

a gift. a gift given: a gift taken

Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick Among Mormon Women

A MORMON HISTORIAN TRACES CHANGES IN THE PRACTICE

Editors Note

This article is taken from a more extensive essay, "Gifts of the Spirit: Women's Share," to be published soon in a collection of essays edited by Lavina Fielding Anderson and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. The larger work, in addition to the practice of washing and anointing, deals with other aspects of women's involvement in the spiritual gifts of healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy, etc., from 1830 to the present. The author is indebted to Vella N. Evans and Carol Cornwall Madsen for sharing some of their extensive research and to Lavina Fielding Anderson for her able assistance in putting the material together.

Linda King Newell

FOR members of the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the term "washing and anointing" is synonymous with the initiatory ordinances of the temple endowment. Joseph Smith first introduced the practice to male members of the LDS church in the Kirtland Temple; he included women when he gave the endowment and sealing ordinances to his select "Quorum of the Anointed" in Nauvoo.¹ By the time the Mormons had established a refuge in the Great Basin, washing and anointing had also been combined with healing. Although it grew out of the temple ordinances in Nauvoo, the practice by women was carried on outside the temple. Even after the establishment of the Endowment House in Salt Lake in 1855 and later the dedication of the St. George, Manti,

and Logan temples, the ordinance took place both within the confines of those sacred structures and in the privacy of individual homes. This paper will focus on the latter practice. These washings and anointings were clearly done in connection with "administering to the sick." The wording took different forms as the occasion demanded. One of the most common uses of the washing and anointing blessing came as women administered to each other prior to childbirth.

That women could and did participate in blessing and healing the sick was already a clearly established and officially sanctioned fact by the time the Saints had established a refuge in the Great Basin. Women like Sarah Leavitt and Edna Rogers left records of their experiences with healing others in Kirtland.² In Nauvoo the Prophet Joseph Smith not only formed the Relief Society as an essential part of the Church, but he also introduced the ceremony of the temple endowment, including washings and anointings. With the coming of the Relief Society the women had an organization through which they manifested the gifts of the spirit. Of this period, Susa Young Gates, a daughter of Brigham Young, wrote: "The privileges and powers outlined by the Prophet in those first meetings [of the Relief Society] have never been granted to women in full even yet." Then Susa asked, "Did those women, do you and I, live so well as to be worthy of them all?"³

There is considerable evidence within the minutes of

the Nauvoo Relief Society meetings to suggest that Joseph Smith seemed to envision the Relief Society as an independent organization for women parallel to the priesthood organization for men.⁴ Yet both seemed to come under the aegis of the priesthood as a power from God, not as an administrative entity.

The women themselves saw their organization as more than a charitable society. Spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and healing the sick were not only discussed in their meetings but the sisters openly practiced them. With Joseph's approval, Emma and her counselors laid hands on the sick and blessed them that they might be healed. The fifth time the Relief Society convened, Sarah Cleveland invited the sisters to speak freely, and women stood one at a time in this testimony meeting. Sister Durfee was among those who spoke. She "bore testimony to the great blessing she received when administered to after the last meeting by Emma Smith and [her] Counselors Cleveland and Whitney, she said she never realized more benefit through an administration." She added that she had been healed and "thought the sisters had more faith than the brethren." Following the meeting, Sarah Cleveland and Elizabeth Whitney administered to another Relief Society sister, Mrs. Abigail Leonard, "for the restoration of health."⁵

In the intervening week, someone apparently reported to Joseph that the women were laying their hands on the sick and blessing them. His reply to the question of the propriety of such acts was simple. He told the women in the next meeting "there could be no evil in it, if God gave his sanction by healing. . . there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water." He also indicated that there were sisters who were ordained to heal the sick and it was their privilege to do so. "If the sisters should have faith to heal," he said, "let all hold their tongues."⁶

In 1857 Mary Ellen Kimball recorded her visit to a sick woman in company with Presindia, her sister wife. They washed and anointed Susannah, cooked her dinner, and watched her "eat pork and potatoes" with a gratifying appetite. "I felt to rejoice with her for I shall never forget the time when I was healed by the power of God through faith in him which power has again been restored *with the priesthood*" (a phrase which indicates a distinction in Mary Ellen's mind).

But after I returned home I thought of the instructions I had received from time to time that the priesthood was not bestowed upon woman. I accordingly asked Mr. [Heber C.] Kimball if women had a right to wash and anoint the sick for the recovery of their health or is it mockery in them to do so. He replied inasmuch as they are obedient to their husbands, they have a right to administer in that way in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ but not by authority of the priesthood invested in them for that authority is not given to woman.

Mary Ellen then noted an argument that would calm apprehensions for the next four decades: "He also said they might administer by the authority given to their husbands in as much as they were one with their husband."⁷

At the same time, strong official encouragement for women to develop and use their spiritual powers is evident. Brigham Young, speaking in the Tabernacle on 14 November 1869, scolded both men and women for not improving themselves. The example he cited was of a sick child. "Why do you not live so as to rebuke

disease?" he demanded. "It is your privilege to do so without sending for the Elders." He laid down some practical advice; if the child is ill of a fever or of an upset stomach, treat those symptoms by all means, beware of too much medicine, and remember that prevention is better than cure. He ended by addressing himself specifically to mothers: "It is the privilege of a mother to have faith and to administer to her child; this she can do herself, as well as sending for the Elders to have the benefit of their faith."⁸ Having enough faith to heal was clearly, for Brother Brigham, "practical religion" like having enough food on hand.

The year before in Cache Valley, Elder Ezra T. Benson had called on all the women who had been ordained to wash and anoint to exercise their powers to rebuke an unspecified disease which so destructively coursed its way through the valley.⁹ This record neither identifies the ordained women nor who ordained them. It only said they were "ordained to wash and anoint." Zina Huntington Young's journal mentions several healings. On Joseph Smith's birthday in 1881, she washed and anointed one woman "for her health" and administered to another "for her hearing." She remembered the Prophet's birthday and reminisced about the days in Nauvoo when she was one of his plural wives: "I have



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practiced much with My Sister Presendia Kimball while in Nauvoo & ever since before Joseph Smith's death. He blest Sisters to bless the sick." Three months later in March 1890: "I went to see Chariton [her son] & administered to him, felt so sad to see him suffer. . . ." The next year she notes with satisfaction hearing an address by Bishop Whitney in the Eighteenth Ward wherein he "blest the Sisters in having faith to administer to their own families in humble faith not saying by the Authority of the Holy priesthood but in the name of Jesus Christ. . . ."¹⁰

Still, healing by women caused some confusion; this quiet, routine practice on the local level occasionally raised questions which, when answered publicly by Church leaders or the Relief Society, seemed to start a ripple of uneasiness which, sooner or later, set off another inquiry. Church leaders began to issue general cautions about women blessing the sick. Angus Cannon, president of the Salt Lake Stake, included the following in his answer to a question about women holding the priesthood: "Women could only hold the priesthood in connection with their husbands; man held the priesthood independent of woman. The sisters have a right to anoint the sick, and pray the Father to heal them, and to exercise that faith that will prevail with God; but women must be careful how they use the authority of the priesthood in administering to the sick."¹¹ Two years later on 8 August 1880, John Taylor's address on "The Order and Duties of the Priesthood" reaffirmed that women "hold the Priesthood, only in connection with their husbands, they being one with their husbands."¹²

A circular letter sent from Salt Lake on that October “to all the authorities of the Priesthood and Latter-day Saints” described the organization of the Relief Society, its composition, its purposes, the qualifications for its officers, and their duties. The letter includes a section called “The Sick and Afflicted”:

It is the privilege of all faithful women and lay members of the Church, who believe in Christ, to administer to all the sick or afflicted in their respective families, either by the laying on of hands, or by the anointing with oil in the name of the Lord: but they should administer in these sacred ordinances, not by virtue and authority of the priesthood, but by virtue of their faith in Christ, and the promises made to believers: and thus they should do in all their ministrations.¹³

It seems clear that the First Presidency was answering one question: anointing and blessing the sick is not an official function of the Relief Society since any faithful member may perform this action. However, by specifying women’s right to administer to the sick “in their respective families,” the Church leaders raised



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another question: what about administering to those outside the family circle? They gave no answer, although the practice of calling for the elders or calling for the sisters had certainly been established.

Another question also bears on the topic: “Is it necessary for sisters to be set apart to officiate in the sacred ordinances of washing, anointing, and laying on of hands in administering to the sick?” Eliza R. Snow used the columns of the *Woman’s Exponent* in 1884 to answer:

It certainly is not. Any and all sisters who honor their holy endowments, not only have the right, but should feel it a duty whenever called upon to administer to our sisters in these ordinances, which God has graciously committed to His daughters as well as to His sons; and we testify that when administered and received in faith and humility they are accompanied with all mighty power.

Inasmuch as God our Father has revealed these sacred ordinances and committed them to His Saints, it is not only our privilege but our imperative duty to apply them for the relief of human suffering.

Eliza Snow in 1884 then echoed the language of Joseph Smith in his April 28, 1842 instructions to the Relief Society: “thousands can testify that God has sanctioned the administration of these ordinances [of healing the sick] by our sisters with the manifestation of His healing influence.”¹⁴

In answering the question of who should “officiate in the sacred ordinances” Eliza Snow’s language is instructive. By limiting its performance to those who have been endowed, she definitely places the source of their authority under the shelter of those ordinances in the temple. In other words, she saw washing and

anointing the sick as an *ordinance* that could and did take place outside the sacred confines of the temple. Women, through their endowment, had both the authority and obligation to perform them.

Two differing points of view were now in print. Eliza Snow and the First Presidency agreed that the Relief Society had no monopoly on the ordinance of administration by and for women. The First Presidency, however, implied that the ordinance should be limited to the woman’s family without specifying any requirement but faithfulness. Eliza Snow, on the other hand, said nothing of limiting administrations to the family—indeed, the implication is clear that anyone in need of a blessing should receive it—but said that only women who have been endowed may officiate.

As the washings and anointing continued, women attending Relief Society conference in the Logan Tabernacle in 1886 heard a Sister Tenn Young urge them: “I wish to speak of the great privilege given to us to wash and to anoint the sick and suffering of our sex. I would counsel every one who expects to become a Mother to have these ordinances administered by some good faithful sister.” She later gave instructions how it should be done. Her counsel was endorsed by Mary Ann Freeze who “said she attended to this and the curse to bring forth in sorrow was almost taken away.”¹⁵

But doubts kept surfacing among women whose desire for approval from their presiding brethren inevitably led to questions of propriety. Answers varied, however, depending on who provided them.

In 1888 Emmeline B. Wells, editor of the *Exponent* and soon to be president of the Relief Society, sent Wilford Woodruff a list of questions on the topic of washing and anointings. Her questions, and his response follow:

First: Are sisters justified in administering the ordinance of washing and anointing previous to confinements to those who have received their endowments and have married men outside of the Church?

Second: Can anyone who has not had their endowments thus be administered to by the sisters if she is a faithful Saint in good standing and has not yet had the opportunity of going to the temple for the ordinances?

To begin with I desire to say that the *ordinance* of washing and anointing is one that should only be administered in Temples or other holy places which are dedicated for the purpose of giving endowments to the Saints. That *ordinance* might not be administered to any one whether she has received or has not received her endowments, in any other place or under any other circumstances.

But I imagine from your questions that you refer to a practice that has grown up among the sisters of washing and anointing sisters who are approaching their confinement. If so, this is not, strictly speaking, an ordinance, unless it be done under the direction of the priesthood and in connection with the ordinance of laying on of hands for the restoration of the sick.

There is no impropriety in sisters washing and anointing their sisters in this way, under the circumstances you describe; but it should be understood that they do this, not as members of the priesthood, but as members of the Church, exercising faith for, and asking the blessings of the Lord upon, their sisters, just asking the blessings of the Lord upon their sisters, just as they and every member of the Church, might do in behalf of the members of their families.¹⁶

President Woodruff's careful distinctions between the temple ordinance of washing and anointing, the church member's practice of washing and anointing, and the priesthood ordinance of anointing in connection with a healing blessing does not directly address the position Eliza R. Snow had taken earlier that only endowed women should administer to others. The issue became more confused. When precisely the same act was performed and very nearly the same words were used among women in the temple, among women outside the temple, and among men administering to women, the distinction—in the average mind—became shadowy indeed.

In 1889 Zina D. H. Young, addressing a general conference of the Relief Society gave the sisters advice on a variety of topics. Between wheat storage and silk culture came this paragraph: "It is the privilege of the sisters, who are faithful in the discharge of their duties, and have received their endowments and blessings in the house of the Lord, to administer to their sisters, and to the little ones, in time of sickness, in meekness and

to heal you. If you have a touch of sore throat, try the oil and a little prayer before you try a single thing besides. Go to bed and see if you are not better in the morning. If you are, then go on adding experience to experience until you have accumulated a store of faith that will all be needed when your body is weak, and you are sick unto death. . . . and if you still feel sick ask your mother or your father to administer to you. Try that; then if that fails, and they wish to call in Elders, let them do so, and thus exhaust the ordinances of the priesthood before you take the other step [of calling a doctor]."¹⁸

The brisk matter-of-factness echoes Brigham Young's practical heartiness—there is nothing mysterious or mystical here about faith and spiritual gifts. But perhaps most revealing is the attitude of spiritual self-sufficiency and the interchangeability of the mother and father as administrators. If this article reflects practice among the membership at large, administrations were far from being confined to the men ordained with the priesthood.

Another revealing example occurred in 1895 when Brother Torkel Torkelson, widely in demand in his community to bless the sick, records that two sisters "came to my house to wash and anoint my wife before her confinement. Since it happened that I was at home,



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the sisters called upon me to bless her. After I had blessed her and then sealed the holy ordinance which the sisters had performed, . . . I could see the power of God come upon [Sister Phelps]," and she prophesied in tongues upon him, his household, and the unborn child.¹⁹ It is interesting that Torkelson blesses his wife because "it happened that I was at home" and that he terms the sisters' service a "holy ordinance." The distinction drawn at the higher levels was not so restricting at the lower.

In the twentieth century, controversy continued over the traditions and policies touching on women's administrations to the sick in general and washing and anointing specifically. On 16 September 1901 a general board meeting discussed "whether the sisters should seal the anointing after washings and anointings. Pres. [Elmina S.] Taylor said that she thought it was all right. She had received just as great benefit from the sealing of the sisters as from the brethren, but thought it wise to ask the Priesthood to seal the anointing when it was get-at-able." Her own testimony that she had been as greatly benefited from the sisters as from the brothers suggests that she did not believe that a man with priesthood ordination might be more efficacious, only that she thought there was wisdom in including the priesthood holders as much as possible. This interpretation is borne out by her next statement: "And if the brethren decided that women could not seal the anointing then we should do as they say," but she could not see any reason why women could not, "Aunt Zina did."

Over five years earlier, Ruth Fox recorded a discussion with that same gently redoubtable Zina Young. "When asked if women held the priesthood in



Relief Society General Board 1916. Bottom row left to right: Clarissa S. Williams, Emmeline B. Wells. Second row: Elizabeth C., McCune, Amy Brown Lyman, Priscilla Paul Jennings, Alice Merrill Horne. Back row: Jeanette A. Hyde, Elizabeth A. Wilcox, Ida Smoot Dusenberry, Edna May Davis.

humility, ever being careful to ask in the name of Jesus, and to give God the glory."¹⁷ Although she does not specify whether the "privilege" refers to washing and anointing or both, she reaffirms—without saying so—that it is not a priesthood ordinance. She also reiterates Eliza's position that it was a privilege of the endowed.

As the last decade of the nineteenth century closed, refinements were being added, both officially and in the wards and stakes. In 1893, the *Young Women's Journal* published a spritely article advising girls to get enough faith to be healed since it is "much easier, . . . much less troublesome and expensive withal" than obtaining medical treatment. The writer then offered a program for increasing faith:

Do not wait until you are sick nigh unto death before making a trial of your faith and the power of God. The next time you have a headache take some oil and ask God



Mrs. Albert Mantwaring and daughters.

connection with their husbands, [she said] that we should be thankful for the many blessings we enjoyed and say nothing about it. If you plant a grain of wheat and keep poking and looking at it to see if it was growing you would spoil the root. The answer was very satisfying to me."²⁰

But always someone was eager to poke and each time the spiritual roots of the women were imperiled. Some, like Louisa Lulu Greene Richards, former editor of the *Women's Exponent*, responded indignantly. On 9 April 1901 she wrote a somewhat terse letter to President Lorenzo Snow concerning an article she read in the *Deseret News* the previous day which stated: "priest, Teacher or Deacon may administer to the sick, and so may a member, male or female, but neither of them can seal the anointing and blessing, because the authority to do that is vested in the Priesthood after the order of Melchisedek." The question of sealing was thus added to the long list of ambiguities. Lulu says, "If the information given in the answer is absolutely correct, then myself and thousands of other members of the Church have been misinstructed and are laboring under a very serious mistake, which certainly should be authoritatively corrected." She gives a hint of the kind of authority that would be necessary by stating firmly, "Sister Eliza R. Snow Smith, who received the instructions from the Prophet Joseph Smith, her husband, [the man to whom she is writing is Eliza's brother] taught the sisters in her day, that a very important part of the sacred ordinance of administration to the sick was the sealing of the anointing and blessings, and should never be omitted. And we follow the pattern

she gave us continually. We do not seal in the authority of the Priesthood, but in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ."²¹ Over the next few years, however, an emerging definition of priesthood authority, and an increased emphasis on its importance, would remove more and more spiritual responsibilities from women and cluster them to the priesthood. The very statements authorizing the continuance of women's blessings only signaled their dependence on that permission. One month later the general presidency of the Relief Society sent President Lorenzo Snow a copy of President Woodruff's letter of 1888 to Emmeline B. Wells. This letter, which we discussed earlier, made the distinction between washings and blessings as an ordinance (and hence confined to the temple under priesthood authority) and as a sisterly act.²² As president of the Church, Lorenzo Snow reaffirmed the position explained there with the exception that blessings should be "confirmed" rather than "sealed."²³

Sometime during the first decade of the new century, the Relief Society circulated a letter on Relief Society letterhead, called simply "Answers to Questions." Undated, it ended with the notation: "Approved by the First Presidency of the Church." This two-page letter was the most complete document on the subject thus far.

Depending on the extent to which this letter was circulated, it may have been a response to an unsigned 1903 *Young Woman's Journal* lesson that asserted: "Only the higher or Melchisedek Priesthood has the right to lay on hands for the healing of the sick, or to direct the

administration. . . though to pray for the sick is the right that necessarily belongs to every member of the Church."²⁴ This may be the earliest published claim that only the Melchizedek Priesthood had authority to heal. But the Relief Society's approved letter directly countered that position.

This letter clarified some issues that had previously been ambiguous or contradictory. Administrations by women to the sick did not necessarily fall as a Relief Society function, but it clearly indicated that the women did not need priesthood permission or participation in the performance of these duties. The quoting of Eliza R. Snow's position gave any endowed woman authority to perform such services. Confining the blessings to one's own family was not necessary. The letter also cautioned the women to avoid resemblances in language to the temple forms, and although the blessings should be sealed, the sisters did not need a priesthood holder to do it.²⁵

Nephi Pratt, the mission president in Portland, Oregon, wrote President Joseph F. Smith in 1908 to inquire if he should, in setting Relief Society sisters apart, give them the authority to wash and anoint sisters for their confinement and also whether there were any forms they should follow in carrying out these services. President Smith answered that the washings and anointings in question was a practice that

Some of our Relief Society Sisters appear to have confounded. . . with one of the temple ordinances. . . We desire you therefore to impress upon the sisters of your Relief Society that this practice is in no sense whatever an ordinance, and must not be regarded as such, unless it be attended to under the direction of proper authority in connection with the ordinance of laying on of hands for the healing of the sick.

He emphasized, however, that even women who had not received their endowments could participate in the washing and anointing

as there is no impropriety whatever in their doing so, inasmuch as they do it in a proper way, that is, in the spirit of faith and prayer, and without assumption of special authority, no more in fact than members of the church generally need to be barred from receiving a blessing at the hands of faithful women. . . . As to the particular form of words to be used, there is none, not any more than there is for an elder to use in administering to the sick.²⁶

On 17 December 1909 The First Presidency, still headed by Joseph F. Smith, again endorsed President Woodruff's 1888 letter to Emmeline B. Wells, making one correction:

namely in the clause pertaining to women administering to children, President [Anthon H.] Lund had said those sisters need not necessarily be only those who had received their endowments, for it was not always possible for women to have that privilege and women of faith might do so [give blessings].²⁷

Apparently for the first time, directly and decisively, a president of the Church had enunciated a policy about who could give and receive such blessings, separating such actions clearly from the temple ceremony and making them rites accessible to any member of the household of faith, male or female. But the matter was not yet laid to rest. The quiet practice of washing and anointing among women went on, but it was

accompanied by greater uneasiness, by more questions, and by greater uncertainty about the propriety of such actions.

The Oakley (Idaho) Second Ward Relief Society minute book contains a rare undated item: the written-out blessing to be pronounced in a washing, anointing, and sealing before childbirth. Even though Joseph F. Smith had said that there was no special form for such occasions, it seems that the sisters were more comfortable with one written out. To what extent they followed the pattern, or deviated from it, is not known, but the very existence of the document bespeaks an insistence that it be done, that it be done in a certain way, and that it be linked to the Relief Society. They did follow earlier counsel to avoid the wording used in the temple. To insure that the sacred nature of the temple ordinances is not infringed upon, the author carefully checked those portions of the blessing quoted here against wording used in the temple. They are, indeed, different. And, of course, the blessing and sealing are also different in concept from the temple washing and anointing.



*"IT IS THE PRIVILEGE OF A MOTHER TO
HAVE FAITH AND TO ADMINISTER TO
HER CHILD; THIS SHE CAN
DO HERSELF."*

The first two blessings follow each other very closely with only minor changes in the wording here and there. The blessings were specific and comprehensive.

We anoint your spinal column that you might be strong and healthy no disease fasten upon it no accident befall [befall] you, your kidneys that they might be active and healthy and preform their proper functions, your bladder that it might be strong and protected from accident, your Hips that your system might relax and give way for the birth of your child, your sides that your liver, your lungs, and spleen that they might be strong and preform their proper functions, . . . your breasts that your milk may come freely and you need not be afflicted with sore nipples as many are, your heart that it might be comforted.

They continued by requesting blessings from the Lord on the unborn child's health and expressed the hope that it might not come before its "full time" and

the child shall present right for birth and that the afterbirth shall come at its proper time. . . and you need not flow to excess. . . . We anoint. . . your thighs that they might be healthy and strong that you might be exempt from cramps and from the bursting of veins. . . . That you might stand upon the earth [and] go in and out of the Temples of God.²⁸

The document combines practical considerations, more common to women's talk over the back fence, with the reassuring solace and compassion of being anointed with the balm of sisterhood.²⁹ The women sealed the blessing:

Sister _____we unitedly lay our hands upon you to seal this washing and anointing wherewith you have been washed and anointed for your safe delivery, for the

salvation of you and your child and we ask God to let his special blessings to rest upon you, that you might sleep sweet at night that your dreams might be pleasant and that the good spirit might guard and protect you from every evil influence spirit and power that you may go your full time and that every blessing that we have asked God to confer upon you and your offspring may be litterly fulfilled that all fear and dread may be taken from you and that you might trust in God. All these blessings we unitedly seal upon you in the name of Jesus Christ Amen.³⁰

The tender attention to both the woman's psychological and physical state is an example of loving service and gentleness. That this widespread practice continued in similar form for several more decades is illustrated by the account written by a Canadian sister.

In the years from the early 1930s on, in the Calgary Ward R.S. under presidents—Bergeson, Maude Hayes, Lucile Ursenbach, the sisters often asked for a washing and blessing before going into the hospital for an operation or childbirth. In this ordinance two sisters washed the parts of the body, pronouncing appropriate words of prayer and blessing, being advised to avoid similarity to expressions used in a temple ordinance, and at the conclusion put their hands on the head of the recipient and, in the name of the Lord pronounced a further blessing.³¹



JOSEPH SMITH SEEMED TO ENVISION THE RELIEF SOCIETY AS AN INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN PARALLEL TO THE PRIESTHOOD ORGANIZATION FOR MEN.

In Cache Valley, a 1910 Relief Society meeting was given over to testimonies of healing. President Lucy S. Cardon "read some instructions to the sisters on the washing and anointing the sick and how it should be done properly," adding a testimony of the importance of having the Spirit of the Lord with us. One sister "asked a question of the subj." of washing and anointing, and Sister Martha Meedham, with a brisk earthiness that comes off the page, answered that

she had done as much washing and anointing as anyone in this Stake. Related an experience of a blessing which she had given while she was in Salt Lake. Said she wanted to spend the rest of her life in doing good to others and blessing and confirming them. Related of experiences where all had blessed and anointed people. Said she had written Pres. J. F. Smith on the sub. and he told her to keep on and bless & comfort as she had done in the past. It was a gift that was only given to a few, but all sisters who desired and are requested can perform this.

Along with a number of other women the local Relief Society President, Margaret Ballard, "spoke of her exp[erience] in washing and anointing and said they had carried out these instructions given." The next sentence speaks volumes not only for the independence of the Relief Society, but perhaps also of mingled pride and trepidation: "The sisters felt that the Bishop should be acquai[i]nted with the work we do."³² Sister Ballard continued, telling the sisters, "how she had been

impressed to bless and administer to her father who was sick and suffering and he had been healed. Had also been impressed to bless her husband and he was healed." The meeting closed, appropriately, with singing, "Count Your Many Blessings."

This rare glimpse into a Relief Society group discussing anointings and blessings is revealing. In addition to the strong associations with faithfulness, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the importance of personal worthiness, there were other kinds of teachings. One was the irreplaceable testimony of personal experience. It also shows a sharing of information the sisters had about current policy, former policy, and folklore, along with asking: How do these experiences relate to the priesthood? That, after all, was the crucial question.

In October 1914 President Joseph F. Smith and his counselors sent a letter to bishops and stake presidents, establishing official policy on "Relief Society Sisters Regarding Anointing the Sick." For the first time, such a document did not come from the Relief Society itself.³³

Little of the information was new. It formalized policy that had taken shape over the years: Lorenzo Snow's stipulation that the blessing must be confirmed rather than sealed, Wilford Woodruff's that it was not a Relief Society function and neither was it an ordinance. The only new policy seems to be that such work comes under "the direction of" the bishop. At the April 13, 1921 general conference, Elder Charles W. Penrose reported women asking "if they did not have the right to administer to the sick" and he, quoting Jesus's promise to his apostles of the signs that will follow the believers, conceded that there might be

Occasions when perhaps it would be wise for a woman to lay her hands upon a child, or upon one another sometimes, and there have been appointments made for our sisters, some good women, to anoint and bless others of their sex who expect to go through times of great personal trial, travail and 'labor;' so that is all right, so far as it goes. But when women go around and declare that they have been set apart to administer to the sick and take the place that is given to the elders of the Church by revelation as declared through James of old, and through the Prophet Joseph in modern times, that is an assumption of authority and contrary to scripture, which is that when people are sick they shall call for the elders of the Church and they shall pray over them and officially lay hands on them.³⁴

Even though he cited the authority of Joseph Smith and even though Joseph Smith certainly taught the propriety and authority of elders to heal the sick, Elder Penrose also contradicted the extension of healing privileges to women by Joseph Smith. In fact Joseph Smith had cited that same scripture in the 12 April 1842 Relief Society meeting but, ironically, had made a far different commentary: "These signs. . . should follow all that believe whether male or female."³⁵

Throughout the 1920s Church leaders increasingly drew bolder lines between spiritual gifts and priesthood powers. With the clarification of the priesthood role came restriction of the women's sphere. Church leaders made it clear that women did not have right to priesthood power. Further definition of priesthood included healing, anointing with oil, etc., as exclusive functions of elders.

By 1928 President Heber J. Grant defended the

priesthood against "complaint. . . about the domination of the people by those who preside over them." He quoted the description of the ideal way in which priesthood authority is to function, found in Doctrine and Covenants 121, then asked, somewhat rhetorically, "Is it a terrible thing to exercise the priesthood of the living God in the way that the Lord prescribes: 'By kindness and gentleness'?"³⁷ The pattern had now been established, clarified, and validated.



THE QUIET PRACTICE OF WASHING AND ANOINTING AMONG WOMEN WENT ON, BUT IT WAS ACCOMPANIED BY GREATER UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE PROPRIETY OF SUCH ACTIONS.

The strength of that pattern can be seen through a letter from Martha A. Hickman of Logan who wrote to the Relief Society General President, Louise Yates Robison, asking:

Is it orthodox and sanctioned by the Church today to perform "washing" and "anointings" for the sick (sisters) especially in preparation for confinement in childbirth?

Some have advocated that the proper procedure would be to have a special administration by some member bearing the Priesthood for those desiring a special blessing at this time.

Some years ago when our temples did away with this ordinance for the sick and expectant mothers, in many of our wards in this stake, as well as adjoining stakes, committees of sisters, generally two or three in each committee, were called and set apart for this work of "washing" and "anointing," in their respective wards, wherever this ordinance was desired.

I happen to be the head of this committee in the First Ward of Logan Stake. We have officiated in this capacity some ten years, have enjoyed our calling, and have been appreciated. However, since above questions have arisen we do not feel quite at ease. We would like to be in harmony, as well as being able to inform correctly those seeking information. Our Stake Relief Society President, nor our Stake President seem to have nothing definite on this matter.³⁸

Sister Robison sent the letter back to the stake Relief Society president with an attached letter explaining:

In reference to the question raised, may we say that this beautiful ordinance has always been with the Relief Society, and it is our earnest hope that we may continue to have that privilege, and up to the present time the Presidents of the Church have always allowed it to us. There are some places, however, where a definite stand against it has been taken by the Priesthood Authorities, and where such is the case we cannot do anything but accept their will in the matter. However, where the sisters are permitted to do this for expectant mothers we wish it done very quietly, and without any infringement upon the Temple service. It is in reality a mother's blessing, and we do not advocate the appointment of any committees to have this in charge, but any worthy good sister is eligible to perform this service if she has faith, and is in good standing in the Church. It is something that should be treated very carefully, and as we have suggested, with no show or discussion made of it.

We have written to Sister Hickman and told her to

consult you in this matter, as it is always our custom to discuss matters of this kind with our Stake Presidents, and have them advise the sisters in their Wards.³⁹

There is an air of almost wistful timidity about Sister Robison's letter that bespeaks near-resignation toward the change that was happening, not necessarily because the policy against blessings had changed *per se*, but because policy about the priesthood had changed the environment in which they occurred. Nonpriesthood blessings were now suspect. One of the last documents on the subject is a little notebook containing a record of "Washing[s] and Anointing[s] done by sisters in 31st Ward" in Salt Lake City. It begins in 1921: "Sister Dallie Watson for confinement, Dec. 1, 1921—by Emma Goddard and Mary E. Creer. 1033 Lake Street." Every few weeks there is another entry, usually for childbirth, but sometimes for illness. The last entry is 2 July 1945 to a Jane Coulam Moore by three sisters, one of whom is the same Sister Goddard who had officiated twenty-four years earlier at the first anointing.⁴⁰



The next year brought the official death knell of this particular spiritual gift. On 29 July 1946 Elder Joseph Fielding Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve wrote to Belle S. Spafford, the Relief Society General President, and her counselors, Marianne C. Sharp and Gertrude R. Garff.

While the authorities of the Church have ruled that it is permissible, under certain conditions and with the approval of the priesthood, for sisters to wash and anoint other sisters, yet they feel that it is far better for us to follow the plan the Lord has given us and send for the Elders of the Church to come and administer to the sick and afflicted.⁴¹

It would certainly be difficult for a sister to say that she did *not* wish to follow “the plan the Lord has given us” by asking for administration from her sisters rather than from the elders. One Relief Society worker in Canada recalled: “This ordinance was a comfort and strength to many. But it was discontinued and the sisters were asked to call for administration by the Priesthood instead when necessary and desirable.”

Elder Smith’s pronouncement ended the practice where it had not already stopped. We have no further evidence of such blessings being given by women.



AN EMERGING DEFINITION OF
PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY, REMOVED
MORE AND MORE SPIRITUAL
RESPONSIBILITIES FROM WOMEN AND
CLUSTERED THEM TO THE PRIESTHOOD.

A recent article in the *New Era*, “President Kimball Speaks out on Administration to the Sick,” bears on the topic at hand. Although it does not deal with the long forgotten practice of washing and anointing the sick, it does state what appears to be current Church policy in regards to blessing the sick.

The administration proper is an ordinance of two parts, the anointing and the sealing. An elder pours a small quantity of oil on the head of the one to be blessed, near the crown of the head if convenient, *never on the other parts of the body* [italics mine], and in the name of the Lord and by authority of the priesthood, he anoints the person for the restoration of health. The sealing is performed by two or more elders, one of whom, as mouth, seals the anointing and gives an appropriate blessing, also in the name of Jesus Christ and by authority of the priesthood.

Allowances can be made for unusual circumstances, for example, when only one Melchizedek holder is present. In this case, the article states, “a substitute program is followed.” One elder, presumably acting alone, may “give a blessing, likewise in the name of the Lord and by authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood. . . . Only by the priesthood are results manifested.”

Nowhere in the article does it mention an instance where a mother, wife, or other female could assist the priesthood holder. It does, however state:

Then there is the prayer that is unlike the administration; it makes request to the Lord to heal and may be offered by any soul who has a desire to do so and is not an ordinance in the same sense. The prayer is a request for the Lord to act, whereas the blessing or the administration is given by the brethren in the name of Christ.⁴²

Perhaps women can gain some measure of comfort from Elder James E. Talmage, who wrote:

When the frailties and imperfections of mortality are left behind, in the glorified state of the blessed hereafter, husband and wife will administer in their respective stations, seeing and understanding alike, cooperating to the full in the government of their family kingdom. Then shall women be recompensed in rich measure for all the injustice womanhood has endured in mortality, . . . Mortal eye cannot see nor mind comprehend the beauty,

glory, and majesty of a righteous woman made perfect in the celestial kingdom of God.⁴³

But President Joseph Fielding Smith spoke more to the point when he said: “There is nothing in the. . . gospel which declares that men are superior to women. . . . Women do not hold the priesthood, but if they are faithful and true, they will become priestesses and queens in the kingdom of God, and that implies that they will be given authority.”⁴⁴

Susa Young Gates’s statement still rings clear, “The privileges and powers outlined by the Prophet [Joseph Smith]. . . have never been granted to women in full even yet.” When the lives of Latter-day Saint women—their faith, spirituality, devotion and sacrifice—are seen across the history of the restored Church, we find a record as venerable as that of men. We must respond to Susa’s question, “Did those women. . . live so well as to be worthy of them all?” in the affirmative.



Notes

1. For the most comprehensive studies to date of the history of the temple ordinance see D. Michael Quinn, “Latter-day Saint Prayer Circles,” *BYU Studies*, 19 (Fall 1978) and Andrew F. Ehat’s article on the early endowment in a forthcoming issue of *BYU Studies*.
2. For examples of women participating in healing in Kirtland see Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, “Sweet Counsel and Seas of Tribulation: The Religious Life of the Women in Kirtland,” *BYU Studies*, 20 (Winter 1980) and Linda King Newell’s essay “Gifts of the Spirit: Women’s Share,” to be published in a collection of essays edited by Lavina Fielding Anderson and Maureen Ursebach Beecher, hereafter cited as “Gifts of the Spirit” manuscript. For additional accounts see Carol Lynn Pearson, *Daughters of Light*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973.
3. Susa Young Gates, “The Open Door for Women,” *Young Women’s Journal*, 16 (1905):117.
4. See Newell, “Gifts of the Spirit” manuscript, pp. 8-11 for a more detailed discussion of this issue.
5. “A Record of the Organization, and Proceedings of The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo,” April 18, 1842. LDS Church Archives, microfilm of original, Joseph Smith collection, hereafter cited as “Relief Society Minutes of Nauvoo.”
6. Relief Society Minutes of Nauvoo, April 28, 1842.
7. Mary Ellen Kimball, Journal, March 2, 1856, Church Archives. Italics mine.
8. *Journal of Discourses Delivered by President Brigham Young, his Two Counselors, The Twelve and others*. Reported by G. D. Watt, J. V. Long and others, Liverpool and London, 1856, Vol. 13 (November 14, 1869), p. 155. Hereafter cited as *Journal of Discourses*.
9. Cache Valley Stake Relief Society Minute Book A, 1869-1881, 18 June 1868, LDS Church Archives.
10. Zina Diantha Huntington Smith Young, Diary, Vol. 13, August-December 1881, LDS Church Archives.
11. *Woman’s Exponent*, 7 (1 Nov. 1878):86.
12. *Journal of Discourses*, 21 (8 August 1880):367-68.
13. Circular Letter, Salt Lake City, Utah, 6 October 1880. Church Archives.
14. *Woman’s Exponent*, 13 (15 September 1884):61.
15. Cache Valley Stake Relief Society Minute Book B, 11 September 1886, pp. 46-48, LDS Church Archives.
16. Wilford Woodruff to Em. B. Wells, editor, *Woman’s Exponent*, 4-27-1888, Correspondence of the First Presidency, LDS Church Archives.
17. *Woman’s Exponent*, 17 (15 August 1889):172.
18. *Young Woman’s Journal*, 4 (4 January 1893):176-77.
19. Torkel Torkelson, Diary, 7 November 1895, LDS Church Archives, trans. Richard Jensen.
20. Ruth May Fox, Diary, 8 March 1896.
21. Louisa L. G. Richards to President Lorenzo Snow, April 9, 1901, Church Archives.

22. Relief Society Minutes, 1901. Church Archives.
23. Relief Society Minutes, special meeting of officers of the General Board, 2 May 1901, Vol. 1, p. 352, Church Archives.
24. *Young Woman's Journal*, 14 (8 August 1903):384.
25. James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), pp. 316-16. The first question concerned washing and anointing:

Is it necessary for one or more sisters to be set apart for that purpose? . . . or should it be done under the direction of the Presidency of the Relief Society, or could any good sister officiate?

This seems to include three questions.

Firstly, our late President Sister Eliza R. Snow Smith said many times, "Any good sister who had received her endowments and was in good standing in the Church, might officiate in washing and anointing previous to confinement, if called upon, or requested to do so by the sister or sisters desiring the blessing; (but should not offer her services.)"

Secondly, Not necessarily under the direction of the Presidency of the Relief Society, although it is most likely whoever was called upon to render such services would be a member of the Relief Society in her own Ward. Some sisters are gifted in ministering and comforting with faith, and adaptability, who might not be chosen to preside or fill any official position in the Relief Society, then the sister herself who desires the blessing might have some choice as to whom she would prefer, and there are many little things might be taken into consideration, all cases are not alike, all circumstances are not the same, wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are things necessary in all such matters.

Thirdly, in reference to children in sickness, one could not always wait to consult the Presidency of the Relief Society; mothers, grandmothers, and often other relatives attend to a sick child, both in administering and in the washing with pure water and anointing with the consecrated oil; but generally in neighborhoods, there are sisters who are specially adapted to minister to children, and who have in a large degree the gift of healing under the influence of the Holy Spirit, who are possessed of greater humility and have cultivated the gift, or whom the Lord has greatly blessed.

Second question: "Should the washing be sealed?" It is usual to do this in a few simple words, avoiding the terms used in the Temple, and instead of using the word "Seal" we would use the word "Confirm" in the spirit of invocation.

Third question: "Have the sisters a right to seal the washing and anoint, using no authority, but doing it in the name of Jesus Christ, or should men holding the Priesthood be called in?" The sisters have the privilege of laying their hands on the head of the one officiated for and confirming the anointing in the spirit of invocation, and in the name of Jesus Christ, not mentioning authority. The Lord has heard and answered the prayers of the sisters in these ministrations many times.

In suggestions made in reference to washing and anointing the sisters are always advised to kneel and offer prayer previous to officiating in any sacred duty.

26. Joseph F. Smith to Nephi Pratt, December 18-21, 1908, Correspondence of the First Presidency, Reel 39, LDS Church Archives.

28. Relief Society Minutes, 17 December 1909, p. 136, Vol. 3:184.
27. Relief Society Minutes, 17 December 1909, p. 136, Vol. 3:184.
28. Oakley [Idaho] 2nd Ward Relief Society Minutes, Church Archives.
29. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Comments, n.d., p. 1-2.
30. Oakley [Idaho] 2nd Ward Relief Society Minutes, Church Archives.
31. Lucile H. Ursenbach statement, August 14, 1980. In possession of Maureen Ursenbach Beecher.
32. Other testimonies born that day included: "Sister Moench felt that we had had so much good said today. Said while she was very young she went out to wash and anoint the sick. Said Sister Richards had given them a foundation to go by and had said to get the spirit of the Lord then they would do right. Related an experience in blessing a child who had been given up by the doc and it got well. Know that if we get the faith and the spirit of God with us we can bless as well as the Brethern. . . ."

"Pres. Hattie Hyde spoke of her experiences in Wyo. where the brethren had helped the sisters to bless and anoint the sick.

"Sister R. Moench said that Pres. Young had said that the sisters need not be set apart for this calling but if they can call in any good brethren to seal the anointing so much the better.

"Pres. Lucy S. Cardan said they use to in the Temple have the brethren seal the anointing but now they do not. Knows that one sister can bless another. We have that privilege but when we can get the brethren we should have them seal the blessing." [Cache Valley Stake Relief Society Minute Book B, 1881-1914, Vol. 2, 5 March 1910, pp. 438-440, CR 1280, 14.]

33. *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:314-15.

To the Presidents of Stakes and Bishops of wards:-

Questions are frequently asked in regard to washing and anointing our sisters preparatory to their confinement. In a circular issued by the leading sisters of the Relief Society a number of questions on this matter have been answered and correct instructions given, but notwithstanding this having been done, we judge from the contents of letters received by us that there exists some uncertainty as to the proper persons to engage in this administration; we have therefore considered it necessary to answer some of these questions, and give such explanations as will place this matter in the right light. We quote some of these questions and give our answers:

1. Is it necessary for one or more sisters to be set apart to wash and anoint the sick?

2. Should it be done under the direction of the Relief Society?

Answer: Any good sister, full of faith in God and in the efficacy of prayer may officiate. It is therefore not necessary for anyone to be set apart for this purpose, or that it should be done exclusively under the direction of the Relief Society.

3. Must the sister officiating be a member of the Relief Society?

Answer: It is conceded that most of our sisters, qualified to perform this service and gifted with the spirit of healing and the power to inspire faith in the sick, belong to the Relief Society, but if the sick should desire to have some good sister who is not a member of the Relief Society administer to her, that sister had the right to so administer.

4. Have the sisters the right to administer to the sick children?

Answer: yes: they have the same right to administer to sick children as to adults, and may anoint and lay hands upon them in faith.

5. Should the administering and anointing be sealed?

Answer: It is proper for sisters to lay on hands, using a few simple words, avoiding the terms employed in the temple, and instead of using the word "seal" use the word "confirm."

6. Have the sisters a right to seal the washing and anointing, using no authority, but doing it in the name of Jesus Christ, or should men holding the priesthood be called in?

Answer: The sisters have the privilege of laying their hands on the head of the person for whom they are officiating, and confirming and anointing in the spirit of invocation. The Lord has heard and answered the prayers of sisters in these administrations many times. It should, however, always be remembered that the command of the Lord is to call in the elders to administer to the sick, and when they can be called in, they should be asked to anoint the sick or seal the anointing.

7. Are sisters who have not received their endowments competent to wash and anoint sisters previous to confinement?

Answer: It must always be borne in mind that this administering to the sick by the sisters is in no sense a temple ordinance, and no one is allowed to use the words learned in the temple in washing and anointing the sick. Sisters who have had their endowments have received instructions and blessings which tend to give them stronger faith and especially qualify them to officiate in this sacred work; but there are good faithful sisters, who through circumstances have not received their endowments, and yet are full of faith and have had much success in ministering to the sick, who should not be forbidden to act, if desired to do so by our sisters.

In conclusion we have to say that in all sacred functions performed by our sisters there should be perfect harmony between them and the Bishop, who has the direction of all matters pertaining to the Church in his ward

Your brethren,
Joseph F. Smith,
Anthon H. Lund.
Charles W. Penrose.
First Presidency.

34. Conference Report, 3 April 1921, pp. 190-91.
35. Relief Society Minutes of Nauvoo, (sixth meeting) 12 April 1842.
36. For a more detailed discussion see Newell, "Gifts of the Spirit" manuscript, p. 36.
37. Conference Report, (5 October 1928), pp. 8-9.
38. Martha A. Hickman to Pres. Louise Y. Robison. 28 November 1935. Church Archives.
39. Louise Y. Robison, 5 December 1935. Copy in possession of author.
40. Xerox of holograph, courtesy Charlott Boden Erickson, LDS Church Archives.
41. Quoted in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:314.
42. "President Kimball Speaks out on Administration to the Sick," *New Era*, 1981, pp. 46, 50.
43. James E. Talmage, "The Eternity of Sex," *Young Women's Journal*, 25 (October 1914):602-03.
44. *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:178 as quoted in *Choose You This Day*, Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide, 1980-81. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1979, p. 200.

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