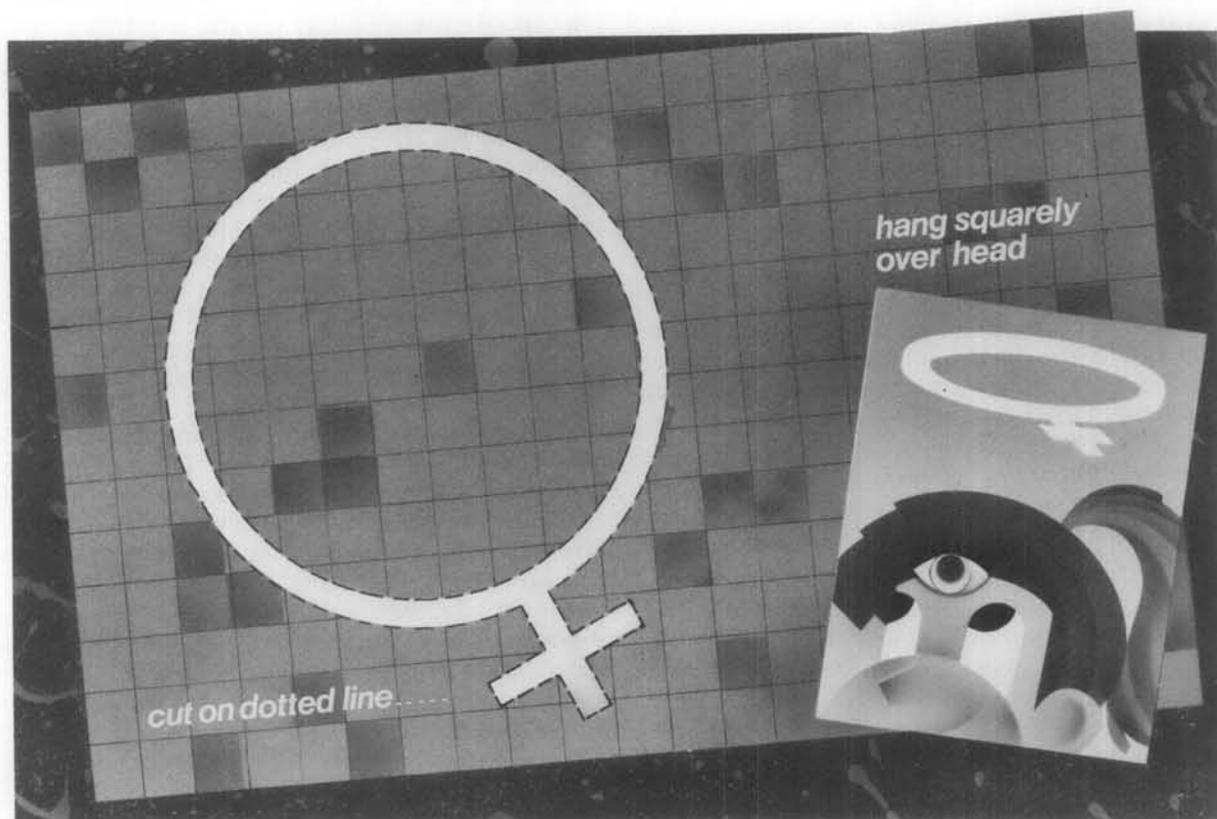


# Priesthood Prescription for Women

## The Role of Women as Prescribed in Aaronic Quorum Lesson Manuals

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL O. ROGAN



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**W**e live in a day when enormous attention has been focused on the role of women in society. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been significantly involved in this concern, both as an official opponent to the Equal Rights Amendment and as a target for charges of patriarchy and sexism in its organization and theology. Throughout the sometimes heated discussion, the Church has repeatedly denied opposition to equal rights for the sexes. But beyond this publicly held position, what are the attitudes of Mormonism's hierarchy and bureaucracy regarding its female membership?

An often overlooked means of answering this question is to examine the lesson manuals which the Church prepares to instruct its future leaders—the young men of the Aaronic Priesthood. This

priesthood serves as a preparatory calling for the majority of worthy young male members between the ages of twelve and nineteen. During these years, young Latter-day Saint males meet on a weekly basis to receive instruction regarding the responsibilities of their priesthood offices (deacon, teacher, or priest) and to learn gospel principles.

While on the average only one lesson per year is devoted entirely to the role of women, many others provide indications of role expectations, particularly in lessons dealing with the family and in the didactic stories which appear periodically in all instructional materials. Although information prepared for the younger quorums tends to be more general, instruction manuals for deacons, teachers, and priests quorums during the past fifteen years all present a unified picture of the responsibilities of a woman to her family.

## DEACONS QUORUM MANUALS

Every year, the presidency of each deacons quorum is responsible for teaching two lessons to the Blazers, a primary class for boys preparing for ordination as deacons. One of the questions the presidency is directed to address during the presentation is, "Why is . . . preparation . . . to become a deacon so important to you and God?" The manual gives as one of its answers: "You are building the foundation of a home. A fine Latter-day Saint girl is counting on you to provide the way to exaltation for her and the spirits in heaven that will come to your home to grow in the gospel. The way you live and serve as deacon will have much to do with the type of husband and father you will be." (*Deacons Study Course Series A* [1978], p. 184.) Although this statement primarily deals with the role of a young man in the Church, it also suggests that a Mormon girl's entire salvation is based on the righteous performance of one individual, a man. It tends to diminish the responsibility she has in working out her own destiny.

A similar point is exemplified in a story from a lesson on welfare. In the story, Rick Barnes learns that his father has been injured in an accident, but will recover. At first Rick worries about his family's financial needs, but is relieved when he remembers his father's explanation of the Church welfare program. The lesson later elaborates that since Rick's father was active in the Church, he had prepared his family for an emergency situation by opening a savings account and saving regularly. Mrs. Barnes and Rick's sister helped can pears at the cannery, and Mr. Barnes had made an agreement with his brother that if either of their families was ever in need, the other would help as much as possible. (*Deacons Study Course Series B* [1971] pp. 155-56.)

It is interesting to note that the option of the mother working full or part time was never considered. Mrs. Barnes was also never given any credit for any of the preparations that had been made. She apparently relied totally on the support and preparedness of her husband. It appears that not only is a woman dependent on her husband for her eternal salvation, but for her temporal salvation as well.

Many of the lessons deal with the family as a whole. One particular lesson states that the mother and father are both responsible for ensuring happiness in the home by providing wise counsel for their children, creating an atmosphere of love and respect, and providing as best they can for nourishing food and a comfortable home (*Deacons Series A* [1978], pp. 137-39). This lesson never distinguishes between the roles of mother and father.

However, several distinctions are made in the roles of mother and father seven lessons later. The lesson states that they both have the responsibility of raising their children in righteousness, but that the Lord has given each a specific role to play. The role of a mother is outlined as follows:

*Although mothers do not bear the priesthood, they do share in its blessings with their husbands and have a very important role to play in the family. . . . Mothers can be of great help to priesthood-bearing sons by:*

- a. *Helping them prepare their clothes on Saturday for Sunday morning.*
- b. *Rising early to prepare breakfast before priesthood meeting.*
- c. *Waking sons early enough that they can be on time to meetings.*
- d. *Avoiding making family plans which would interfere with attendance at meetings and other assignments.*
- e. *Encouraging and supporting her husband in his priesthood assignments, and in holding regular family prayer and home evenings.*
- f. *Teaching love and consideration for others in and out of the home.*
- g. *Setting an example of LDS womanhood, motherhood, and family living that will inspire their sons to grow in the priesthood. (P. 170.)*

This statement appears to be assigning the mother all of the domestic duties while her husband and sons are busily involved in activities outside of the house. Two deacons manuals reinforce this idea through use of the Chinese proverb: "A hundred men may make an encampment, but it takes a woman to make a home." Both lessons quote David O. McKay concerning the virtues needed in order to establish such a home: "Motherhood is the one thing in all the world which most truly exemplifies the God-given virtues of creating and sacrificing. . . . the mother who, in compliance with eternal law, brings into the world an immortal spirit occupies first rank in the realm of creation." (*Deacons Course A* [1983], p. 39; *Deacons Series B* [1971], p. 218.) Again, the Mormon woman is portrayed as the self-sacrificing homemaker and caretaker.

A lesson in a more recent manual relates the story of a family which met under the direction of the father to establish a family corporation. He appointed himself as the chairman of the board and his wife as vice-chairman. Each of their children were appointed as members of a board of directors. (*Deacon Course A* [1983], p. 46.) The comparison of a family to a business is not a new one, yet it is interesting to note the difference in job titles between the husband and wife. Although supposedly equal, their job titles suggest a higher ranking authority in the title of the father.

Only one lesson for the deacons deals with their social interactions with girls, perhaps reflecting the presumed level of interest in most boys that age. Its main premise is that boys feel awkward around girls, and its objective is to teach "the roles of common courtesy and good speech" (*Series A, Priesthood Study Course, Deacons Quorum* [1971], p. 173.) The lesson encourages deacons to treat girls with more respect by talking about things which interest them, opening doors, using proper language, being polite, and always walking with the boy nearer the street. This lesson suggests that girls feel they should be treated differently from boys.

**One deacon's manual suggests that a Mormon girl's entire salvation is based on a righteous performance of one individual, a man.**

**One lesson relates a story in which tragedy is relieved by the father's advanced preparation. The mother is never given any credit.**

An interesting change can be noted in a more recent deacons manual. In the older manuals, women were never quoted, but in 1983 at least two quotes from women are cited: Elaine A. Cannon and Kathleen Lubeck (*Deacons Course A* [1983], pp. 54-55, 99). However, neither of these quotes, taken from *New Era* articles, addresses the roles of women.

#### TEACHERS QUORUM MANUALS

The lessons in the teachers manuals present essentially the same amount of material on women's homemaking role as the deacons manuals. One lesson in the 1983 manual presents this information in the form of a quiz entitled, "What Do You Know about the Patriarchal Order?" Many of the answers to these multiple choice questions help the teacher further define family roles:

*The father is the head of the home because—*

- a. He is more worthy and qualified.
- b. It is his divine role.
- c. It is a question of law and order.

...  
[Answer:] (b) and (c)

*"The patriarchal order is of divine origin and will continue throughout time and eternity. There is, then, a reason why men, women, and children should understand this order and this authority in the households of the people of God. . . . It is not merely a question of who is perhaps best qualified. Neither is it wholly a question of who is living the most worthy life. It is a question largely of law and order." (Joseph F. Smith, Gospel Doctrine, p. 286.) (Teachers Course A [1983], p. 107, emphasis in original.)*

It is interesting to note the use of the words *merely* and *wholly* in this statement. It succeeds in reducing the role of individual qualifications and righteousness in determining who will be head of the home, yet does not fully diminish the influence of these qualities in the selection process. While this is perhaps intended to allow women a more prominent leadership role where the father is unworthy, this usage can also be taken to mean that men meet more qualifications and live more righteously resulting in their calling as heads of the home.

The same lesson also states that the mother is the head of the home "if there is no father." However, unlike all other assertions in the lesson, no authoritative discourse is presented to justify this statement. The quiz continues:

*In the Lord's plan—*

- a. There is full equality between men and women.
- b. The man is more important because he holds the priesthood.
- c. The Lord loves his daughters as much as he loves his sons.

...  
[Answer:] (a) and (c)

*"In the church there is full equality between man and woman. The gospel . . . was devised by the Lord for men and women alike. . . . The privileges and requirements of the gospel are fundamentally alike for men and women. The Lord loves His daughters as well as He loves His sons." (John A. Widtsoe, Evidences and Reconciliations, Vol. I, p. 241.) (Pp. 106-7, emphasis in original.)*

Men and women may be equal in the sight of the Lord, but women's responsibilities differ greatly from those of men. Some statements indicate that a woman's salvation will be determined by the manner in which she fulfills these responsibilities: "Women do not possess the priesthood any more than men attain motherhood, the feminine equivalent of the priesthood. Motherhood is the great talent and calling given to women, and upon their magnification and use of this calling depends their exaltation" (*Series A, Priesthood Study Course, Teachers Quorum* [1970, 1972], p. 151).

An earlier lesson from the same manual explains the responsibilities she has as a wife and mother:

*Although the mother does not bear the priesthood, she shares in its blessings by supporting her husband in his duties. Since the mother spends most of her time in the home, she has a special responsibility to maintain it as a clean, peaceful, and comfortable place to be. A righteous mother can do no more than anyone else to create a home as a haven of rest from the pressures and tensions of the world. She is the individual to whom we turn when illness comes. She is compassionate, kind, and unselfish in her interests in our welfare.*

After this explanation of feminine responsibility, the lesson focuses on four main responsibilities of a mother, which David O. McKay outlined. These responsibilities include watching out for the physical welfare of the family, teaching children through parental guidance and warning, ensuring proper spiritual guidance for children, and applying wise financial management in the home. (P. 147.)

A woman is not only responsible for the spiritual well-being of her family, but the temporal well-being as well. One lesson listed the duties of a mother as (1) counselor, (2) "heart of the home," (3) child bearer, (4) helpmate, (5) homemaker, (6) preparer, (7) partner (*Teachers Study Course Series B* [1973], p. 69). A later lesson from the same manual lists characteristics of a true woman which include a loving spirit, a desire to be protected, chastity, femininity, friendliness, and beauty.

In the 1976 manual, a story intended to show the adverse effects of disharmony in a family also establishes role expectations for husbands and wives. The husband's responsibilities are to put in a hard day's work and then come home

and relax. The wife, on the other hand, is portrayed as being responsible for cooking, washing, and childcare (*Teachers Study Course Series A* [1976], p. 105.)

The role of a woman is closely, if not synonymously, related to the role of a mother in all the teachers manuals. She is encouraged to focus essentially all her attention on her home and family. Successful completion of these responsibilities will allow her to become like our Mother in Heaven. While this concept is not frequently referred to, the 1970 and 1972 manuals do discuss the desired ultimate destiny of the Mormon woman—godhood (*Teachers Series A* [1970, 1972], p. 151).

Considerable emphasis is placed on social relationships in the teachers lesson manual compared to that of the deacons. The majority of these lessons deal with “respecting” or “honoring” women. The apparent concern of these lessons is to help the young priesthood bearer gain social acceptance with girls. For example, a 1971 manual reported the following:

*Several seminary classes of junior and senior girls were asked what they liked least about the way they were treated by the young men of the church. At the top of the list was the statement, “The boys treat us like we are boys. They still treat us like we like to play football and push us around like they would one of their male friends.” In other words, girls want to be recognized as being females and be treated accordingly. They will soon be assuming a very important role in families, as wives and mothers, and resent the fact that boys do not recognize that they are different and want to be treated with respect. (Teachers Study Course Series B [1971], p. 218.)*

The differences between boys and girls emphasized here are elaborated further in a manual published in 1973:

*It is helpful in learning to respect young women their own age if they understand something about the differences in their attitudes and rate of growth.*

1. *Young women of this age [fourteen and fifteen years old] are usually more mature than young men.*
2. *They are apt to be more interested in boys than boys are in them.*
3. *They are apt to be more interested in social activities.*
4. *They are often more interested in planning for the future.*
5. *They are usually more strongly influenced by their friends.*
6. *They are often less self-conscious than young men.*
7. *Young women are usually more comfortable in a one-boy-one-girl situation, while young men are usually more comfortable in groups.*
8. *Young women usually enjoy talking and visiting more than young men do.*
9. *Most young women find it easier to talk about themselves than young men do.*
10. *Young women place more importance on politeness than do young men.*
11. *Young women are usually more openly affectionate than young men.*

12. *Young women appreciate a friendly relationship with other young people.*
13. *Young women are usually more emotional than young men.*
14. *Young women usually find it easier to accept advice from parents and other elders than do young men. They enjoy being protected. (Teachers Series B [1973], p. 73.)*

These fourteen statements provide many roles for both young men and young women to live up to.

There is an interesting contrast between the manuals published before 1976 and those published afterwards. Before 1976 any lesson examining boy-girl relationships referred to them as friendships: “Surely young ladies have much to offer as friends. They can help each of us [teachers] in becoming a better gentleman.” (*Teachers Series B* [1971], p. 217.) Since then, however, there is an apparent willingness to admit that these young men are preparing for dating and “should be given some guidelines from the girl’s point of view.” The instructor is encouraged to solicit the aid of a panel of young women who will answer any questions the quorum members might have. Panelists are also asked to talk about how boys can show respect for girls: “Girls enjoy associating with boys who treat them well.”

Greater concern for the morality of the youth in the Church appears to have accompanied this openness. Teachers are admonished to respect the virtue of a woman. A daughter is referred to as “the most precious thing I own,” and compared with a white gardenia who should be returned from a date “fresh and sweet” and not “brown and shriveled” (*Teachers Series A* [1976], pp. 48, 129, 130). “Every young woman has a perfect right to feel safe in going out with a young man holding the priesthood, knowing that he will respect and protect her in every way” (*Teachers Series A* [1983], p. 48).

#### **PRIESTS QUORUM MANUALS**

The priests manuals both echo and expand the views of women’s role given in the deacons and teachers manuals. For example, many of these lessons deal with the family organization, making reference to the woman’s “very special physical and spiritual calling” and stating flatly that “her role is that of homemaker.” (*Priests Study Course* [1972], p. 210.)

But unlike lessons in other quorums, these lessons also describe marriage as a “partnership” (p. 210). This appears to contradict the notion stressed so strongly elsewhere that “the man is the head of the family unit by virtue of his priesthood.” However, one manual resolves this contradiction by observing that “leadership may be a partnership. . . . A husband will seek the interests of his wife and confer with her on matters of mutual concern. . . . All counsel completed, however, the decision is with the father, for to him goes the recognition for success, or the crit-

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icism for error." (*Priests Study Course Series B* [1971], p. 123.)

That men have the final say while women occupy the subordinate role of "counselor" is reaffirmed in the following: "As a young man matures, he may find some empathetic girl companion who will listen to his hopes and aims and desires. He will develop complete confidence in his sympathetic listener. He may even be willing to heed her counsel and advice." (P. 140.) This suggests that counsel or advice which is offered by a woman is only accepted in those moments when a man feels so inclined. Consideration of such advice does not appear to be an important dimension of the husband-wife relationship.

Many of the lessons in the priests manual which discuss the role of women allude to an either abbreviated or expanded version of David O. McKay's four major responsibilities of a mother. One such expansion considers the ways in which womanhood contributes to the priesthood.

1. *Plays an essential part in creating and maintaining the family—the basic tenet of the Kingdom of God.*
2. *Supports the husband and children in church work, encourages acceptance of responsibility and punctuality.*
3. *Sets the tone of spirit in the home.*
4. *Teaches and guides children in both spiritual and temporal matters on a day-to-day basis.*
5. *Gives emotional support to husband and family in all their activities.*
6. *Assumes an active role in church auxiliaries.*
7. *Participates with husband in sacred, eternal priesthood ordinances.*
8. *Assumes her position next to her husband at the head of an eternal family. (Priests Study Course [1972], pp. 209-10.)*

This elaboration is meant to show how women can, in fact, help support the priesthood in their own personal activities. "It is true that a woman cannot perform ordinances in the church, but she does a lot to get members of the priesthood ready to do it" (*Priests Series B* [1971], p. 139).

Another lesson in this manual provides a specific instance in which wives can support their husbands:

*Priesthood bearers who are husbands and fathers have been counseled not to do church work to the extent of neglecting their family. Nevertheless, the support of a faithful wife and mother allows the priesthood bearer to devote the considerable amounts of time to church activity that the Lord expects of him. During periods of the father's absence from the home, the wife carries a particularly large share of the burden of caring for the children. (P. 199.)*

Interestingly, this passage seems to contradict the Mormon concept that families are more important than the Church. Moreover, it implies that fathers can justify neglecting their families if their wives can fill in for them while they are away performing Church assignments.

Although women are to support priesthood bearers, there are also several ways in which she is dependent on them. For example, priests manuals indicate that women must depend on priesthood holders for emotional and spiritual companionship, protection, financial support, the reception of priesthood ordinances, and the performance of certain physical tasks beyond her abilities.

Aaronic Priesthood manuals mention little about women pursuing interests outside of the home. In exception to this, the 1972 priests manual briefly addresses this issue: "There is no objection to a woman's entering and participating in any and all things which contribute to the fullness of her womanhood, and increase her upbuilding influence in the world. But the important realm of home, in which woman's influence should always be felt, should never take secondary position to her other interests." (*Priests Study Course* [1972], p. 211.) Such statements do not provide much incentive for women to look elsewhere in pursuit of greater personal fulfillment.

The priests manuals focus considerable attention on the social relationships of boys and girls, men and women. Part of the purpose for this is to explain differences between the sexes and why they exist. For example, one 1971 lesson provides the following outline:

*For a very wise purpose, man and woman were created by God to play different roles. Boys and girls and men and women are different in many ways.*

1. *Difference between the sexes was designed to provide individuality to all God's children.*
2. *Differences complement each other to make a happy and interesting home life.*
3. *It makes for maximum interest and vitality of personal relationships.*
4. *It provides a realistic and functional approach to carry out the various functional aspects of life.*
5. *There are emotional, spiritual, and mental differences between the sexes.*
6. *Differences occur in special interests. Young men like physical activities and masculine things as they prepare to assume their roles as husband and father and provider. They become protectors. They become leaders. Young ladies, by comparison, are feminine in nature. They do the things they like to do to prepare for the role of mother in the family. (Priests Series B [1971], pp. 132-33.)*

Such a presentation tells young men that men and women are different in almost every aspect of life. It also states that because men participate in "masculine activities" they will become leaders and protectors, implying that women can never have these qualities.

Nevertheless, one lesson does acknowledge that leadership is one of the many capacities women possess. As a result, women are justified in assuming leadership over priesthood bearers

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when directing speeches, dramatics, or dance. (*Priests Study Course Series B* [1970], p. 140.) Nevertheless, their authority and ability to lead is not considered as great as that which men require to direct the affairs of a stake, ward, or branch.

Another reason the priests manuals discuss social relationships is to emphasize that in spite of inherent differences, the same moral law applies to both sexes:

*"In the Latter-day Saint Church there is but one standard of morality. In the world many people protect their girls and daughters, irrespective of religion. They know what it means for young girls to be treated as slaves, as playthings, and they shield their own daughters from the ravages of men. But their boys are too often left free to prey upon helpless creatures who are not so protected.*

*Thus, in the world you have a double standard, but in the Church of Jesus Christ there is but a simple standard. It applies to the boys as well as to the girls."* (David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*.) (*Priests Study Course Series A* [1975], pp. 75-76.)

This same type of thought was expressed in an earlier manual: "Realize that somewhere there is some girl presently living that will some day cross your path. She is keeping herself for you and for you alone just as she expects you to be keeping yourself entirely for her. She would not want you as a husband if you are not as clean and pure as she." (*Priests Series B* [1971], p. 135.)

Like the teachers manuals, the priests instructional materials for both 1973 and 1983 list ways a priest can honor women with whom he associates. This list includes helping her "live, not break the commandments," showing respect and manners, and treating her "as an equal, and . . . not . . . as an inferior" (*Priests Course A* [1983], p. 25).

Three different lessons also devote sections to those qualities each priest should look for in his wife. One lesson emphasized that a girl's appearance, homemaking skills, educational intent, hobbies, and maturity should comply with standards which have been established by the Church (*Priests Study Course* [1972], pp. 196-97). It is believed that adherence to such standards will improve the quality of the marriage, and help ensure that the couple gains eternal life and exaltation.

Another lesson states that when a Mormon man thinks well enough of a young lady to ask her to be his wife, that he is asking her to become the following:

1. *Your consort and companion who brings all the characteristics and strengths of femininity into masculine life.*
2. *Your friend and partner.*
3. *Your counselor.*
4. *Your general manager and vice-president in charge of operations.*
5. *Your purchasing agent.*
6. *Your hostess and social secretary.*

7. *Your housekeeper.*
8. *Your dietician.*
9. *Your cook.*
10. *Your bookkeeper and financial adviser.*
11. *Your children's nurse or doctor.*
12. *A practical nurse.*
13. *Your children's teacher.*
14. *Your children's counselor.*
15. *The mother of your children.*
16. *Above all, your partner in the Kingdom of God.*

In other words, after marriage the woman would lead a life of total domesticity. This section of the lesson continues by stating: "The total services this young lady will perform for you, if measured on a monetary basis, will be worth from \$15,000 to \$20,000 per year. Keep this to yourself. If she knows that you know it, she may ask for a raise. She will generally be satisfied for all this effort, and these services with a few words of love and affection on your part. This you cannot afford not to give." (*Priests Series B* [1971], p. 141.) This statement apparently tries to use humor to bring out the worth of such services rendered in a household. Regardless of its manner of presentation, there is no denying that the Mormon woman is expected to devote her heart and soul to her home and her family.

#### CONCLUSION

The role of Mormon women as prescribed in the Aaronic Priesthood manuals contains all elements of Victorian role expectations. Women are expected to be domestic, pious, pure, and submissive. Such expectations are believed to be natural because of God-given feminine traits which differentiate women from men. In today's society many might argue that such differences are nonexistent, and for this reason women should free themselves from such expectations. In apparent response, one Aaronic Priesthood manual printed this comment: "Someone has stated that when women eventually realize that the object of their emancipation is to make them not more like men, but more powerful in womanly virtues, the implicit demand and need of women for a world based on human principles may break through as the most important influence upon history" (*Priests Study Course* [1972], p. 210).

It is this type of idealistic view that has allowed for little change in the definition of the role of women in the Church. While changes in society and individual circumstances will no doubt persuade many women to abandon their traditional roles, it appears the LDS ideal will continue to be inculcated into rising generations of Mormon males through Aaronic Priesthood quorum meetings.

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**A**  
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