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LATTER-DAY SAINT WOMEN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS TODAY PRACTICES a gendered division of labor, meaning that administrative functions in the Church are largely separated by what men can do and what women can do. Gendered division of labor is becoming more and more unusual in current American institutions, and some members both old and young struggle to understand why the Church maintains administrative divisions. The doctrinal foundation for the division—the fact that only men hold the priesthood and women do not—has been challenged in recent years, and dialogue about women's roles has been tense at times. This essay aims to summarize what our leaders are currently teaching about this gendered division of labor and how members can best align practices to support this doctrine.

Sam Gordon is a football sensation. The eleven-year-old has been the subject of a Super Bowl commercial, has been featured on the front of a cereal box, and has appeared on national television. There's also Sam's autobiography (written with the help of a ghostwriter), Sam's YouTube channel, and Sam's recent press conference with the governor of Utah. Why all the attention? Well, Sam has one of the best rushing and touchdown records for any eleven-year-old football player, but it also has a lot to do with the fact that Sam Gordon is a girl.

Sam is short for Samantha, and Sam has been dominating her local youth football leagues for three years now. Sam also happens to be a Mormon girl, and the ghostwriter of her book is her family's home teacher. Here is a girl—a Mormon girl—who is receiving the highest accolades a child of her age can receive because she is breaking into boys' territory.

She reflects an instinct among Americans, and, as her fame is demonstrating, among Mormons, to celebrate crossing over the gender divide. We want girls to have a fighting chance in whatever they attempt. We crave parity. We look for it in our governments and in our boardrooms. We push for girls to pursue careers in technology, math, and science because we know these disciplines will be strengthened by the impact of strong, intelligent women.

Realities like these of the twenty-first century American culture can create tension when contrasted with the gendered division of labor that characterizes many practices in the Church. For many American LDS youth, institutional gender division is introduced to them through the framework of Church administration and doctrine. The idea that women could and *should* break into male-only spheres, the way Sam Gordon is doing with football, has often not even been considered. How do we navigate between aspiring to gender parity in our external institutions and interactions and supporting the gendered division of labor inherent in our current divinely mandated Church structure?

GENDER ROLES

For much of the twentieth century, the Church's division of labor was in harmony with mainstream American culture: men and women typically occupied separate spheres, with the man in the workplace and the woman at home. That cultural dynamic was comfortably mirrored in Church structure, where men were responsible for public administration and women for private nurturing. That public/private division, however, is no longer the norm in our broader culture, and our youth are growing up without that formerly idealized division of gender roles. What our youth see and celebrate is that women around the world are benefitting from the explosion of rights and protections now given them by governments, institutions, and family culture. The strong cultural force driving toward the potential of women to gain education, fulfill their personal ambitions, earn money for their families, and have a public voice in all settings has undeniably resulted in a better quality of life for women worldwide.

It is not coincidental that this explosion of women's voices and opportunities has corresponded with the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the last days. The founding of the Relief Society corresponded with a trend toward the improvement of women's lives globally. Apostle Orson F. Whitney noted that the "lifting of the women of Zion . . . was the beginning of a work for the elevation of womankind throughout the world. . . . The spirit of women's work [is] . . . one of those sunbursts of light that proclaim the dawning of a new dispensation."¹ What we are experiencing now in the liberation of women from historical strictures is "one of those sunbursts of light" delivered by the Restoration.

But the Church doesn't appear to be facilitating the institutional opportunities that in our secular culture have resulted in so many open doors for our grandmothers, our mothers, and now us. Instead, the vast majority of leadership opportunities, of administration responsibilities, and of ecclesiastical oversight are the sole domain of men in the Church. On the one hand, the Restoration allowed the world to consider equal opportunities for women as for men, but on the other, in our own Church men and women's opportunities to contribute are by divine mandate largely separated by gender. How are we to balance these two realities?

THE DEFINITION OF EQUALITY

There are several key considerations that allow us to hold these two realities congruently and celebrate each for its goodness, rather than be distracted by seeming contradictions. First, the definition of equality recognized by earthly institutions seems not to be the same definition the Lord uses to describe the practices of his kingdom. In short, the Church does not practice equality in the same way schools, workplaces, and government organizations do. In our daily lives, the concept of equality is seen through the lens of a mathematical paradigm, where "equal" means the same, or 50/50, or where something offered to one person is also offered to another. In the Lord's kingdom, though, scriptures and Apostles teach that all factors do not need to be the same in order for two things, or two people, to be considered of equal worth or value in the Lord's eyes. "Equal worth," "equal value," and "equal opportunity" to return to live with our Heavenly Parents are the phrases used by leaders to represent the way God sees us, and they are careful to stress that these do not mean that opportunities, expectations, and responsibilities will be the same for each person.

Elder M. Russell Ballard is particularly focused on separating the concept of doctrinal equality from its earthly, mathematical lens. In *Counseling with our Councils*, he has suggested an analogy to help us understand that men and women can contribute differently, but their offerings are received by the Lord with the same degree of acceptance, approval, and love. He stated:

Perhaps we might look at the respective contributions of men and women in this way: You have no doubt visited the ophthalmologist for an eye exam. In the process of determining a patient's correct vision, the doctor will typically test the patient's eyesight by asking him or her to look through a variety of settings on a machine, some of which are blurry. . . . Only when he can determine the exact prescription for both eyes can a patient's vision be corrected precisely.

In much the same way, men and women express themselves differently and tend to have different skills, talents, and points of view. When either viewpoint is taken in isolation, the resulting image may

be blurry, one-dimensional, or otherwise distorted. It is only when both perspectives come together that the picture is balanced and complete. Men and women are equally valuable in the ongoing work of the gospel kingdom.²

Elder Ballard restated this message in his talk at BYU Education Week in 2013: “Our Church doctrine places women equal to and yet different from men. God does not regard either gender as better or more important than the other.”³ In examples such as this, we see our leaders attempting to create through metaphor an image of what “equal to and yet different from” could actually look like. Creating a functional model in Church governance of what this actually looks like still remains a challenge for which we have little worldly precedence, but our leaders have made our mission clear.

GENDER ROLES AND THE PRIESTHOOD

A second consideration is the truth that men and women actually have much more in common than Church rhetoric typically admits. Often Church rhetoric serves to underscore the differences between men and women: the emphasis on eternal gender identity and the separate gendered responsibilities outlined in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” lead us to a hyperawareness of the divine differences to the point that we can lose sight of both the commonality and interdependence of men and women. Even while Elder Ballard stresses that men and women have differences, his metaphor of two eyes working together implicitly suggests that those two eyes are much more alike than they are different. Similarly, while we may discuss different divine natures of men and women, we should not let those conversations distract us from the fact that we are not only all children of God but also that we all have access to priesthood power. In fact, we are both part of Church organizations structured similarly to each other up to the highest levels of Church governance.

Discussion of gender roles inevitably leads to the assertion that men “hold the priesthood” and therefore *are* the priesthood. However, more nuanced and emphatic language from recent leaders has encouraged members to look more carefully at the intragendered nature of priesthood power. Scholar Valerie Hudson Cassler has called this recent shift a “new and higher level of discussion” and “a firmer foundation for our people.”⁴ One potent example of this higher level of discussion was articulated by Elder Dallin H. Oaks. He emphasized the commonality of priesthood power when he 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? When a woman—young or old—is set apart to preach the

gospel as a full-time missionary, she is given priesthood authority to perform a priesthood function. The same is true when a woman is set apart to function as an officer or teacher in a Church organization under the direction of one who holds the keys of the priesthood. Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.⁵

Elder Ballard adds more to this higher discussion: "When men and women go to the temple, they are both endowed with the same power, which by definition is priesthood power. . . . The endowment is literally a gift of power. All who enter the house of the Lord officiate in the ordinances of the priesthood. This applies to men and women alike." Having established that endowed women hold priesthood power, Elder Ballard builds on the idea that there are two great works in the Lord's kingdom: building a family and building the Church. "It takes a man and a woman to create a family, and it takes men and women to carry out the work of the Lord in the Church." And finally, these two works require complete interdependence: "Just as a woman cannot conceive a child without a man, so a man cannot fully exercise the power of the priesthood to establish an eternal family without a woman. . . . In the eternal perspective, both the procreative power and the priesthood power are shared by husband and wife."⁶

In *Women and the Priesthood*, Sheri Dew adds to the discussion by being careful to distinguish between priesthood power, priesthood authority, and priesthood keys—not all of which are exclusively male. "Both men and women would have full access to this [heavenly] power, though in *different ways*."⁷ She continues, "The manner in which He authorizes the distribution of *His* authority and power throughout the earth is through priesthood keys."⁸ She further goes on to state, "I believe that the moment we learn to unleash the full influence of converted, covenant-keeping women, the kingdom of God will change overnight."⁹

If the Priesthood with a capital *P* includes both male and female priesthood authority, as these apostolic statements suggest, how is that doctrine currently reflected in our Church practices and structure? The truth is that we see today a shadow of what it could be, but we are still somewhat blinded by the persistent and pervasive disconnect that leads some members to believe that women's participation in building the kingdom should be limited to being counselors and influencers rather than decision makers and leaders. We have important but limited female influence in the decision-making councils of the Church. Each organization led by women in the Church, for instance, has a full presidency and a general board, and these structures are echoed down to the very lowliest ward and branch. But we are far from having those groups work as co-presidencies, as "equal to but different from" the male governing bodies. The object of reevaluating female government would

not be to give women more work; indeed, women's work in the Church is abundant. The potential lies in making that female government more public, more authoritative, and more focused on causes and people that women themselves have independent stewardship over. This is our challenge.

It can be argued that this model isn't a new one, but would, rather, be a harkening back to the original intention of the Relief Society. In the early decades of its history, the Relief Society functioned as an autonomous organization, administratively and financially independent of the male hierarchy. As a result of this radical independence in an era before women's emancipation or suffrage, Latter-day Saint women ran their own magazine, their own cooperative store, their own granary, and their own hospital and led their own social causes. The result was a feeling of driven productivity and impact that lasted, according to personal accounts,¹⁰ until about the 1970s when the *Relief Society Magazine* was phased out, manuals were no longer written by the Relief Society board, and Relief Society finances were folded into the general Church ledgers. Despite dedicated work and countless hours in Church meetings today, many women long for the autonomy and mission-driven focus that characterized female government in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this earlier model still doesn't overtly address how male and female priesthood could function, it offers a hopeful precedent for reflecting doctrine more accurately in our practice.

CHANGING THE PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF WOMEN

There are ample signs that our leadership is working out what co-leadership might look like in a functional, comprehensive way. Over the past several years, we've seen small but significant changes in the way women are seen, heard, and included at the very highest levels. The change in age for missionaries signaled a desire to have young women embrace their ecclesiastical authority more completely; the addition of the female general officers' portraits in the Conference Center and the general conference *Ensign* suggested these women should be considered by the Church membership to be global leaders and not just figureheads. The change of the general women's meeting to the general women's session, now the first session of general conference, evidenced a desire to shore up the "equal to but different from" model in every way, even in semantics and structure.

With awareness of and willingness to support co-leadership becoming more apparent at the general Church level, it is the responsibility of the membership to assume that same awareness and willingness on the local level. The question for us is what can we do in our wards and stakes to demonstrate a similar commitment to co-leadership by emphasizing the equality, commonality, and interdependence of men and women just as much as we do their differences? There are several ways each of us on the local level can help adapt our practices to be more consistent with this vision

of co-leadership. As members and local leaders study *Handbook of Instruction 2*, the guide available to all members of the Church that outlines how the local Church should be run, we can seek for opportunities to expand our current practices, excavate previously untapped sources of female input, and look for places where we can put women front and center in our meetings.

Is there more we can do to acquaint the ward members with the Young Women as well as they are acquainted with the Young Men through the passing of the sacrament, handling of the testimony microphone, and home teaching? Are there ways we can put our Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary presidencies front and center, respected as the ecclesiastical and administrative authorities they have been set apart to be, when having ward or stake conference? Can we quote women or use female examples in every talk or lesson we give to demonstrate women's wisdom and closeness to God? Through these small changes, we can demonstrate to our youth that we don't just pay lip service to the equality of women in our doctrine; we actually align our practices to that doctrine by recognizing in our worship, learning, and government the unique but divine power that resides in each woman.

For some women, taking on this process of evaluation and adjustment can represent a seismic shift in their own sense of identity and self. Understandably, it is proving uncomfortable for some women to critically examine their willing participation in the organization and acknowledge that their daughters and granddaughters and even peers might not find the same fulfillment in certain practices or attitudes. Many women in the Church do feel heard and loved by male leaders, and these feelings of acceptance and community make women's structural inequity seem to them to be irrelevant, or worse, a distraction from eternal truths. Because addressing women's changing relationship with the Church and the world around them can be fundamentally threatening to a Mormon woman's treasured identity, some of the fiercest battles about these shifts happen among Mormon women themselves, either in public, on social media, or in local or private interchanges where women explore the boundaries of their influence and governance against the pushback of other women, even when male leaders encourage greater female impact.

It is a hard thing to examine our own community and have the humility to seek for greater wisdom. But it is essential that we continue to ask ourselves and our Father in Heaven for insight and knowledge regarding women. If we better align our practice with our doctrine, then a young woman like Sam Gordon would discover that she doesn't have to share the man's world of spiritual kingdom building to lead and contribute. She will realize she has all the tools she needs as a daughter of God not only to return to live with him but also to lead the Church in our midst here on earth in a different but equal way to her male counterpart. She will believe gender roles are different but equal not because anyone tells her they are, but because she will be supported in her efforts, see the fruits of her work, and

know for herself. For Sam and for all of our youth, we must stretch ourselves to see opportunities we have not yet explored and be committed to modeling not the *same* leadership but co-leadership between men and women at every level of Church governance.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Dew, Sheri. *Women and the Priesthood: What One Mormon Woman Believes*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013.

McBaine, Neylan. *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014.

Mormon Women Project. <http://www.mormonwomen.com>.

Oaks, Dallin H. "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood." *Ensign*, May 2014, 49–52.

Oscarson, Bonnie L. "Sisterhood: Oh, How We Need Each Other." *Ensign*, May 2014, 119–21.

Uchtdorf, Dieter F. "Four Titles." *Ensign*, May 2013, 60–62.

Women at Church. <http://www.womenatchurch.com>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neylan McBaine is the founder and editor in chief of the Mormon Women Project, a continuously expanding digital library of interviews with LDS women from around the world found at www.mormonwomen.com. Founded in 2010, the Mormon Women Project has published nearly three hundred interviews with women in twenty-two countries. As a writer, Neylan has been published in *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, and *Dialogue*. Neylan is a native New Yorker, lifelong Mormon, graduate of Yale University, and mother of three literarily named daughters.

NOTES

1. Orson F. Whitney, "Woman's Work and Mormonism," *Young Woman's Journal* 17, no. 7 (July 1906), 295–96, <http://cdm15999.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/YWJ/id/12943/rec/17>.

2. M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 102–3.

3. M. Russell Ballard, "Let Us Think Straight," Brigham Young University Campus Education Week devotional, August 20, 2013, 6, available at <http://speeches.byu.edu/?act=viewitem&cid=2133>.

4. Valerie Hudson Cassler, "Zion in Her Beauty Rises: Current Discourse on Women and the Priesthood by Ballard, Dew and Oaks," *SquareTwo* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2014), <http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleHudsonMcBaine.html>.
5. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," *Ensign*, May 2014, 51.
6. Ballard, "Let Us Think Straight," 4.
7. Sheri L. Dew, *Women and the Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 74; emphasis added.
8. Dew, *Women and the Priesthood*, 81; emphasis added.
9. Dew, *Women and the Priesthood*, 163.
10. Helen Claire Sievers, "What Women in the Church Have Lost in My Lifetime," *Exponent II* 33, no. 3 (Winter 2014): 18–22.