured out . . . upon all the faithful women of the Church. These good sisters can



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prepare themselves, by keeping the commandments and by serving in the Church, for the blessings of the house of the Lord. The Lord offers to his daughters every spiritual gift and blessing that can be obtained by his sons, for neither is the man without the woman, nor the woman without the man in the Lord [see 1 Corinthians 11:11].²⁸

We are all aware that the Lord told Abraham he would be a father of many nations and that his seed would be like the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the seashore in number, but what we must not overlook is that the same promises were made to Sarah.

“And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.” [Genesis 17:15–16.]²⁹

The Lord, speaking of the priesthood and the power of the priesthood, and the ordinances of the Church which we receive through the priesthood, had this to say: “And this greater priesthood

administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God.”

. . . Let me read that again: “And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God. Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of Godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof and the authority of the priesthood, the power of Godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; for without this, no man can see the face of God, even the Father and live.” [D&C 84:19–22.]

When we read things of this nature, it ought to make every man among us who holds the priesthood rejoice to think that we have that great authority by which we may know God. Not only the men holding the priesthood know that great truth, but because of that priesthood and the ordinances thereof, every member of the Church, men and women alike, may know God.³⁰

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Questions

- What can we learn from the experiences described in “From the Life of Joseph Fielding Smith”? What similar experiences have you had?
- President Smith spoke of women in different eras who have fulfilled important responsibilities in the kingdom of God (see section 1). In what ways have you seen women contribute to the strength of their families and the Church?
- How have you seen that Relief Society service is “essential to the welfare of the Church”? (See section 2.) In what ways do Relief Society sisters and priesthood bearers work together to build up the kingdom of God?
- In what ways does the Relief Society look after the spiritual welfare of Latter-day Saint women? In what ways do Relief Society sisters extend their influence beyond their organization? (For some examples, see section 3.)

- President Smith emphasized that all women and men need to understand gospel doctrines, strengthen their testimonies, and receive revelation (see section 4). Why do you think it is important for all of us to seek these gifts?
- President Smith taught that the blessings of the priesthood are “poured out . . . upon all the faithful women of the Church” (section 5). Why do women need the blessings of the priesthood to carry out their responsibilities in the home and in the Church? What examples have you seen of women receiving spiritual gifts?

Related Scriptures

Acts 5:12–14; Alma 32:22–23; D&C 46:8–9

Teaching Help

“It is often helpful to begin thinking about an upcoming lesson soon after you have taught the preceding lesson. You will probably be most aware of those you teach and their needs and interests immediately after you have been with them” (*Teaching, No Greater Call* [1999], 97).

Notes

1. “Purpose of the Relief Society,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1964, 5.
2. For more about Joseph Fielding Smith helping his mother with her duties as a midwife, see chapter 20 in this book.
3. “Mothers in Israel,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Dec. 1970, 883.
4. Amy Brown Lyman, in Joseph Fielding Smith and John J. Stewart, *The Life of Joseph Fielding Smith* (1972), 243.
5. See Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph Fielding Smith: Gospel Scholar, Prophet of God* (1992), 261.
6. Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph Fielding Smith: Gospel Scholar, Prophet of God*, 281.
7. Belle S. Spafford, *Latter-day Prophet—Presidents I Have Known* (speech given at Brigham Young University, May 29, 1973), 4.
8. *Answers to Gospel Questions*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., 5 vols. (1957–66), 3:66.
9. “The Relief Society Organized by Revelation,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1965, 5.
10. *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 3:67.
11. “Purpose of the Relief Society,” 4.
12. “The Relief Society Organized by Revelation,” 6.
13. “Relief Society Responsibilities,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Oct. 1954, 644.
14. “Relief Society—An Aid to the Priesthood,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1959, 4.
15. “Relief Society Responsibilities,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Oct. 1954, 646.
16. “Relief Society—An Aid to the Priesthood,” 6; punctuation standardized.
17. “Mothers in Israel,” 883.
18. “Relief Society—An Aid to the Priesthood,” 5.
19. “Teaching the Gospel,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1966, 5; see also Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, Apr. 1906, 3.
20. “Relief Society Responsibilities,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Mar. 1954, 151–52.
21. “Purpose of the Relief Society,” 5.
22. “Obedience to the Truth,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1960, 6–7.

23. "Relief Society Responsibilities," *Relief Society Magazine*, Oct. 1954, 644.
24. "Relief Society Responsibilities," *Relief Society Magazine*, Mar. 1954, 152.
25. "Relief Society Responsibilities," *Relief Society Magazine*, Oct. 1954, 644.
26. "Obedience to the Truth," 7.
27. *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 3:68–69.
28. In Conference Report, Apr. 1970, 59.
29. "Mothers in Israel," 885.
30. "And the Truth Shall Make You Free," *Deseret News*, Mar. 30, 1940, Church section, 4; see also *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (1954–56), 3:142–43.