

If a church's primary duty is to promulgate the gospel of Jesus Christ, which asserts that each soul is equally precious in God's eyes, it is important to question any policies that contravene or offend this principle.

“ARE BOYS MORE IMPORTANT THAN GIRLS?”

THE CONTINUING CONFLICT OF GENDER DIFFERENCE AND EQUALITY IN MORMONISM

By Margaret Merrill Toscano



EDITOR'S NOTE: This article by Margaret Toscano kicks off a series of discussions on Mormon women's experience that Sunstone plans to host at its Salt Lake symposium this August and in upcoming issues of the magazine. In addition, Sunstone is combining energies and seeking to cross-fertilize its discussions with those taking place at *Mormon Stories*, an influential blog and podcast that is currently doing a cycle of interviews and hosting exchanges on this vital issue. Please check out these discussions at MORMONSTORIES.ORG.

“ARE BOYS MORE IMPORTANT THAN GIRLS?” THIS question was asked by an eight-year-old Mormon boy who had been left behind with his mother and sisters while his father and older brother attended the priesthood session of the October 2004 General Conference. When the boy's mother answered that boys and girls are equally important, this eight-year old contradicted her with bracing candor: “I think,” he said, “that boys are more important because Jesus



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and Heavenly Father are boys, and boys get the priesthood and girls don't.”

During his conference remarks the very next morning, President Hinckley addressed the value and importance of LDS women in a talk titled “The Women in Our Lives,” in which he stated that “women are such a necessary part of the plan of happiness which

our Heavenly Father has outlined for us.” The boy's mother felt that the prophet's remarks were an inspired answer to her son's question and supported her defense of the equality of women in the Church. Subsequently, she related this incident as a faith-promoting story in sacrament meeting in my sister's ward.¹

But is President Hinckley's statement that “women are such a necessary part” of God's plan really an assertion of gender equality? In this paper, I address the question, “Are boys more important than girls?” by examining five related questions:

1. Does God's justice demand gender equality, and, if so, is it possible to achieve gender equality and gender difference simultaneously?
2. Is gender equality in the Church to be measured objectively by outward criteria or subjectively by the feelings reported by LDS women?
3. Does the Church have the moral duty to promote gender equality within its organization?
4. If the Church is failing in such a duty, how can concerned members work for positive change when they also believe the Church is divinely guided by priesthood authority?



“WHEREFORE, SHE COMMANDETH NONE THAT THEY SHALL NOT PARTAKE OF HER SALVATION. . .”

IF THIS WERE THE LANGUAGE THAT WE READ OVER AND OVER IN ALL SCRIPTURE AND OTHER OFFICIAL TEXTS, WOULD MEN FEEL THAT THEY ARE FULL PARTICIPANTS IN THE CHURCH AND THE GOSPEL? WOULD *THEY* PERHAPS QUESTION THEIR WORTH, ETERNAL VALUE, AND POSITION?

- Perhaps most important of all, what would need to happen to make an eight-year-old conclude that LDS girls are just as important as LDS boys?

JURISPRUDENTIALLY, EQUALITY IS defined either as equality of treatment, called commutative justice, or as equality of condition, called distributive justice. Commutative justice requires equal treatment of individuals under law. Distributive justice requires the equal distribution of wealth, privilege, and power. Each concept seeks to avoid invidious discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, or alien status. In either case, human differences complicate the picture because of genetic endowments or environmental conditions. If justice is blind to such differences, then the socially or naturally underprivileged will be disadvantaged unfairly, and minority groups will be forced to conform their identity with the majority. On the other hand, emphasizing differences can increase unequal treatment because it can turn a difference into a stereotyped role or forced identity. Think of the difficulty of giving “handicapped” people equal access to public facilities without labeling them as deficient human beings. Is it possible to honor difference and promote equality at the same time?

Much of the feminist debate about gender equality has centered on the implications of these definitions and problems. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the “first wave” of feminists emphasized women’s commonality with men, arguing that the human traits they shared with men should entitle them to common human dignity and equality under the law. This call for gender blindness and commutative justice dominated the suffrage movement.

A later feminist wave argued that this type of gender equality continued to privilege males and helped only assertive male-identified women who possessed inherent abilities to succeed in a patriarchal world—in particular, those women who had not assumed the duties of wife and mother. These “difference” feminists argued for a maternal or woman-centered equality that put nurturing and caring on an equal footing with autonomy and assertiveness. This position, how-

ever, was later criticized by postmodern feminists as essentializing women and reducing them to biological and psychological stereotypes that disqualify women from certain roles on the assumption that all women share common characteristics. So the feminist debate goes round and round. But what unites all feminist approaches is the goal of ending the domination and subordination of women and of all underprivileged persons worldwide, such as children, the elderly, and the disabled.²

HOW DO THESE controversies relate to gender questions in Mormonism? What does equality mean in LDS terms? In 2 Nephi 26, we find a scriptural requirement for the equal treatment of all God’s children. We are told the Lord

inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile. (v. 33)

In contrast to the proud who lift themselves above others and work for their own gain alone, God works for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him. Wherefore, he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation. (v. 24)

In context with the rest of the chapter, it is clear that the term “men” used here includes all races, genders, and ethnic groups. All are alike and equally privileged. None is forbidden in respect to receiving the goodness of God. The Book of Mormon asserts, then, that salvation is a gift available to men and women alike. But how alike do men and women need to be to fully receive it?

In the 1995 document, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve assert that male and female sexes and role differences are part of eternal identity:

By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their

families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.

Inherent in this statement is a striking contradiction: Men and women are to be equal partners, and yet the male partner is always to preside and provide, while the female partner is primarily to nurture. Because the Proclamation states that “Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose,” the stated role divisions would seem to make women eternally subordinate to men. (The prefix *sub* means “under” and *ordinate* means “order” or “rank.”) If one partner always presides, even in love and righteousness, the other is still subordinate, at least in rule, if not also in rank. Doesn’t the Proclamation, then, contradict the ideal of equality required in the Book of Mormon?

In talking to many active, believing Mormons over the years, both male and female, I have found that most feel men and women are equal in worth but have been assigned the different roles outlined in the Proclamation. One woman explained it to me this way: “They have the same capabilities but different responsibilities.” The view I most frequently encounter among Latter-day Saints is that, while the genders may not be equal in condition, they are equally valued and fairly treated.

But is this ideal being met in LDS Church practice? In an attempt to assess the current state of affairs, I examine three pieces of evidence: (1) President Hinckley’s 2004 conference talk that the woman in my sister’s ward saw as an answer to her son’s sense that boys were more important than girls; (2) visual representations of men and women in recent issues of the Church’s *Ensign* magazine; and (3) a thought experiment in which one reverses the references to men and women in LDS discourse.

PRESIDENT HINCKLEY’S OCTOBER 2004 general conference talk, “The Women in Our Lives,” focuses on the equal value and dignity of women and contradicts the view of men who think they are superior simply because of their sex. His talk is especially touching because it was given in part as a tribute to his wife Marjorie, who had passed away the previous April after their sixty-seven years of married life together. In his talk, President Hinckley makes several strong assertions about women’s equal worth. He mentions that “some few of the greatest characters of scripture have been women of integrity, accomplishment, and faith,” such as Esther, Naomi, Ruth, Sariah of the Book of Mormon, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the sisters Mary and Martha. He notes that Jesus gives Mary of Magdala “a position of preeminence” by appearing to her first after his resurrection. He emphasizes the “divine qualities” of women as daughters of God.³ And he ends with praise for his own daughters who are “so kind and good and thoughtful.” The overall tone and purpose of President Hinckley’s talk is a clear attempt to improve the treatment of women.

In spite of this, the presumption of male power underlying

his talk reinforces the very thing he is trying to remedy: the subordination of women. This is especially evident in President Hinckley’s telling of the creation story, in his description of male leadership in the home, and in his framing of these issues within the context of priesthood authority. I offer the following critiques with all due respect to President Hinckley’s position. He stands out as an inspired president of the Church with his moderate, kind, approach and his emphasis on humanitarian service. My reason for focusing on his talk as an example of gender inequity in the Church is, in fact, *because* of his position. The prophet sets the doctrine and practice for the Church as a whole, and the doctrine President Hinckley sets out in this talk clearly underscores male priesthood leadership over women that puts them in a secondary and supporting role within the structure of the Church.

He begins his description of women’s place by forefronting the creation of the world as a solely male enterprise: “The Almighty was the architect of that creation. Under his direction it was executed by his Beloved Son, the Great Jehovah, who was assisted by Michael, the Archangel.” After this all-male trinity created the cosmos, they decided the endeavor would not be complete without the introduction of a female as a helpmeet for the male. Of the multiple LDS versions of the creation of woman, President Hinckley emphasizes the account of her being taken from Adam’s rib, rather than the account that states that male and female were each created “in the image of God.” This is a curious choice in remarks designed to contradict the denigration of women. He says, “Notwithstanding this preeminence given the creation of woman, she has so frequently through the ages been relegated to a secondary position.” But in his account, isn’t woman relegated to a secondary position? Isn’t it secondary for an all-male godhead to create woman after the man as a helpmeet for him? To say that women are the culmination of creation rather than its source is to say that women are derivative, not primary; important, not essential; helpers, not partners; separate, not equal.

While it can be argued from the Hebrew that the term “helpmeet” is more about complementarity than subordination, because of its current connotations, most readers do not understand the term this way.⁴ Likewise, when President Hinckley asserts that the duality of male and female is God’s design and that their “complementary relationships and functions are fundamental to his purposes,” this translates into the well-worn priesthood/motherhood dichotomy that relegates women to the private sphere. President Hinckley, in fact, focuses on motherhood as a primary reason for honoring women. He asserts that those men who “think they are superior to women . . . do not seem to realize that they would not exist but for the mother who gave them birth. When they assert their superiority, they demean her.” Despite his intent to correct what he sees as arrogant male chauvinism that can lead to divorce, abuse, and family stress, President Hinckley still gives to men the central role of setting up the way the family system operates. He blames divorce “predominantly” on men, presuming that men have the power and authority to avoid di-



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voice by presiding over women in love. He says: “I plead with the men of this Church, to look for and nurture the divinity that lies within their companions. To the degree that happens, there will be harmony, peace, enrichment of family life, nurturing love.”

Indirectly, President Hinckley does admonish women, as well as men, to promote their partners’ happiness; and he praises women for their “kindness and love,” while blaming men for acting selfishly. Though this seems to privilege women on one level as spiritually superior creatures, on another level it deprives women of full moral agency by assuming their nature is mostly good. That President Hinckley addressed this talk to men when women were present in his audience further strengthens the impression that agency and leadership ability center on males. He does insist that men should not make all the decisions in the home, but again the presumption is that the decision not to make all the decisions lies with men.

On the positive side, President Hinckley is obviously trying to loosen men’s hold on power, encouraging them to share it more equally with their wives. Priesthood authority in the Church and home, however, gives the final say to men in a way that works against equality. Women have informal power in both arenas: that is, power that comes from personal gifts rather than the forms, (i.e., offices of the organizational structure). But the few formal positions women hold, like Relief Society president, are all under the direction of men, as is evident in President Hinckley’s talk, when he gives the example of the “presidency of the Relief Society” visiting a meeting of the “General Authorities” (notice the difference in capitalization between the female “presidency” and male “Authorities”). He says, “These able women stood in our council room and shared with us principles of welfare and of helping those who are in distress. Our stature as officers of this Church was not diminished by what they did. Our capacities to serve were increased.” The example seems an odd choice to illustrate gender equality in Church leadership because it is presented as an exception, a special time when women invaded men’s space, although invited. If women were valued as equal partners, wouldn’t it be normal for them to share their viewpoint

and experiences with male leaders? There is a clear emphasis in this example on men as the presiding “officers of this Church,” with women as advisors and supporters.

President Hinckley concludes his talk by reminding men of their duty to exercise their priesthood according to the principles of righteousness outlined in D&C 121. When he states here, to his male listeners, that “God has given us the priesthood,” he resoundingly highlights male leadership over “the women in our lives.”

Again, I applaud President Hinckley for addressing the gender issue; I think his purpose is to elevate women. Yet the contradictions in his remarks between equality and subordination reinforce the view of women not as active and empowered participants, but as receivers without equal power or authority to direct the family or influence the Church.

GENDER TENSIONS ARE evident not only in words but also in pictures.⁵ In early 2005, I examined several issues of the *Ensign* and was pleased to discover more articles than I expected by women and more images of women in actions other than their traditional service in the Church—that is, I found images of women as gospel students and teachers, not simply as providers of food and compassionate service. For example, in the January 2005 *Ensign*, one can find a woman thoughtfully studying the scriptures and Church magazines. On another page, the same woman is teaching a class of mixed men and women. On a third page, the woman is at a pulpit speaking in sacrament meeting. These visuals are encouraging for gender equity because they create a sense of women’s authority in regard to doctrine. When I was young, there were few such images of women investigating doctrine or being serious students of the scriptures. However, in the third visual, one sees the male leadership seated behind the woman, reinforcing the role of male priesthood holders as governors in the Church. The woman speaks at the behest of men. Of course, men also speak at the behest of men with higher authority. But no man in the Church ever speaks at the behest of a woman.

The importance of priesthood authority is the dominant message and pattern in all the issues of the *Ensign* I examined. The presence of male priesthood authority is felt on almost

every page in pictures, authoritative statements, and in the magazine's format itself. In this January 2005 issue, five of the twelve bylined articles are written by women; and of the seven written by men, five are by general authorities. In another issue, eight out of seventeen articles are by women, and again, five of the male authors are general authorities. Also, for each major article in every issue, quotations by prominent Church leaders, living and dead, all male, are displayed along with their pictures in highlighted boxes. While this functions as a teaching device to add material for further thought about the subject at hand, an unspoken implication is the importance of priesthood leadership in establishing truth by authoritative pronouncement. In one article, Elder Russell M. Nelson's statement about the blessings of the temple is forefronted in a touching article by a woman who describes how her faith in the ordinances of the gospel helped in her struggle following the death of her husband. More of the women's articles in the *Ensign* deal with relationships and practical problems; more of the men's articles deal with doctrine and history. Overall, the *Ensign* reinforces the same message as President Hinckley's address: that women are indeed a very important part of the Church and contribute to it in many ways, but men lead and define both the Church and women.

loveth the world, even that she layeth down her own life that she may draw all women unto her. Wherefore, she commandeth none that they shall not partake of her salvation.

If this were the language that we read over and over in all scripture and other official texts, would men feel that they are full participants in the Church and gospel? Would *they* perhaps question their worth, eternal value, and position?

As the eight-year-old boy in my sister's ward could see, Jesus and Heavenly Father are boys. If the Godhead is just boys, then boys are in charge. Mormon theology, reinforced as recently as October 2004 by President Hinckley, does not accord to women the power to create or save worlds because both are described as priesthood functions. The highest authority is vested in males. Women are not final decision-makers. The Relief Society, touted as the largest and possibly oldest women's organization in the world, is subordinate to men in every way, with no chain of command from the General Relief Society presidency to each stake and ward Relief Society presidency. Rather, at each level—general, stake, ward, and branch—women are called by, released by, and supervised by men, to whom they must report and from whom they must seek and obtain permission and money to act. Church re-

BECAUSE GENDER EQUITY IS A HIGHLY CHARGED ISSUE,

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A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT may clarify whether the ideal of men and women's equality is being met in today's Church. In this, I follow in the footsteps of Elouise Bell, Carol Lynn Pearson, and others who have written "role reversal" essays as a way of highlighting unstated ways in which gender affects LDS discourse.⁶ What would LDS discourse look like if we reversed male and female references? What if, as we flipped through the pages of the *Ensign*, we saw female leaders highlighted and quoted authoritatively and men in supporting roles? What if, instead of pictures of Christ, we saw pictures of Mary his mother, or Mary Magdalene, or a female savior? What if our image of God were female? What if we merely substituted the female pronoun for the male in scripture? Such a rewrite of 2 Nephi 26:24 (which I quoted earlier more fully and with the original pronouns) provides a taste of how this kind of change might feel:

For behold, my beloved sisters, I say unto you that the Lord God worketh not in darkness. She doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for she

sources now rest entirely in men's hands. Although often used by women, Church funds are never to be used without male approval. Women cannot commonly schedule the use of a meetinghouse without male permission. They cannot create or present a curriculum that has not been approved by males. The current Relief Society lesson manual is taken entirely from the writings and utterances of male Church presidents.

Women confess their sins to males, never to other females; certainly men never officially confess their sins to women. Men hold all the judicial offices of the Church, whether in a disciplinary council conducted by a bishop on the ward level, by a president on the stake level, or on the general appellate level. Women are therefore never judged by their peers. On the other hand, Church leaders do not need the approval of women for any of their actions, nor are they required to receive doctrine or ordinances from women. Men define doctrine,



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THE HANDS OF MEN, NOT WOMEN, WHICH INEVITABLY MAKES MEN'S WORK SEEM MORE FAR-REACHING. THIS IS WHY THE ISSUE OF GENDER EQUITY IN MORMONISM INEVITABLY REVERTS TO THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S EXCLUSION FROM PRIESTHOOD.

policy, and practice. They define normative behaviors. They create the moral context for all departments of Mormon life. They hold the keys of the kingdom on earth and in heaven.

Current Church practice and rhetoric reinforce how deeply ingrained the gender problem is and how difficult it is to remedy, as seen by the following four observations. First, the problem is systemic and not merely a matter of individual behavior. This can be seen by the fact that women's roles and input in the Church are entirely dependent on the way male leaders allow them to participate. Many have assured me that women have a voice in the Church because the male leaders they know ask women for their input. The crucial point, however, is this: whether male leaders solicit women's input or not, either on a local or Church-wide level, is *entirely* in the discretionary power of men.

Second, women, as a group, must rely on male leaders, such as President Hinckley, to ensure their fair treatment in private and public settings, their inclusion in church activities, and their visibility in gospel lessons. This situation can affect women's self-esteem. When was the last conference talk assuring men that they "are such a necessary part of the plan of happiness which our Heavenly Father has outlined for us"? The fact that women need to be told of their worth, and that men need to be reminded of women's equal value, should make us question assertions of gender equity in the Church.

Third, what are we to make of theories of gender equality that tie the worth of women primarily to their functioning as wives and mothers (even when single or childless), while these same theories tie the worth of men to their priestly ordinations, which are not only independent of but often in competition with their functioning as husbands and fathers? (It is true that single men are also not likely to be called to important Church offices—a fact that demonstrates that men, too, are limited by gender roles.) These theories about different roles create different concepts of self-worth for men and women. While President Hinckley and other male Church leaders repeatedly assert that a woman's chief, indispensable, contribution is motherhood, this alleged indispensability is subverted by the absence of the Heavenly Mother in discussions of the

plan of salvation, including the cosmic creation story. If the Heavenly Mother is absent as an equal participant in the creation, what is the mothering principle really worth? If mothers are so vital, where is the council of mothers, either in heaven or in the earthly Church? Where are the female Church leaders with voices equal to men's—women with equal authority to assure that nurture, care, and right relationships are fostered in the Church?

Finally, no matter how much lip service is given to women's worth and equality, the patriarchal governing structure of the Church gives dominance and preference to men and their views, simply because they have the final say regarding how things are organized and defined.

I HAVE ARGUED for the existence of systemic gender inequity in the LDS Church based on a pattern of male domination and female subordination in all formal LDS Church power structures, using standard objective criteria for gender analysis. But is it right to look at gender equity only in this way?

Another approach that we might employ is referred to as "third world feminism." Third world feminism is a response to the hegemony of white, European-American women in the feminist movement. White feminists are often liberals who come to free native women from oppressive traditions, but without any awareness of the beliefs and desires of those they are supposedly trying to help. As a result, white feminists often end up inadvertently colonizing the native women instead. This white feminist hegemony is represented by academics so caught up in careers and theory that they dismiss everyday politics and lose sight of the real practices that affect women's identities and status. Third world feminism provides a model for critiquing power structures while honoring women's agency and self-descriptions. It suggests common concerns across racial, ethnic, and national borders without erasing important differences.⁷ The implication of this theory for the Mormon gender question is that gender equity cannot be defined without understanding how most LDS women feel about this issue.

I started this study with the question of an eight-year-old boy. His opinion, however, should not be given greater weight than that of his mother, who appears willing to accept not only President Hinckley's assertions but also her own role as evidence of the equality of genders in the LDS church. A recent study by an intern at the Smith Institute at BYU showed that 70 percent of LDS women surveyed were content with their role in the Church. While the results have been questioned because of the way the survey was set up to solicit certain kinds of answers, they accord in large part with my own assessment based on informal discussions with hundreds of Mormon women over the last twenty years.⁸ I am not a social scientist and do not pretend to know how to interpret statistics mathematically, but I am trained to read texts and to interpret cultural signifying practices.⁹ I would not be surprised if a broader survey revealed a statistic even higher than 70 percent approval in some contexts.

When I have asked LDS women if they are satisfied with their current status in the Church, most active women say "yes." When asked if they think it is fair for men alone to be in charge of the Church, most say they do not envy men this position and would not like to bear the responsibility of hearing confessions, holding disciplinary councils, and making hard decisions about Church policy, procedure, practice, and doctrine. Their answers are also usually couched in language which shows that LDS Church leadership is so identified with maleness that for a woman to be dissatisfied with her exclusion from power is tantamount to her being dissatisfied with her sex and her mothering function—the very roles she is told her Heavenly Father has assigned her. Most Mormon women would see such dissatisfaction as synonymous with ingratitude toward and even rebellion against God. One woman told me:

We [women] don't hold the priesthood and therefore cannot be in positions in the Church of great prominence, but that doesn't bother me. I don't care to hold the priesthood. . . . I feel its power in my home. I don't think it makes me a lesser person to my husband or to my sons; I just see my role as mother and nurturer as the role best suited for me.

In my view, the reason most Mormon women say they are satisfied with their role in the Church is that they have concluded, consciously or not, that the advantages of membership in what they deeply believe is Christ's true Church outweigh any disadvantages. Since these women believe that salvation can come only through the Church, it makes sense from their perspective to ignore ecclesiastical stresses and problems and cling to the gospel of Jesus Christ and its blessings, letting God sort out the power issues that might arise. One woman wrote:

I guess it's hard when, as a woman, you feel very strongly about something in the church, whether it is who to call in your organization, or how to proceed with an activity and the men always do have the final say. I don't know how that could change with the nature of Priesthood callings. . . . I believe in sustaining the prophets who are called of God. If I [err], I want it to be on the side of obedience, since, if a Priesthood

holder is leading us astray or making incorrect decisions, the Lord can deal with that in His way and in His time.

For such women, their subjective view or experience does justify the Church's treatment of women, despite "objective" evidence that the genders are treated differently and unequally. Any gender inequities are to them but the unintended consequences of benign Church doctrine and policies that require men to provide for families and to protect women, children, and weaker members in their charge from economic, physical, moral, and spiritual harm. Not surprisingly, I have found in talking to LDS women that their views on gender issues are closely tied to their individual experiences with the men in their lives. One woman explained:

I was raised in a home where my father thought very highly of my mother and her abilities. He always treated her well. I never sensed any feeling of men being better or more important than women in our family. My brothers had that kind of example and followed it . . . [Name omitted] has been that kind of a husband also. I know that some women are not as fortunate as I have been and may answer these questions differently.

SHOULD THE SUBJECTIVE feelings of faithful Mormon women resolve the gender question in the LDS Church? Or does the list of gender inequities offered earlier justify a challenge to the Church's construct of male privilege? These questions are complicated by other factors. First, the positive or negative pictures given by women in questionnaires may not reflect their complete experiences. Because gender equity is a highly charged issue, it is difficult for those on either side to tell the complete truth about their feelings and experiences, even to themselves, especially under unspoken pressure from both sides of the question. The very fact that the issue is perceived as two-sided and polemic instead of multiple and complex is telling. Though unfair, many perceive as unbelieving those who question—while others perceive as unthinking those who conform. One woman interviewed expressed serious concerns about women's roles but also many positive experiences as a Church member. But when asked to write her views, despite assurances of anonymity, she expressed only the positive. Many women expressed a desire to be more public with their concerns but feared the consequences. One woman said, "I have a wonderful husband who wants our two sons to be raised in the Church; I can't risk getting kicked out."

Few are willing to risk Church membership by stating their concerns publicly. However, in a letter to the editor in the December 2004 issue of *SUNSTONE*, Peter Bleakley from Kent, England, described the damage he sees happening to women in the LDS Church:

All my life I have been surrounded by [women] spiritual giants with exemplary faith, who should never for a moment have to question whether they have value in God's kingdom or a right to be heard. But be-

cause they are women, even when they hold senior callings, their ability to function and contribute depends entirely on the mindset and basic social skills of their priesthood line-managers. . . . When my own mother . . . who has devoted her life to raising children in the gospel . . . has started to seriously wonder whether women really are second-class citizens in the celestial kingdom, alarm bells ring with me. Something has gone seriously wrong. With the self-confidence our doctrines should give her, how could she become so demoralized?

Bleakley gets to the heart of the matter. In judging whether or not gender inequity is a problem in the LDS Church, the evidence and issues must be examined in terms of basic Christian ethics and not just women's reported experience. The primary moral question must be what the current practice does to individual self-worth. The scripture that states that the "worth of souls is great in the eyes of God" is central to an LDS theology of personhood.¹⁰ To block any soul from reaching her potential or from using his gift must be seen as an offense to the God who gives those gifts. In looking at gender structures in the Church, we must ask, returning to the concept found in 2 Nephi 26, how those structures affect each person's ability to "partake of the goodness of God." As I have tried to show by looking at women's own statements and feelings about gender roles, this is a difficult issue. Still, for the sake of fair treatment, there must be the freedom to question—something that is presently lacking in the Church.

I SEE TWO obstacles to an open examination of gender difference and equality: first, an ambiguity surrounding the desirability of power; and second, the belief that the present Church structure must, and therefore does, reflect the will of God. Most women who complain, or even express pain or doubt, about gender inequity in the Church are immediately accused of being power hungry and out of line with Church doctrine and authority. Lorie Winder Stromberg asks why we assume that wanting power is a bad thing:

I've spent too many years on the defensive . . . It's time I owned the term. Perhaps I am power hungry. And my question is: Why aren't we all? If by power hungry you mean I desire the ability not only to accept responsibilities in the institutional Church but also to be part of defining those responsibilities, then, yes, I'm power hungry If by power hungry you mean I believe women must have a voice in the Church, then, yes, I'm power hungry If by power hungry you mean I would welcome a heightened ability to bless the lives of others, then, yes, I'm power hungry. . . . If by power hungry you mean I want the ability to participate in a model of power based on partnership rather than patriarchy, based on empowerment rather than domination, then, yes, I'm power hungry.¹¹

In LDS discourse, the term "power" is not often connected with male leadership roles, even though priesthood is defined as "the power or authority to act in God's name." Rather,

priesthood is usually connected to "stewardship," "service," and "callings," terms that emphasize duty and downplay recognition. While men are allowed to view such callings as desirable, even central to male identity, many LDS priesthood holders do not have managerial positions and, like women, are deprived of involvement in the making of policy and interpreting doctrine. In talking to active LDS men over the years, I have found that they, too, feel a lack of self-worth if they have never been called to lead. Ecclesiastical hierarchy stratifies men as well as women. Because Church leaders are so highly revered and so important, it is difficult for male members not to see their personal worth and righteousness as dependent on the type of Church callings they receive. However, because of the strong, unspoken prohibition in the culture against "aspiring to Church office," Mormon men rarely complain about being pegged as only followers. Mormon men don't want to be thought of as ambitious for such callings. But, silently, many understandably are.

As a feminist disinclined toward corporate power and inclined toward an ethics of care and relationship, I am uneasy with the Church's modeling of priesthood authority on the secular model of corporate management. In the last twenty years, I have repeatedly asserted the necessity of reexamining and redefining in sacral terms the meaning and nature of priesthood.¹² On the other hand, over time I have come to see how complex, large institutions like the Church cannot avoid corporate models altogether, though I still believe we should not allow the need for order to overtake the Church's spiritual mission.¹³ Also, I agree with Lorie Stromberg that because power is the ability to act and produce an effect, power issues in a healthy community must be acknowledged openly as a fundamental part of both personal agency and institutional organization. When power issues are avoided, then power is more likely to be abused to gratify pride and ambition or to exercise compulsion, to paraphrase the important caution found in D&C 121:39.

I NOW RETURN TO the question of whether the equal dignity and worth of all Church members can be promoted under the rule that men preside and women primarily nurture. That is, in the LDS Church, can there be fair treatment of the sexes, including equal access to resources, privileges, protections, and avenues of participation, when the genders in the Church are necessarily divided into these roles? The answer must be "no" for several reasons.

First, these roles limit women's and men's ability to develop and express their talents. Though humans have different gifts that qualify some more than others for certain functions, those differences are not sufficient justification for excluding anyone from access to opportunity—at least not if we want evenhandedness in their treatment. Because of my severe lack of talent as a singer, I should not direct the ward choir; but I also should not be prohibited from taking lessons or joining the choir. By the same token, my sex or race should not disqualify me from pursuing my desires either. Moreover, gender and race surely differ from talents or abilities as markers for exclu-

sion or inclusion because of their historical and long-standing status as cultural categories that define both personhood and citizenship. Yet the LDS Church promotes the assumption that gender disqualifies women from most Church leadership and management roles.

As with race, acknowledging differences based on sex is not discriminatory unless used to exclude, treat unjustly, or subordinate. However, the current gender role distinctions asserted by Church leaders put women in a subordinate position solely because of their sex. Despite this subordination, strong women continue to wield power informally, especially in the home and sometimes in the Church organization as well. Patriarchal systems are usually supported by a strong matriarchal substructure. Interestingly, several women have told me that one reason they don't want priesthood is that they fear it would diminish their centrality and dominion in the home. This fear may be valid. Nevertheless, excluding women from formal power structures can encourage them to resort to manipulation to maintain a voice. Studies on larger populations of American women have shown that the social unacceptability of ambition and aggression for women drive them toward other means of obtaining power.¹⁴

I am not asserting leadership as the most important or valu-

scope, but it denies the Church community the blessing of women's full array of gifts and spiritual power.

In addition, if a woman, either because she is expected primarily to nurture or because she is excluded from priesthood, is given fewer opportunities within the Church to exercise her other abilities, they may be invisible to her and others, and in time may be lost as well. Christ told his followers not to hide their light under a basket (Matthew 5:15), but this may be the case for those not allowed to express certain talents because of gender or hierarchy.¹⁵ If women have the same capabilities as men but because of limited responsibilities do not use them, will those capabilities eventually disappear? And vice versa. It is true that women do much more than nurture in the Church, in spite of the Proclamation's gender definitions; and certainly they do not have a solely private role. In fact, it is obvious in the examples I've given above, ironically in the section on gender inequity, that women teach, write, organize, manage, and serve in diverse ways in the Church. But still their subordination to men's priesthood authority limits their scope, expression, and perhaps self-esteem. In a recent conference talk, Elder Dallin Oaks explained that the equal partnership of men and women described in the Proclamation applies only to the home, not to the Church organization, which is hierarchical.¹⁶

THE CHURCH'S CURRENT GENDER ROLES PROMOTE, AT BEST,

A GENDER-BASED POLICY OF "SEPARATE BUT EQUAL."
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able aspect of Church service. As the apostle Paul admonished, "the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee" (I Corinthians 12:21). Rather, I am emphasizing the way priesthood, as the power to act in God's name, puts the spiritual mission of gospel salvation into the hands of men, not women, which inevitably makes men's work seem more far-reaching. This is why the issue of gender equity in Mormonism inevitably reverts to the question of women's exclusion from priesthood. Can women be seen as men's spiritual equals when they have no official permission or legitimate authority to act in God's name? Is there any woman in the Church who is revered as the spiritual peer of President Hinckley? Is there any woman who is considered as close to God, or who can legitimately speak in God's name? Even on a lower level in the Church, because many spiritual gifts are linked to priesthood and priesthood office, such as healing blessings and prophecy, women may feel these and other such gifts are beyond women's legitimate use. Not only does this belief limit women's

Perhaps the most common argument for gender role division in the Church is the belief that women's ability to bear children gives women a special gift that men will never possess and also makes it impossible for women to bear the responsibility of the priesthood if they are going to fulfill the demanding role of motherhood. Even if we acknowledge that gender differences connected to the body are eternal, we must also acknowledge that women can and do bear and rear children while serving as Relief Society presidents, even as men serve as bishops while functioning as fathers.¹⁷ Fathers nurture, and, as President Hinckley reminded his listeners, Relief Society presidents preside. Because some women may have the "natural" ability to preside and some men the "natural" ability to nurture, to limit either person's access to these roles simply on the basis of sex is unreasonable, discriminatory, and damaging.

Yet motherhood, even for women who do not have children nor will never have children in their care, is a main reason given for women's being disqualified for leadership roles connected to priesthood. By contrast, priesthood, which is available to all men, does not disqualify them from fatherhood.¹⁸ To say that the gender division of priesthood for men and motherhood for women is simply a matter of different responsibilities avoids the central issues of personal agency, growth, and development. This division is false and creates a damaging dichotomy that tends to put women in the private and bodily realm, while granting men the public, spiritual realm.¹⁹ Some have told me in response that it is because men are less spiritual than women that they need the priesthood to raise them to women's level. Like the motherhood argument that equates women with one function while reducing the importance of fatherhood, this argument also ultimately demeans both men and women because it says men are inferior while denying women full latitude to express their supposed superior spirituality in the Church. But what if it's just God's will that men alone have priesthood? Joseph Smith's explicit revelation about women receiving priesthood in the temple endowment gives me comfort that a just God would not give his daughters less than he gives his sons.²⁰ Perhaps women's and men's priesthood function differently, but, as 2 Nephi 26 implies, a loving Father and Mother would neither forbid any of their children access to their spiritual power nor privilege one group over another.

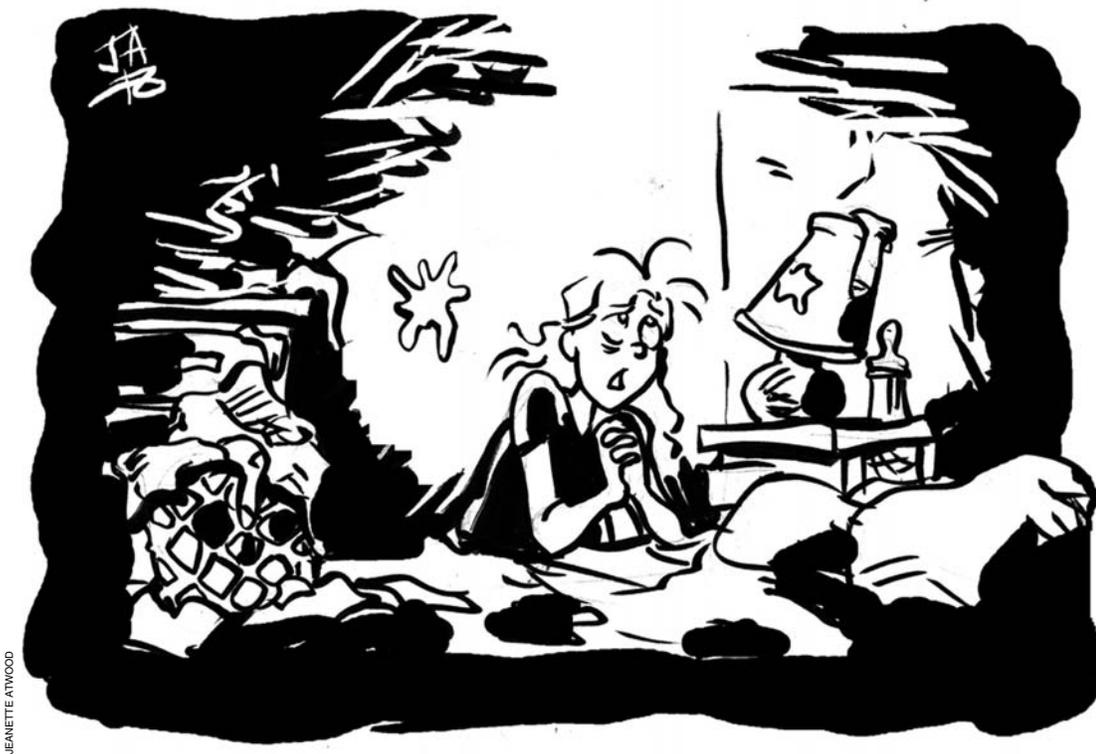
The final reason that current gender roles in the Church are

not equal is that they deny women full agency to participate in defining and authorizing doctrines and policies that shape cultural and personal identity and practice. Because most decisions about Church management and the direction of spiritual affairs are made by priesthood councils, women do not have a full voice or "vote" in the Church. Thus the Church's current gender roles promote, at best, a gender-based policy of "separate but equal." Yet, the history of race relations in America has clearly shown that separate is never equal.

I AM AWARE that no matter how persuasive my arguments may be about gender inequity in the Church, they will be perceived merely as feminist criticism, or worse as "anti-Mormon," as long as the current gender roles are seen as divinely mandated. This fact leads to my final questions.

Can't we assume in a Church run by revelation from God that the current structure is God's will and that any change must come from the current prophet? There are many problems with this line of reasoning, but the short answer must be "no." There are numerous historical precedents, starting with the Church's about-face on its policy of withholding priesthood from black men, that expose the fallacy and danger of this position. To assume that all current Church policies and teachings are correct is to assume that human mistakes and misjudgments cannot infect the Church, a view plentifully contradicted by the scriptural history of God's dealings with his people and his repeated calls for repentance. Some argue that though individual members can sin and are imperfect, the

Church is perfect, and its leaders acting unanimously represent the will of God. Such a view puts the Church as a whole in a position of self-righteous pride that keeps its membership from thoughtful self-examination—the foundation of ongoing repentance. Do we really think that we are the only generation that has not sinned collectively? Or that our Church leaders have become infallible? Could President Kimball have received the 1978 revelation if his heart had not been open to the wrongness of the Church's teachings and policies on this issue? Even in the years that have followed that change, had we willingly admitted that denying blacks the priesthood was a human prejudice



"Heavenly Father. . . I hope you don't mind. . .
can I PLEASE talk to Mom?"

JEANNETTE ATWOOD

instead of God's will, we would have avoided collateral prejudice and severe damage to our brothers and sisters.²¹

The Church's primary duty is to promulgate the gospel of Jesus Christ, to assert that each soul is equally precious in God's eyes. Any Church policy that contravenes or offends this principle must be questioned. Our scriptures admonish us to aid the oppressed, to notice and care for the poor, to bind up wounds, to nourish those who hunger and thirst. The Church bears the principal duty to promote equality of treatment, of dignity, of value, and, to the extent possible, of distribution of wealth as well. If current Church policy or practice can cause an eight-year-old boy to conclude that boys are more important than girls, then the Church must repent of policies that feed that sense of inequality. The only way to reject longstanding false traditions that have assumed institutional legitimacy is simple renunciation, just as the U.S. Supreme Court did in *Brown v. Board of Education*, where it publicly repented by reversing its doctrine of separate but equal as just plain wrong. The Church must do the same. It must admit that separate but equal in matters of gender is just plain wrong, an affront to the equal dignity and worth of women and men both.

It is ironic that the principle of continuing revelation in Mormonism, meant to facilitate change, is currently employed to preserve the status quo. Yes, we must be realistic about the resistance of people to change, especially when it involves vested personal and institutional interests. And we should creatively deal with problems in ways that do not alienate members. But surely, in a Church that claims the legitimate priesthood authority to act for God, social injustice based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or class must be eradicated not only as threats to the faith and well-being of members but also as sins intolerable in the sight of God in the Church that has been called to be a light to the world and a city on a hill. ☹

NOTES

1. My sister, Janice Allred, began "The Fall of Eve: Personal Identity and the Divine Mother" (in my possession) with this anecdote. In this speech, given at the 2004 Counterpoint Conference as she accepted the Eve Award, she also explicates President Hinckley's October 2004 conference talk and the way women's identity in the Church relates to the place of the Heavenly Mother.

2. See the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entries on "feminism" and "justice" for helpful summaries of the scholarship on these issues. Two important introductions to feminist theory are: Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), and Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, *Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3. In his talk "Stay on the High Road" in the General Young Women meeting of the April 2004 General Conference, President Hinckley also emphasized women's divine qualities inherited from a Heavenly Father that gives them "the potential to become anything to which you set your mind."

4. As biblical scholar Phyllis Trible points out, the Hebrew word "ezer" is "traditionally translated 'helper'—a translation that is totally misleading because the English word helper suggests an assistant, a subordinate, indeed, an inferior, while the Hebrew word "ezer" carries no such connotation." Trible instead translates the Hebrew word as "companion corresponding to it" in her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 90. My point is that most readers, unaware of the Hebrew meaning or such scholarship, see the passage traditionally.

5. It is standard practice for feminists to examine the ways words and pictures reinforce patriarchal structures and define women's roles, emphasizing the need for women to have their own "voice." See Dorice Williams Elliot's "Let Women No Longer Keep Silent in Our Churches: Women's Voices in

Mormonism," and Lavina Fielding Anderson's "The Grammar of Inequity" for examples of this pattern in contemporary Mormonism, both in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 201–14, 215–30. In contrast, Vella Neil Evans argues that Mormon women having their own publications from 1872–1970 "empowered women of the church" ("Empowerment and Mormon Women's Publications," *Women and Authority*, 50).

6. Examples of these "role reversal" exercises can be seen in Louise Bell, "The Meeting," in *Only When I Laugh* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 11–16; Carol Lynn Pearson, "Walk in the Pink Moccasins," *SUNSTONE*, May 2005, 21; Richard K. Circuit, "New Policies (Tribute to Manhood)" *SUNSTONE*, July/August 1982, 57–59.

7. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* is a good representation of third world feminism. I owe thanks to Roberta Micallef, my former colleague at the University of Utah, for introducing me to these concepts.

8. My knowledge of this survey and the questions surrounding it come from an intern at the Smith Institute in 2003, though not the intern who conducted the study herself.

9. I keep a file of conversations and written statements, all qualitative rather than quantitative. I'm afraid a social scientist might be horrified at the unsystematic nature of this file.

10. D&C 18:10.

11. Lorie Winder Stromberg, "Power Hungry," *SUNSTONE*, December, 2004, 60–61.

12. See my article, "The Missing Rib: The Forgotten Place of Queens and Priestesses in the Establishment of Zion," *SUNSTONE*, July 1985, 16–22; my essay, "The Nature and Purpose of Priesthood" in *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology*, co-authored with Paul Toscano (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 143–54; and "If Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843, Why Aren't They Using It?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 219–26.

13. Meg Wheatley uses business models to analyze the effects of including or excluding women from priesthood in her "An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?: Some Present and Future Consequences," in *Women and Authority*, 151–65. Two excellent analyses of the tensions that arise when churches inevitably operate according to business models are: J. Bonner Ritchie, "The Institutional Church and the Individual," *SUNSTONE*, May/June 1981, 28–35 (reprinted in the *Sunstone 25th Anniversary Issue*, *SUNSTONE*, June 1999, 98–112), and Jim Sawyer, "Enduring to the End . . . in Joy," *SUNSTONE*, October 2002, 60–62.

14. See Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Anne Campbell, *Men, Women, and Aggression* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and Rachel Simmons, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (New York: Harcourt, 2002).

15. Compare this passage to Christ's parable of the talents in Matthew 25:15–28.

16. Dallin H. Oaks, "Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church," *Ensign*, November 2005, 24–27.

17. I do not have room in this paper to explore the complexities of defining gender difference and the issue of constructed versus "natural" difference. My argument here assumes difference while attempting to promote the welfare of all.

18. Sonja Farnsworth examines the motherhood-priesthood dichotomy in "Mormonism's Odd Couple: The Motherhood-Priesthood Connection," in *Women and Authority*, 299–314; Linda P. Wilcox examines the historical development of the emphasis on motherhood for Mormon women in "Mormon Motherhood: Official Images," in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, eds. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) 208–26.

19. Feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, have explored the damaging effects of this traditional dichotomy that goes back to early Christianity at least. See her *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 52–79.

20. "The Missing Rib," my first Sunstone symposium talk, which was later published in the magazine, focused on this question. See "The Missing Rib: The Forgotten Place of Queens and Priestesses in the Establishment of Zion," *SUNSTONE*, July 1985, 16–22. See also my "Put on Your Strength O Daughters of Zion: Claiming the Priesthood and Knowing the Mother" in *Women and Authority*, 411–37 and D. Michael Quinn's "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843" in *Women and Authority*, 365–409.

21. For examples of this damage, see the roundtable discussion, "Speak the Truth and Shame the Devil," *SUNSTONE*, May 2003, 28–39.