

“Thou Art an Elect Lady”

How Christ Includes and Empowers
Women in Doctrine and Covenants 25

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If *praxis*, here defined as Christian living, is a fruit, it would seem logical to assume that it tells something about the tree from which it stems. Such a deduction may seem validated by Christ’s allegorical teaching to help discern false prophets from good ones (see Matthew 7:15–20; Luke 6:43–45). However, the deduction quickly becomes untenable if we assume that the tree metaphorically stands for Christ and if we swap *prophets* for *disciples*. We will inevitably notice that while *praxis* is important, it is not a conclusive statement about Christ. Because of our nature (see Mosiah 3:19), we somehow always “come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) or fail to fully manifest who Christ really is. *Praxis* then helps to know “them” (Matthew 7:20), meaning disciples in general, but it is always a filtered, and therefore imperfect, indicator of “what [we] worship” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:19). It does not follow, for instance, that what Christ has revealed and continues to reveal is false because some of us have failed, and

may yet fail, to live up to those revelations. Christ and his gospel, for instance, do not cease to be inclusive and empowering because some disciples may prove, willfully or not, to be intolerant.

While *praxis* is partly rooted in faith, Doctrine and Covenants 93:19 suggests that its quality also depends on what the Latter-day Saints “understand and know” of the revelations that Christ gave to Joseph Smith. In the specific area of inclusion and empowerment of women, some Latter-day Saints may be like the Ethiopian eunuch (see Acts 8:26–36) in that they may lack the tools, including secular ones,¹ that have the potential to illuminate their study and facilitate a greater outpouring of the Spirit. The example of the Ethiopian eunuch also illustrates that although revelation may be hard to understand, the way of the disciple is still to engage it fully and to expect that external help will come to further clarify the revelation. It seems to be in that spirit that President Russell M. Nelson invited the women of the Church in October 2019 “to study prayerfully section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants,”² in which Christ refers to Emma Smith as “an elect lady.”

President Nelson’s subsequent remarks to the men of the Church in the same sermon suggest that they will also benefit from a greater understanding of section 25. The contextual and interpretive reading proposed here is not as authoritative as Phillip’s exegetical assistance to the Ethiopian eunuch. I am hopeful, however, that it will help readers come to a greater realization that section 25 is an innovative, revolutionary revelation in that it reveals a Christ who gives pastoral functions to Emma and, through her, all the women of his Church at a time when some were arguing that women should not be allowed to pray or even raise questions directly during worship services.

Of course, there have been previous attempts in Sperry symposiums and publications to contextualize and explicate Doctrine and Covenants 25.³ I endeavor in this paper to present one more perspective.⁴ I will postulate and argue in particular that Christ continues in section 25 the dynamic of inclusion and of religious empowerment of women that he had started in the New Testament, and that—for the

Saints, at least—he also resolved in the revelation the biblical misunderstanding that was being used in nineteenth-century America to justify the exclusion of women from pastoral functions. Three aspects of the revelation will be considered in support of these claims, namely Emma’s callings (1) as wife, (2) as “elect lady,” and (3) as teacher and exhorter. Ultimately, I will argue that through Doctrine and Covenants 25, Christ establishes Emma as a type and a reflection to show that all women can be empowered and elevated through religious functions in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Context is one of the tools needed to understand the profound social and spiritual implications of Doctrine and Covenants 25. Because of that, I will take great care throughout this paper to situate the revelation within the history of the Restoration and the larger history of religion in the United States.

The General Context of Doctrine and Covenants 25

Within the Church, the date of the revelation, July 1830, directs our thoughts to its immediate Restoration framework. The Book of Mormon was published the previous March, and the Church was incorporated in April. This means that Emma, who was baptized toward the end of June, was by today’s standards even a younger “new convert” compared to those who had been baptized in April. The priesthood power necessary to perform the rituals of baptism and of confirmation had been restored in the months leading to the revelation.

For the larger context, it is safe to assume that the revelation was given when the effects of the “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” Joseph had experienced in the early 1820s were still very much present (Joseph Smith—History 1:5).⁵ As Joseph describes, the religious landscape was very much an open market of offer and demand with preachers from competing religious groups like the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and the Baptists “crying, ‘Lo, here!’

and others, ‘Lo, there!’” and where “great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5).

The idea of a “free religious market” did not mean the competitors gladly welcomed others and accepted conversion to other churches. The context of the “awakening” of America to God was “bitter in its divisions,” as one historian puts it;⁶ in the words of Joseph, it was a context of “bad feeling” and “strife” among the churches (Joseph Smith—History 1:6). Members of the nascent Church also suffered from this context of religious pluralism, which paradoxically favored the emergence of the Church: for instance, persecutions, which intensified prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon, had delayed the confirmation of Emma and of other people baptized at the same time.⁷

Aside from affiliation, as Joseph indicates, the bitterness and strife covered a broad spectrum of issues including, of course, theology with intense and protracted debates on Christology,⁸ the procedures and disciplines of religious life with questions on acceptable forms of worship,⁹ and the role women could play, if any at all, in these areas.

A Comfort unto My Servant: When Christ Reconstructs Matrimonial Duties

The first calling extended to Emma in the revelation is a confirmation of her matrimonial responsibilities toward her husband. Christ stipulates that “thy calling shall be for a comfort unto my servant, . . . thy husband, in his afflictions, with consoling words, in the spirit of meekness” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:5). There is no contesting that matrimony was an important part of the calling. Yet, to approach the passage solely in that light might be equated to seeing only “the letter” of the revelation. Latter-day Saints might miss its “spirit” and therefore the spiritual implications of the calling if no effort is made to read beyond the obvious fact that with matrimony comes mutual obligations. In fact, the Saints might miss the intent of the revelation

should they fail to understand why Christ dwells on what had better be a given in a marital relationship. Who can think that there was no comfort and no consoling words, no meekness or humility in Joseph and Emma's marital relationship? Did it take the opening of the heavens for them to know about those things? The answer to those questions is a definite no. Nothing in their relationship indicates that Emma, who had already been through a lot of persecutions and had just confirmed her fidelity through her baptism, had given Joseph and the Lord any reason to doubt that she was an affectionate wife. Yet, the Lord gave a revelation on the subject.

Beyond the obvious matrimonial considerations of the revelation then, readers should also engage with the text. A careful and informed reading can, for instance, call attention to the fact that instead of contractual terms like *duty* and *responsibility*, the Lord used the word *calling*. Latter-day Saints are very familiar with this word, which adds an extra layer of significance to matrimony: the term *calling* has profound spiritual and ecclesial, that is, institutional, implications within Christianity. For instance, after having surveyed Martin Luther's use of the word *calling* and its prevalence in Protestantism, sociologist Max Weber came to the conclusion that the word suggests "a God-given mission."¹⁰ The notion of "vocation" is sometimes used in association with, or as a synonym for, *calling*. In a religious context, that "vocation," as used by Luther, becomes a charge that the believer "ought to accept as a divine decree," "the 'destiny' which he must embrace," or "*the mission imposed by God.*"¹¹ This religious understanding of the term continued in Joseph and Emma's days and in the larger Protestant tradition in America.¹² Whether it was through a dream, a vision, a strong feeling, or a conviction after having listened to a sermon or read a biblical passage, being "called" was always understood to be a divine communication that had the potential to permanently alter the course of life.

In the case of Emma, however, it may be said that the call to comfort and console signaled the application of a divine seal on, and therefore a sacralization of, her matrimonial responsibilities. Indeed,

in section 25, providing comfort and speaking words of consolation were no longer temporal or even part of normal intimate activities or signs of affections between husband and wife because Christ turned them into specific assignments within a larger religious project. In this sense, it may be said that by defining marriage and matrimonial duties in more than legal and contractual terms, Christ outlined the principles that would underpin eternal marriage in Doctrine and Covenants 132:7: temporal contracts become religiously efficacious only insofar as they are given divine imprimatur.

Emma's call further echoes countless scriptural stories where God brings to the fore a person of low social standing and empowers that person to fulfill his plan. This may be illustrated with examples from the Bible and from the Book of Mormon. In Alma 19, for instance, two women, Abish and the Lamanite queen, are empowered to "serve the role of Jesus" or to function as Jesus.¹³ Abish, who is of the lowest standing as a slave, is identified as "one of the Lamanitish women" (Alma 19:16). But social standings and power structures are reversed in the story. Because of her previous conversion, Abish "knew that it was the power of God" that was working on King Lamoni and the queen, and she became instrumental in how the spiritual experience ended for everyone involved. Abish extends her hand to "raise [the queen] from the ground" (Alma 19:29), and the queen goes on to raise the king, and so forth.

The Old Testament story of the widow of Zarephath and Elijah the Tishbite also illustrates someone who is presumably of low social status becoming empowered. We learn in 1 Kings 17 that in spite of Elijah's immense power to control heaven and earth—including the power to end the drought so that the people, Elijah included, could find sustenance—God instead made Elijah rely on a vulnerable widow for that sustenance (see 1 Kings 17:9–16). In other words, the widow becomes as vital to the execution of Elijah's mission as the power he was entrusted with to bind heaven and earth.

Continuing with this line of reasoning, Emma's call to "be a comfort" can also be read as a disguised call for Joseph. It may indeed

be argued that through Emma's call Christ also intended to teach Joseph about his own vulnerability and the need for him to rely on Emma. Christ's insistence on the phrase "my servant, [. . .] thy husband" (Doctrine and Covenants 25:5) can be read as supporting these arguments of the prophet's vulnerability and need to rely on Emma for assistance.

Of course, by 1830 Emma knew that Joseph was the Lord's "servant"—else why her baptism?—and that he was *her* husband. Hence the phrase "my servant, [. . .] thy husband" may seem like an unnecessary reminder. One way to make sense of it might be to begin with the form, the very structure of the statement. With the notions of vulnerability and reliance in mind, this structure seems to demonstrate the underlying message that Christ made Emma his human counterpart who—similar to Aaron and Hur's relationship to Moses, although in a different type of calling—helps steady the prophet (see Exodus 17:11–12). This means then that the callings of Emma and of Joseph were intertwined and interdependent: they were both called by Christ, and it almost seems like Joseph was incomplete, almost not a prophet, without Emma. In other words, they were bound through their respective callings—though not *sealed* yet—both in temporal, affectionate terms and as links in a chain that serve the purposes of God.¹⁴

If humility is required of Joseph to rely on Emma, it is a form of ascetism—a spirit of abnegation or self-denial—that was required of Emma to accept to serve God somewhat indirectly, through Joseph. But once again, reading the matrimonial aspect of the revelation in temporal terms is to stay on the surface, assuming that it continued the traditions in which it was given—that is, like most of her contemporaries, Emma was asked to take the back seat in order to facilitate the religious career of her husband.¹⁵ But as will be demonstrated, such a reading is further countered by the calls to be an elect lady and a hymn compiler, calls through which Christ stepped up Emma's empowerment and inclusion in the pastoral life of his Church.

Emma as “Elect Lady” among Elect Ladies

Along with giving Emma the sacred matrimonial responsibility, Christ calls her “an elect lady” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:3). Emma and the other early Saints were well enough versed in biblical language to know that it was no ordinary thing to be named “elect lady.” The title is used only once in the Bible in a passage that reads, “The elder unto the elect lady and her children” (2 John 1:1). The Prophet read this passage during the organization of the Relief Society in 1842 to further impress the significance of the title “elect lady” on the mind of the sisters, “to show that respect was then had to the same thing.”¹⁶

Scholars debate whether the elect lady in the Johannine text refers to the Church, meaning the Church of Christ or the Church *chosen* by Christ;¹⁷ one of the congregations of the Church of Christ; or to a real person. This last possibility is supported by the fact that John points to the existence of a second elect lady in verse 13, which reads, “the children of *thy elect sister* greet thee” (emphasis added), although this could also refer to the members of another congregation. This second reference occurs in spite of the use of the definite article *the* in “*the elect lady*” in 2 John 1:1. This article can either exclude the possibility of other elect ladies or signify that there is a *joint* or *co-*elect lady. In support of this idea of one elect lady among several, we may point to Christ’s declaration to Emma in section 25: He refers to her as *an* elect lady, not as *the* elect lady.

Moreover, in the same revelation Christ expanded the title with the phrase “whom I have called” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:3), which means that an elect lady, in this specific context, is one who is called, chosen, or selected. Joseph further declared to the sisters of the society that the Lord had given Emma the title of “elect lady” because she was “elected to preside,” implicitly over the Relief Society. Hence, tying the proposition of “one elect lady among several” to the prophet’s explanation to the Relief Society, one may fairly conclude that by virtue of her selection, Emma had become the first among the

sisters of the society, all of whom were “elect ladies” by virtue of their baptism and membership in Christ’s Church.

Emma as Hymn Compiler and Organizer of Worship

Beyond Emma’s role as president of the Relief Society, Rachel Cope has shown how the title of “elect lady” also applied in her assignment “to make a selection of sacred hymns [. . .] to be had in my church” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:11). Emma was “a unique exception” in religious America, Cope writes, because in that context hymn selection was a territory dominated by male preachers since immense practical and theological power came with it.¹⁸ It is amply documented that hymns were so important and sought after by believers that “instead of hunting up a college or Biblical institute,” itinerant preachers of the Methodist tradition—a group with which Latter-day Saints share a great deal¹⁹—relied on a most important library that consisted of three items: the Bible, a hymnbook, and a copy of the “Discipline,” the Methodist “handbook of instructions.”²⁰ Coming from the Methodist tradition, Emma surely understood the significance of hymn singing in worship. Michael Hicks proposes that “since choosing songs to be sung was often the duty of a congregational singing master, the revelation may have been designating Emma to lead the tunes.”²¹ This reading is irreconcilable with the clause “make a selection” that is used in the revelation.

Another possible reading is that through the call, Christ made Emma both conductor of church meetings and his officiator in a special ritual. As Christ’s officiator, we can say that she symbolically welcomes and leads the ceremony for every Latter-day Saint who opens a hymnbook. The act of opening the hymnbook can then be compared to leaving behind a profane world and stepping into “a sacred space”²² in which, through a ritual of prayer that takes the form of a “song of the heart,” Latter-day Saint worshippers then and now present a righteous devotion that delights the very soul of God (see Doctrine

and Covenants 25:12). As in all rituals, the validity of singing as a ritual rests on certain rules: the verse explicitly tells about the conditions worshippers have to be in (righteous) and how to sing (from the heart) so that their worship can delight the soul of the Lord. But these rules also imply that Christ placed a tremendous responsibility on Emma in calling her to compile hymns for the Church: successful performance of the ritual—and to a certain extent of the whole religious service—depended on her ability to choose songs that participants would embrace without reservations and would intone as though they were personal prayers that had originated in their hearts.

The novelty and uniqueness of a woman tasked with selecting hymns probably explains why John Whitmer—who is believed to have authored the introduction to the revelation in the 1833 Book of Commandments—specifically mentions “A Revelation to Emma [Smith] . . . giving her a command to select Hymns” and silences the remaining aspects of the revelation behind an “&c.”²³ Indeed, this method of abbreviation is generally used in long book titles. Unfortunately, this summary, which emphasizes hymn compilation—though already a major move—has become the main aspect of elect lady that succeeding generations of Latter-day Saints retain. Because of that, the header may be said to have both oriented how the revelation is read and limited its scope.

Compiling hymns is, however, merely one of the many ways in which Christ empowers those who, on account of their gender and social standing, were precluded from greater involvement in religious life.

Emma as Exhorter to the Church

Christ did not make Emma a witness or endow her with apostolic authority. But as with hymnody, other passages in section 25 show that he elevated Emma in other areas of great social and religious import. This is evidenced in the call “to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:7). The Prophet specified

during the founding meeting of the Relief Society in 1842 that Emma was “ordained,” meaning set apart, to “expound the scriptures to *all* and to teach the female part of [the] community.”²⁴ The clause “to teach the female part of [the] community” suggests that even the Prophet may have missed the encompassing, churchwide nature of the call, and may even have set an unfortunate precedence for future readings of Doctrine and Covenants 25:7. There is evidence, as we will see, that this may also have been because he was not totally above the fray when it came to women’s involvement in religions, even though he acted as the Lord’s spokesperson in a revelation that empowered a woman.

Of course, the Relief Society was organized some twelve years after section 25 was revealed. It made sense in that context that the Prophet should specify that it was Emma’s role, by virtue of her calling as elect lady, or president, to teach the sisters placed under her leadership. In spite of how the Prophet’s specification would later be understood, it did not affect the call—from Christ—for Emma to “expound the scriptures” and to “exhort”²⁵ *all* in the Church. Through this call, Christ empowered Emma to help Church members—male and female—access the hidden meanings of holy writ. And that was no small thing.

Emma’s Christic commission was one of ministerial function in the 1830 context of the revelation. At that time it was the role of preachers and exhorters, sometimes duly licensed,²⁶ to explicate scripture and exhort individuals to be better Christians. Such a call then was disruptive of the norms, as for the compilation of hymns, even though the presence of female preachers in the religious landscape was not totally unusual. Women like Joanna Bethune and Isabella Graham, her mother, had played “an especially active and determinative role”²⁷ in the rise of the American Sunday Schools between 1803 and 1824. We also know that during the period of “the hymnodic revolution that had swept through America” between 1780 and 1830²⁸ that “more than one hundred women crisscrossed the country

as itinerant preachers.”²⁹ Like their male counterparts, some female preachers were constantly on the road because they did not have a pulpit. However, Emma’s call to expound scripture and to exhort the Church logically came with a pulpit because the call was obviously meant to strengthen the Church qualitatively from within and not quantitatively through missionary work.

The number of female preachers and teachers involved in the Sunday School movement does not mean that the context of Emma’s call was one in which women were wholly accepted in religious life. The pulpit was still considered a “masculine space,” as Catherine Brekus puts it,³⁰ a ground of bitter theological battles, even within the few denominations that tolerated female preaching. The mere idea of women praying in public horrified some of the greatest luminaries of the day. Peter Cartwright, a prominent revival preacher between 1803 and 1856, informs us that there were “fashionable objections to females praying in public” in the Methodist Episcopal Church to which he belonged.³¹ In 1827 Asael Nettleton stood against such revivalist fathers as Charles Grandison Finney who was accused of having introduced in revivalism “the practice of females praying with males,” among other “new measures,” and of “rais[ing] an angry dispute,” “a civil war in Zion—a domestic broil in the household of faith.”³² Lyman Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s father, concurred with Nettleton. “There is no instance in the patriarchal age, of a woman offering sacrifice as an act of worship, and a symbol of prayer; and none in the tabernacle or temple service,” he argued.³³ The suggestion made earlier that Joseph probably did not understand the encompassing nature of Emma’s call to expound scripture and exhort the Church rests on the fact that he did share somewhat in those popular views expressed by Beecher.³⁴ In fact, female prayer for Beecher could eventually be tolerated only on the condition that even in matrimonial bonds, “it was the wife apart, and the husband apart”—they could not pray together.³⁵ Otherwise, he insisted, “no well educated female can put herself up, or be put up, to the point of public prayer, without the loss of some portion at least of that female delicacy . . . ;

and whoever has had an opportunity to observe the effect of female exhortation and prayer in public, will be compelled to remark the exchange of softness and delicacy for masculine courage, so desirable in man, so unlovely in woman."³⁶

The last part of Beecher's argument refers to the highly demonstrative and physical aspect of exhortation in the context of revivalism. Overall, though, those who opposed the involvement of women in pastoral life, even in areas that did not require ordination or a degree in theology, were never without an excuse. As Beecher and Nettleton saw it, the involvement of women was the ruin of the churches; religious matters were deemed too sacred to be left to women because everything in them, from their tone to their physical appearance, made them a source of such distraction that rather than edifying, their presence at the pulpit was equated to its defilement.³⁷ Indeed, the view of the most adamant ministers was that women who dared to take the pulpit in the presence of men "were no better than prostitutes."³⁸

Such strong language was certainly informed by two concepts: (1) the belief that with Eve—the archetypal woman—came sin and the demise of the Edenic world and (2) the Pauline injunction to "let your women keep silence in the churches" and to ask their husbands questions "at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Corinthians 14:34–35).³⁹ In that context, even though the dynamics in the American religious landscape tended toward greater inclusion of women, as for hymnody, Emma's call to exhort and to expound the scriptures to everyone in the restored Church of Jesus Christ placed her in a position that was socially avant-gardist. That position arguably reveals more about Christ and his plan for women in his Church than is usually assumed. Through that revelation, Christ steers the Church back on a trajectory of greater inclusivity by suspending the injunction, which may have been unduly attributed to Paul, to bar women from speaking in churches and from holding institutional positions.⁴⁰

Doctrine and Covenants 25 as Revelation for the Emmas of Christ's Church

As hinted at, I concur with Carol Cornwall Madsen's view that while "[the] specifics [of Doctrine and Covenants 25] are addressed to Emma, its principles are applicable to all" because of its canonization as scripture.⁴¹ Joseph Smith, who acted as mediator between Christ and Emma, insisted on that universal dimension when he declared that "not [Emma] alone, but *others*, may attain to the same blessings" or privilege to expound scripture and exhort the Church.⁴² Christ may have been pointing to that universal dimension in concluding the revelation with the phrase "this is my voice unto *all*" (emphasis added). Surely, there is ground to read "others" and "all" in the broad universal sense of "male and female." After all, the first verse of the revelation begins by indicating that "all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom" (Doctrine and Covenants 25:1). When it comes to empowerment, however, "others" and "all" may generally be read more narrowly to refer to the women of Christ's Church.

With that understanding in mind, readers of the revelation logically come to see Emma as Christ may have viewed her: a type, and a model for *all*, especially for the female body of the Church. The revelation then stands as a reference point, the basis for a pattern of female participation and empowerment in Christ's Church. As mentioned previously, in that 1830 revelation, when Christ was laying the foundation of his Church once again on the earth, he frees Latter-day Saint women from the Pauline injunction not to speak in church. The revelation has a double significance in that it tacitly allows Latter-day Saint women to pray and speak on religious matters, and it explicitly mandates that they occupy the pulpit to explicate scripture and exhort the Church. This explicit mission recalls of course the responsibility entrusted to priesthood holders in a revelation given in the same organizational years "to teach, expound, exhort" the Church (Doctrine and Covenants 20:42, 46, 59). This similarity may have

been part of what led Joseph to state that the Relief Society, meaning the sisters collectively, was “patterned after the priesthood.”⁴³

Another level of reading of the revelation may consist in seeing Emma as a type, a proxy for Christ.⁴⁴ Expounding and explaining to others the hidden and true meaning of scripture is one of the activities we see Christ doing throughout his earthly ministry. In Luke 24:27, for instance, we learn that “beginning at Moses and all the prophets,” the resurrected Christ “expounded [. . .] in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” to the disciples he had joined on the road to Emmaus. Before his Crucifixion, we learn that after reading, for instance, from Isaiah 61, “the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him” (Luke 4:20), obviously eager to access the true meaning of the prophecy. With authority, Christ explained, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21). Interestingly, the scripture that was fulfilled indicates that Christ, anointed by the Spirit, had come “to preach the gospel to the poor; . . . to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18–19).

Assuming that after Christ’s own eventful ministry “the acceptable year of the Lord” encompasses “the dispensation of the fulness of times” Christ speaks about in Doctrine and Covenants 112:30, we may argue that Relief Society presidents (who continue in Emma’s stead)—and their sisters who are also elect ladies in the kingdom—act as proxy for Christ in that they are able to stand in the Church where he would have stood to “preach deliverance” to those who are spiritually “captives.” Just like the sister’s organization is “patterned after the priesthood,” one may see in that a “pattern,” a certain coherence with what Christ may have intended in calling Emma to exhort and expound: in these specific areas, at least, the Emmas of the Church are just like priesthood holders who represent Christ at the sacrament table and other rituals.

Like Christ in the Lukan passage, Emma may be said further to have received an anointing, when set apart by the proper authority,

which entitles her to the Spirit of Christ (see Doctrine and Covenants 25:7), the Holy Ghost (Doctrine and Covenants 25:8), to “preach [that is, exhort and expound] the gospel” to Latter-day Saints who are “poor [in spirit],” who are “brokenhearted” or “bruised,” to open the eyes of those who may be “blind” as to the true meaning of scripture, and to deliver those who are in a form of captivity.

Doctrine and Covenants 25 is addressed to Emma, but there is in the revelation an implicit reminder for Joseph and for the larger body of the Church, the males in particular, to acknowledge the Christic mandate and authority of their sisters in the area of teaching and exhortation. This is evidence in the modal “shalt” that precedes “be ordained,” which further confers to the calling a sense of decree, something that must come to pass in Christ’s Church. Modern prophets, seers, and revelators have made it clear that though not ordained to a specific priesthood office, a woman who is set apart to serve in the restored Church of Jesus Christ officiates under the same priesthood umbrella as do the ordained males of the Church. Like the men, those sisters are “given priesthood authority to perform a priesthood function,” affirmed Elder Dallin H. Oaks in 2014 as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.⁴⁵

There is a twofold corollary to the clarification made by Elder Oaks. The first one is that Latter-day Saints who fail to acknowledge those sisters in their divinely appointed sacerdotal functions tacitly fail to see them and the Relief Society as Joseph Smith did, as an instrument of balance and perfection in the restoration process.⁴⁶ The second is that when Church members disregard women serving in their appointed positions, they disregard the priesthood, those who exercise the keys, and ultimately Christ, who provided for the calling of sisters.

Overall then, Doctrine and Covenants 25 shows a Christ who is consistent but who, in *restoring* his Church, literally repairs it and bridges loopholes in teachings that may have been brought into holy writ to marginalize women. Prior to Christ’s Resurrection, we see him in the New Testament protecting women from ostracization,

forgiving and healing them physically and spiritually (see John 8:3–11; Luke 7:36–50). This dynamic of inclusion and empowerment is stepped up after the Resurrection: Christ “appeared first to Mary Magdalene,” we read in Mark 16:9. And, for the first time, Christ gives a woman a major commission: he asks Mary to be his envoy, to announce to “my brethren . . . I ascend unto my Father, and your Father” (John 20:17). That in and of itself was remarkable, considering the low social recognition women had in Mary’s culture. Like Mary, Emma was the first in modern times to be given a commission that breaks away from established exclusionary practices. Mary’s calling to announce and Emma’s calling to expound and exhort reveal consistency in a dynamic of female inclusion and empowerment and a Christ who does not change.

Conclusion

The objective in this paper has been to propose an interpretative reading of Doctrine and Covenants 25 using a reading methodology based on diachronic (historical) and synchronic (textual and intertextual) analyses. The question of *praxis* has not been developed much because the intent was not to engage in any in-depth consideration of that dimension. Yet it seems impossible not to hint at its significance, at least as an opening in lieu of a conclusion. The principle of continuing revelation in the Church of Jesus Christ and the fact that Latter-day Saints, like everyone else, learn as they go, plead for that open-door approach when it comes to *praxis*.

By definition, *praxis* is the visible part of a principle or doctrine upon which it is based. This definition, however, is true only insofar as the doctrine is fully understood and adhered to. In a religious community, social factors—such as previous religious affiliation or non-affiliation, the level of education of the adherents, and the broader tradition in general—make it so that understanding and adhering to doctrine can be easier said than done, the fruits (*praxis*) are not always an exact manifestation of the tree (Christ and what he reveals). And

that is not necessarily because the members are recalcitrant toward a particular doctrine. The records do not hint that the early Saints had voiced any significant opposition to Emma's multiple divine callings at a time when female inclusion in religious life was the object of heated debates in the larger American religious landscape. Yet, there is a *hiatus*, a disconnect, between the revelation and its implementation in the history of the restored Church of Jesus Christ.

As noted by Marianne Holman Prescott, for a long time the early Saints followed "most other Christians in their day" and because of that, except in a few cases, they "reserved public preaching and leadership for men."⁴⁷ To that may be added the frustration created by the fact that women were not even invited to pray in the general conferences of the Church until April 2013. These restrictions have had ripple effects in and outside of the Church, fueling the sentiment that only the voice of "the brethren" matters in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and that it was conceived and exists for modern patriarchs. But Holman Prescott also documents an evolution within the Church that consists in aligning more with the spirit of revelations that mandate the inclusion of women, a subject on which the apostolic voice of M. Russell Ballard, for instance, has been raised more than once and in multiple venues of the Church and its institutions.⁴⁸

Aside from prayer and teaching and participation in the Church's temple rituals, women now sit as permanent members on several Church councils, most notably the Board of Trustees of the Church Educational System (the General President of the Primary and the General President of the Relief Society, who is also a member of the more reduced Executive Committee), on the Priesthood and Family Executive Council (General President of the Relief Society), Missionary Executive Council (General Young Women President), and the Temple and Family History Executive Council (General President of the Primary). In September 2018 the youth of the Church worldwide were presented with two well-trained and faithful historians—including a woman—to whom an apostle deferred by letting them address historical issues. About a year later, President Nelson

announced a change in Church policy allowing women who carry a temple recommend to stand as witnesses for baptisms and temple sealings.⁴⁹ Interestingly, all of these forward-looking decisions actually bring the Church more in line with authorized precedents⁵⁰ and the spirit of empowerment that is found in Doctrine and Covenants 25. It is to be assumed that this trend will not only continue but that the leaders will further educate the membership of the Church so that their practice reflects even more what Christ has revealed for the equilibrium and full flourishing of his restored Church.

Notes

I take full responsibility for the “sins,” though involuntary, that may appear in this paper. They would have been far more grievous were it not for colleagues like Kate Holbrook, Mark D. Ellison, Jason R. Combs, and my Sperry coeditors. They were generous with their time and provided very constructive feedback and references.

1. Of course, Church members are familiar with the injunction to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” from “the best books” and in all sorts of disciplines so that they “may be prepared in all things” to worship and serve God (Doctrine and Covenants 88:80, 118; 109:7). But as President M. Russell Ballard reminded, the Saints should not exclude consulting those with expertise outside of the ecclesiastical structure because they can “be useful in answering *all* the questions we may have about scriptures, history, and the Church” (emphasis in original). M. Russell Ballard, “Questions and Answers,” BYU Devotionals, 14 September 2017, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard/questions-and-answers/>.
2. Russell M. Nelson, “Spiritual Treasures,” *Ensign*, November 2019, 77.
3. See Susan Easton Black, “The Sacred Role of Women,” in *Doctrines of Exaltation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1–14; Carol Cornwall Madsen, “The ‘Elect Lady’ Revelation (D&C 25): Its Historical and Doctrinal Context,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004). A valuable reference beyond the Sperry volumes is Rachel Cope’s

- “A Sacred Space for Women: Hymnody in Emma Hale Smith’s Theology,” *Journal of Religious History* 42, no. 2 (June 2017): 243, 247.
4. As suggested in her title, Black’s paper will be helpful for a perspective on womanhood and motherhood in section 25 and throughout the Doctrine and Covenants. The scope of Madsen’s paper is a little broader, although the relevant context it provides focuses mostly on female converts who were around Emma.
 5. See, for instance, William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 98–140; “The Upstart Sects Win America, 1776–1850,” in *The Churching of America, 1776–2005*, ed. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 55–67; Ray B. West, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1950).
 6. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 106.
 7. See, for instance, the “Historical Introduction” page to Doctrine and Covenants 25 in “Revelation, July 1830–C [Doctrine and Covenants 25],” p. 34, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-july-1830-c-dc-25/1>.
 8. For example, see Nicholas J. Frederick’s paper, “Incarnation, Exaltation, and Christological Tension in Doctrine and Covenants 93:1–20,” 11–41, in this volume.
 9. Asael Nettleton and Lyman Beecher, two major actors of the religious scene, opposed “enthusiasm” or expressive forms of worship (which sometimes included extremes like rolling on the ground, speaking in tongues) so much that they “tested” their new converts and put them on probation for as long as six months before those converts could enjoy full fellowship. See McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 122. For a Sperry reference, see J. Spencer Fluhman’s “The Joseph Smith Revelations and the Crisis of Early American Spirituality,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 71–85.

10. Max Weber, *L'Éthique protestante et l'Esprit du capitalisme*, trans. Isabelle Kalinowski, 2nd ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 126.
11. The quotations used here are based mostly on a French edition of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, but there are several easily accessible English editions, with different translation nuances.
12. Zilpha Elaw, a black female preacher, traces the salvation of her soul and later ministry to an experience at the age of fourteen where "God [. . .] called me by an effectual call" through a dream and a vision of Jesus Christ. *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour; Together with an Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]* (London, 1846), 3–7. Closer to Joseph and Emma's days was Charles Grandison Finney, whose experience and use of the word can be found in his *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney Written by Himself* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1876), 265.
13. Nicholas J. Frederick, "Intertextuality in the Book of Mormon with Nick Frederick," Latter-day Saints Perspective Podcast, <https://ldspectives.com/2018/08/22/intertextuality-book-mormon/>. See also Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, "John 11 in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 5, no. 1 (2018): 81–106.
14. Steven Harper does not elaborate, but I concur that the linguistic "positioning of Joseph between the Lord and Emma" represents "perhaps the most compelling part of the revelation." See Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 108.
15. Likewise, viewed in purely temporal terms, the story in 1 Kings 17 is scandalous. It must have required great efforts on the part of the dying widow to risk shortening life expectancy for both herself and her son to execute the demand of a prophet who apparently was more comfortable being fed by others than finding bread "in the sweat of [his] face" until his death (Genesis 3:19).
16. "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," p. 9, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/6>.

17. Latter-day Saint theologian Rosalynde Welch, for instance, opts for the definition that “elect lady” in the Johannine text refers to “a first-century Church of Christ and disciples” and postulates that by applying the title to Emma, Christ had made her both “figure” and “form” of his restored Church. See Rosalynde Welch, “Emma as Church, Emma as Christ: Kingdom and Salvation in Section 25,” in *Latter-Day Saint Theology Seminar* (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 2019).
18. Cope, “Sacred Space for Women,” 243, 247.
19. See, for instance, Christopher C. Jones’s excellent thesis “We Latter-day Saints Are Methodists: The Influence of Methodism on Early Mormon Religiosity” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2009), a title borrowed from a statement by Joseph Smith.
20. *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher*, ed. William P. Strickland (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857), 243.
21. Michael Hicks, *Mormonism and Music: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 10.
22. Cope, “Sacred Space for Women,” 242.
23. “Revelation Book 1,” p. 34, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/18>. The header to the 2013 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants takes a more generalist summarizing approach: “This revelation manifests the will of the Lord to Emma Smith, the Prophet’s wife.”
24. “Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” p. 8; emphasis added.
25. As can be noticed, the Prophet dropped this verb in his Relief Society remarks but left it standing in the original revelation.
26. Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, 58, for instance, officially became an exhorter in the Methodist Episcopal Church at a conference when he received a license signed by his minister. See also Louis Billington, “Female Laborers in the Church: Women Preachers in the Northeastern United States, 1790–1840,” *Journal of American Studies* 3, no. 19 (1985): 380–81.
27. Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004), 141.

28. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 146.
29. Catherine A. Brekus, "Female Preaching in Early Nineteenth-Century America," in *Women and the Church*, Christian Reflection (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2009), 21.
30. Brekus, "Female Preaching," 21.
31. *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, 517.
32. Lyman Beecher and Asael Nettleton, *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton, on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion* (New York: G. & C. Carvill, 1828), 10–11.
33. Beecher and Nettleton, *Letters*, 89.
34. Rising against Johanna Southcott, Jemimah Wilkinson, and other religious groups in which women had prophetic claims or played a significant role, Joseph declared on 1 April 1842, "Where do we read of a woman that was the founder of a Church in the word of God? Paul told the women in his day 'to keep silence in the Church, and that if they wished to know anything to ask their husbands at home;' he would not suffer a woman 'to rule or usurp authority in the Church;' but here we find a woman, the founder of a Church, the revelator and guide, the Alpha and Omega, contrary to all acknowledged rule, principle and order." See "History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842]," p. 1308, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/482>; "History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842]," p. 1310, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/484>). Black, "Sacred Role of Women," 12–15, uses similar references but does not raise the impropriety, even in the nineteenth century, of making the womanhood of rival prophets an argument rather than challenging their claims on other grounds. At any rate, a comparison between Joseph's statements and the revelation indicates that there was Joseph the man, who had his own views, and then there was Joseph the Prophet who, as mouthpiece for the Lord, declared revelations that went against the views of the man. The fact that Joseph used the question "Where do we read of a woman that was the

founder of a Church in the word of God?" suggests that in this instance, he relied on *an accepted cultural reading* of the text, not on revelation he had received from the Lord.

35. Beecher and Nettleton, *Letters*, 89.
36. Beecher and Nettleton, *Letters*, 91.
37. More specifically, Beecher saw the inclusion of women in religious life "as ultimately working ruin to our churches," as one way "churches were once laid to waste." Beecher and Nettleton, *Letters*, 15.
38. Brekus, "Female Preaching," 21.
39. Beecher quotes that passage in support of his argument and rejects 1 Corinthians 11:3–16, which indicates that women could pray and prophesy. Beecher and Nettleton, *Letters*, 90. In "Female Laborers in the Church," 381, Billington writes about how, in 1830, the Freewill Baptist Church also voted in conference that women were to remain silent in church matters.
40. The Pauline origin of the injunction is debatable. Biblical scholars generally agree that 1 Corinthians 14 was subjected to scribal tampering, which likely happened with 1 Timothy 2:11–12 and Titus 2:5. Harold W. Attridge, ed., *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 1952. Verses 34–35 in 1 Corinthians 14 actually interrupt the flow of Paul's argument, and it contradicts his earlier statements about women speaking in religious settings as found in 1 Corinthians 11:5, which suggests that women did pray and prophesy. See, for instance, Jason R. Combs, "Noncanonical Gospels," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2019), 333; Karin B. Neutel, "Women's Silence and Jewish Influence: The Problematic Origins of the Conjectural Emendation on 1 Cor 14.33b–35," *New Testament Studies* 65, no. 4 (October 2019): 477–95. That the sacred text may have been tampered with is something Latter-day Saints have of course been warned about by the Prophet Joseph Smith. He stated in what has become the Church's eight article of faith: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly."
41. Madsen, "Elect Lady' Revelation," 120.

42. “Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” p. 8, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/5>.
43. See the “Historical Introduction” to “Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” p. 10, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/7>.
44. Rosalynde Welch also comes to a similar conclusion in her presentation “Emma as Church, Emma as Christ” by putting the Doctrine and Covenants passage in dialogue with different profound and inspiring biblical passages such as Isaiah 42:1. Our readings differ however—or maybe support each other—in that the Christic figure she sees represented in Emma is that of a sacrificial lamb, “the suffering Christ” of the Atonement.
45. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 51.
46. See the “Historical Introduction” to “Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” p. 10, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/7>. A clarification may be in order again. Joseph’s rejection of the prophetic claims of women like Southcott and Wilkinson (see note 34), shows that there was, on the one hand, the Joseph who as a man of his time accepted and applied the *cultural reading* of the Pauline injunction; on the other hand, there was the Joseph who seems to have understood *from revelation* what the Lord wanted for the women of his Church—that they were to be organized “under and after the pattern of the priesthood.” From this, one may infer that Joseph could not accept the claims of the women because they operated outside the order of priesthood God had revealed to him.
47. Marianne Holman Prescott, “Women’s Voices Past and Present Impact General Conference and the Church for Good,” *Church News*, 5 October 2018, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/womens-voices-past-and-present-impact-general-conference-and-the-church-for-good>.
48. See, for instance, M. Russell Ballard, “Counseling with Our Councils,” *Ensign*, May 1994; M. Russell Ballard, “Let Us Think Straight” (BYU devotional, 20 August 2013); and M. Russell Ballard, “Women of Dedication,

- Faith, Determination, and Action” (BYU Women’s Conference, 1 May 2015).
49. Sarah Jane Weaver, “Women Can Serve as Witnesses for Baptisms, Temple Sealings, First Presidency Announces,” *Church News*, 2 October 2019, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/women-can-serve-as-witnesses-for-baptisms-temple-sealings-first-presidency-announces>.
 50. Joseph Smith approved the fact that Vienna Jacques, who is actually the other woman identified by name in the Doctrine and Covenants (90:28–29), stood as witness on 12 September 1840, as Jane Neyman was baptized by proxy for her son. See Alexander L. Baugh, “‘For This Ordinance Belongeth to My House’: The Practice of Baptism for the Dead Outside the Nauvoo Temple,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 48; Alexander L. Baugh, “‘For Their Salvation Is Necessary and Essential to Our Salvation’: Joseph Smith and the Practice of Baptism and Confirmation for the Dead,” in *An Eye of Faith: Essays in Honor of Richard O. Cowan* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 115.