Hope deferred: Mormon feminism and prospects for change in the LDS church

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Hope deferred:
Mormon feminism and prospects for change in the LDS church

by

Holly Theresa Bignall

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What happens to a dream deferred?

    Does it dry up
    like a raisin in the sun?
    Or fester like a sore--
    And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

    Or crust and sugar over--
    like a syrupy sweet?

    Maybe it just sags
    like a heavy load.

    Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes, Montage of a Dream Deferred
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Mormon constructions of gender that limit women’s sphere and narrowly prescribed women’s roles have elicited strong resistance from many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A rich tradition of feminist theology and activism exists within the LDS church, but little work has been done to analyze the overarching effectiveness of these feminist efforts in bringing about change in the tradition. In order to address this issue I begin by teasing out how the LDS church’s process for making changes to doctrine, policy, and practice differs from the change process of mainstream Protestant denominations, and how LDS church’s particular change process informed its response to the civil rights movement—explaining why the eventual resolution took the form it did. I follow this with a consideration of how Mormon feminists have presented their positions and arguments for change, how the church as an organization has responded, and the current state of official church positions and rhetoric with respect to feminist issues. Finally, I pose the following questions: What lessons does the history of race related change within the LDS church hold for us regarding the potential change process for addressing feminist concerns? What avenues are available to the church for making changes in the roles it prescribes for LDS women? And is there evidence of imminent change or that change is in process right now? After analyzing the evidence available in the literature, I suggest that the LDS church is currently experiencing neither the internal nor the external conditions necessary to motivate it to seek and enact deep, genuine change in its construction of gender roles. In addition, I argue that while some of the church’s behavior suggests movement toward a more conciliatory stance toward women, on balance, the majority of evidence suggests that the church is not taking steps to prepare for a major doctrinal change as it did in the lead-up to changing its doctrine on race.
CHAPTER 1 – REFLEXIVITY AND THE LATTER-DAY SAINT TRADITION

In absolute darkness, we are blind. In absolute light, we are also blind… It is only through the dynamic interplay of light and dark—the shifting of lights and shadows—that sight exists.

Nikki Bado¹

1.a. Overview

Feminist scholars studying religion have drawn our attention to the ways in which religious organizations and theological works construct gender and prescribe women’s roles within religious communities, church institutions, and society more generally.² In this thesis I examine how Mormon constructions of gender that limit women’s sphere and narrowly prescribed women’s roles have elicited strong resistance from many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

A rich tradition of feminist theology and activism exists within the LDS church,³ but little work has been done to analyze the overarching effectiveness of these feminist efforts in

¹ Bado-Fralick, Coming to the Edge of the Circle, 6.
² Influential works on Western Christian traditions include: Ruether, Women and Redemption, 29-64; Stanton and the Revising Committee, The Woman’s Bible, 29-64; Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 29-64; Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 29-64; Arthur, “The Wisdom Goddess and the Masculinization of Western Religion,” 29-64; Gardini, “The Feminine Aspect of God in Christianity,” 29-64; Fiorenza, “Women in the Early Christian Movement,” 29-64; McLaughlin, “The Christian Past: Does it Hold a Future for Women,” 29-64; Pagels, “What Became of God the Mother?,” 29-64; Fiorenza, “Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision,” 29-64; Collins, “Theology in the Politics of Appalachian Women,” 29-64; Daly, Beyond God the Father, 29-64; Daly, Gyn/ecology, 29-64; Some influential works on Judaism include: Trible, “Eve and Adam,” 29-64; Adler, Engendering Judaism, 29-64; Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, 29-64; Resnick Dufour, “Sifting Through Tradition,” 29-64; For Feminist works on Islam consider: Hassan, “Feminist theology,” 29-64; Lazreg, “Feminism and Difference,” 29-64; Tohidi, “Islamic ‘Feminism’,” 29-64; King, “Islam, Women and Violence,” 29-64; Badran, Feminists, Islam, and nation, 29-64; Cooke, Women Claim Islam, 29-64; Some interesting feminist works on Hinduism include: Gross, “Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess,” 29-64; Dobia, “Approaching the Hindu Goddess of Desire,” 29-64; Important feminist works on Buddhism include: Gross, Buddhism after patriarchy, 29-64; Klein, Meeting the Great Bliss Queen, 29-64; Kwok, Introducing Asian feminist theology, 29-64; Kwok, Postcolonial imagination and feminist theology, 29-64; For works on Third World feminist theologies more generally see: Russell, Inheriting our mothers’ gardens, 29-64; Pui-lan, Hope Abundant, 29-64; King, Feminist Theology from the Third World, 29-64; For a good overview see chapter two of Gross, Feminism and Religion, 29-64.
³ “LDS” is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ preferred abbreviation for its official name. For further discussion see section 1.b.
bringing about change in the tradition. In order to address this issue I begin by teasing out how the LDS church’s process for making changes to doctrine, policy, and practice differs from the change process of mainstream Protestant denominations, and how it informed the LDS church’s response to the civil rights movement—explaining why the eventual resolution took the form it did. I follow this with a consideration of how Mormon feminists have presented their positions and arguments for change, how the church as an organization has responded, and the current state of official church positions and rhetoric with respect to feminist issues. Finally, I pose the following questions and suggest some answers: What lessons does the history of race relations within the LDS church hold for us regarding the potential change process for addressing feminist concerns? What avenues are available to the church for making changes in the roles it prescribes for LDS women? And is there evidence of imminent change or that change is in process right now?

1.b. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Nineteenth century religious leader Joseph Smith Jr. once claimed, “No man knows my history… If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself.” Yet many did, and do, believe him. The revelations and teachings he espoused began a movement that thrives in both numbers and diversity. When he was martyred only two decades after his initial visions, the large following Joseph Smith had attracted splintered but did not die. Those of Smith’s followers who believed Brigham Young to be his legitimate successor followed him west to the Utah territory and settled in the Great Salt Lake basin of the Rocky Mountains. The church they established there retained the official name The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, distinguishing itself from other sects which either splintered off at the time of Smith’s death or at some time later in the church’s development. It is this

4 History of the Church, 6:304–5, 312, 317; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 7, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Wilford Woodruff, Willard Richards, Thomas Bullock, and William Clayton; see also appendix, page 562, item 3.
largest and most influential sect of Mormonism, the LDS church, which I address in this thesis.

The term “Mormon” is more widely known and recognized than the church’s official name. It derives from the church’s belief in the *Book of Mormon,* an abridgment of writings compiled by an ancient prophet named Mormon. This theological work distinguished the church founded by Smith from its contemporaries. “Mormon” quickly became incorporated into the self-image of Smith’s followers. Until recently, most LDS members—including myself and most of the LDS writers I draw on in this thesis—thought of and referred to themselves as Mormons. In the past few decades, the LDS church has begun referring to itself and encouraging its members to refer to their church by its full name or by the acronym LDS and to themselves as LDS members, Latter-day Saints, or simply Saints. I will follow this convention and generally use the term “LDS church” when referring specifically to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Latter-day Saint movement, however, is much larger than the LDS church. In the confusion that followed its founder’s death, many distinct sects formed, several of which survive today. Of Smith’s followers who remained in the Midwest, the majority coalesced behind his son Joseph Smith III and established The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (RLDS) now known as the Community of Christ. Both of these major groups, and the surviving smaller ones, have experienced further schisms over the course of their histories and produced a multitude of smaller sects, all tracing themselves back to the prophet Joseph Smith and believing the *Book of Mormon* to be sacred scripture. Not all the members in these different groups self-identify as Mormon, but many do, and the terms Mormon and Mormonism have been widely used in scholarship in reference to any movement originating with Joseph Smith Jr. Given this context, I will generally use the word

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5 The *Book of Mormon (BoM)* is one of the four books in the LDS scriptural canon.

6 For more details see “Community of Christ History.”
Mormon when a statement applies more widely than to just members of the LDS church and when referring to my own childhood experiences or scholarship in which the author uses the term. (This includes the vast majority of all academic discourse about the LDS church and its members). However, I should note that the LDS church has unsuccessfully attempted to trademark the word “Mormon” arguing that its use in reference to other sects confuses the public and misrepresents the LDS church.

The current LDS church, headquartered in the Great Salt Lake Valley of Utah’s intermountain west, had its humble beginnings in 1830 upstate New York with just six official members. One hundred eighty years later, the church reports a membership of over 13 million in 162 countries with over half of its membership outside the United States. The majority of that growth has taken place in the last 50 years, currently doubling every fifteen years. The church has built four institutions of higher education, 128 temples located all over the world, and runs 348 missions with over 50,000 missionaries. Such self-reported statistics are an oversimplification of a complex system of beliefs and practices and a wide diversity of adherents. Nonetheless, the numbers make it clear—the LDS church is a global phenomenon with broad appeal to a diversity of peoples. It is a supremely well-organized institution employing a cluster of markedly successful strategies.

The Latter-day Saint movement’s transformation from just one of many esoteric new religious movements sprouting up in the early 1800s to a large, wealthy, influential worldwide religion is truly remarkable. The rural, western frontier to which upstate New

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7 D&C, 20:1. The Doctrines and Covenants (D&C) is one of the four books in the LDS scriptural canon.
8 “Newsroom: LDS church.” These are numbers the church self-reports and likely does not take into account the number of its members who have become disaffected or converted to other religions.
9 This brief introduction only attempts to provide some context for readers unfamiliar with the LDS church. It does not propose to fully explore the church’s history or doctrines. There are many treatments of LDS history and doctrine available in the literature. For LDS versions of its history see Our Heritage; Hughes, Mormon Church; Pittman, The Eyewitness History of the Church; Howick, A Concise History of the Early Church; Givens, People of Paradox; Roberts, Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints; For more critical and balanced perspectives see Allen and Leonard, The Story of the Latter-Day Saints;
York belonged in 1830 was a hotbed of religious fervor and has since been labeled the “burned-over district” by historians. The time and culture of its birth has deeply influenced the LDS tradition. Though now a prominent U.S. denomination busy exporting itself and its particular version of U.S. and Christian values throughout the world, its roots remain firmly embedded in 19th century Western, Christian values.

In the early 20th century, the church stretched its limbs and shed the isolation of the intermountain desert, integrating itself with the outside world. Growth, success, and prominence soon followed. But with this success has come growing scrutiny from that outside world and from the LDS church’s increasingly diverse, educated, and worldly membership. As with every tradition, its members are constantly negotiating their identities, resolving tension between the doctrine, practices, and expectations of their faith and the values acquired from secular culture, religious teachings, and personal experience (both spiritual and mundane). As Armand L. Mauss points out,

...being Mormon has always meant having to answer for it regularly in the neighborhood, at school, at work, in politics, on the university campus, and ultimately to oneself.

Like many new religious movements, the Latter-day Saints movement understands itself as a *restoration* of lost ancient practices. According to LDS theology, Jesus Christ established a church upon the earth two thousand years ago. With the passage of time, the doctrine and practices of those who believed in and followed him slowly diverged from His original teachings. God, therefore, *restored* the fullness of the gospel to the earth through the prophet Joseph Smith. Mormon leaders do not only claim their doctrine represents the true teachings of the Savior, but also claim the institutions and organization of the priesthood, its

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10 Cross, *The Burned-over District.*


13 For this reason Mormonism is frequently referred to as a restorationist movement.
ministry, and its ordinances, as revealed to Joseph Smith and recorded in the book *Doctrine and Covenants (D&C)*, to be a restoration of the original ancient church established by Jesus Christ.¹⁴

The LDS church is built on an unpaid lay priesthood into which nearly every male member over the age of twelve is ordained.¹⁵ The Priesthood is defined by the church as the “eternal power and authority of God”¹⁷ and is not taken upon oneself, but conferred by God through officially sanctioned individuals in a ritual known as ordination. Ordained priesthood holders conduct both the sacred ordinances and ministry work for their communities and carry out the administrative functions of a large and complex organization.¹⁸ These functions range from presiding over local meetings to making world-wide church policy decisions.

The LDS church does not clearly distinguish between the administrative and ministerial work of priesthood leaders. The two are intertwined and seen as interdependent. Therefore, as LDS scholar Darron T. Smith points out, although priesthood leadership positions “require sacrifice and are presented as opportunities for service, they also confer privilege and authority on those who hold them.”¹⁹ Almost all ordinances and rituals in the LDS religion require a priesthood holder for their performance. As women do not hold the

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¹⁵ The LDS church conflates gender and sex categories, assuming men are male and women are female. Only those individuals who both fall into the sex category “male” and present as men qualify for priesthood. Anyone not male would be categorically disqualified for priesthood and anyone male but not presenting as a man would be disqualified for priesthood on grounds of sin or immorality. Given this reality, and the fact that the issue of gender identity and sexual ambiguity are not significant topics of this thesis, I will typically use the terms men and male, as well as the terms women and female interchangeably.
¹⁶ While the vast majority of priesthood holders serve without monetary compensation, some of the individuals holding top ecclesiastical positions are paid. The church asks these individuals to leave secular employment in order to devote themselves full-time to ecclesiastical and administrative work. However, nearly all local and area ecclesiastic authorities perform their ministry and administration functions on a voluntary basis, usually in addition to full-time secular employment.
¹⁷ “Gospel Library: Priesthood”; see also D&C, 84 & 107; PofGP, Joseph Smith-History 1:68-73. The *Pearl of Great Price (PofGP)* is a compellation of writings translated by, revealed to, or written by the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is one of the four books of the LDS scriptural canon.
¹⁹ Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 156.
priesthood, men

alone conduct or perform almost all public and most private rituals. However, the church does grant women authority to perform some limited temple rituals for other women. General authorities responsible for making church-wide policy, expounding doctrine, and providing spiritual leadership to its members head the priesthood hierarchy. Of the general authorities, the highest-ranking members belong to the Quorum of Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency. The latter consists of the president of the church—frequently referred to as “the prophet”—and his two councilors.

Elder Russell M. Ballard of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles spoke to how the church understands and preaches about priesthood authority in the following address:

… any man who claims the special powers of heaven for his own selfish purposes and seeks to use the priesthood in any degree of unrighteousness in the Church or in the home simply does not understand the nature of his authority. Priesthood is for service, not servitude; compassion, not compulsion; caring, not control. Those who think otherwise are operating outside the parameters of priesthood authority.

Despite this emphasis on service and compassion, those who hold priesthood leadership positions exercise very real power, both spiritual and organizational, within the community.

It is important to recognize how leadership positions are filled in the church. A president of any given priesthood quorum is not chosen by its members, nor a bishop by the

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20 I refer to priesthood holders as men throughout this thesis despite the fact that boys are typically initiated into the priesthood at age 12. This ordination into the Aaronic priesthood acts as a status changing right of passage, after which the youth is referred to as a “young man” and expected to take on some of the religious (priesthood) responsibilities of a man. Ordination into the Melchizedek priesthood typically takes place at age 18 and represents a second right of passage into adult manhood. It is appropriate to refer to all priesthood holders as men because such individuals have passed through their initial religious induction into manhood.


22 This term is used by the LDS church to refer to priesthood leaders with church-wide administrative responsibilities, as opposed to those with administrative responsibility over a particular geographic area or a particular auxiliary organization within the church. These include the First Presidency, Quorum of Twelve Apostles, and the first two Quorums of Seventy. See, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Gospel Library: Church Administration: Additional information.”

23 The Quorum of Twelve Apostles is also known as the “Council of the Twelve Apostles” and is frequently shortened to “the Quorum of Twelve,” “the Council of Twelve,” or just "the Twelve.”

24 Ballard, “Strength in Counsel.”
members of his ward. When a member of the First Presidency or the Twelve dies, the members of this quorum deliberate and pray for guidance regarding whom to choose as a replacement. Upon receiving confirmation of the appropriate choice through prayer and revelation, they call a new apostle. This newest apostle becomes the lowest ranking member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles. If the prophet passes away, the most senior (highest ranking) member of the Quorum becomes the new prophet. Members of the First Presidency and Twelve are responsible for choosing the presidents of the quorums of Seventy. The presidents of the Seventies choose the members of their quorums including the area presidencies. Members of these area and general authorities choose stake presidents; stake presidencies choose bishops; and bishoprics choose presidents for each priesthood quorum within their ward. At each level of the hierarchy priesthood leaders are expected to seek God’s council and confirmation of their choice through prayer. When priesthood members are called to leadership positions, the call is understood by the church membership to be inspired and to, in effect, come from God. While the positions at the top of the hierarchy are lifetime appointments, a single individual fills lower ranking positions for only a few years or

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25 LDS congregations are divided into worship congregations called units. The most common type of unit is a ward. Ward boundaries are geographically drawn to include a few hundred members. The administrative and ministerial leader of a ward is called the bishop. He is a lay priesthood holder who has been asked to serve in this capacity, typically for 3-5 years.

26 “Seventy” is a priesthood office within the LDS church’s hierarchy. Therefore, a man holding this office is referred to as “a Seventy.” As originally described by Joseph Smith, the Seventy were to be a body composed of several separate quorums of up to 70 members each, all of which would be led by seven presidents of the Seventies. Organizationally, the quorums of Seventy fall hierarchically between the Quorum of Twelve Apostles and local priesthood leaders. The responsibilities originally assigned to these quorums are outlined in D&C, 107:23-39, 85-100.

27 All Area Presidencies are either members of the Quorums of the Seventies or members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

28 Presidencies and bishoprics are composed of three members, the president or bishop, and two counselors, which he chooses.

29 I use the term “choose” for describing how leaders are selected because names put forth by lower level priesthood authorities are only recommendations. The First Presidency issues the actual “call” to these leadership positions. They can, and have on occasion, reject a recommendation.
decades, depending on the position. At the end of his service, the individual is “released” and a replacement called.

Darron T. Smith succinctly discusses the power structure of the church explaining,

Although Mormonism, as a Christian religion, contains strong messages about the inherent worth of each soul (“we are all children of God”) and the equality of believers (“all worthy men are eligible to hold priesthood” and “the blessings of the temple are available to all worthy members”), it is also an authoritative institution, with clear levels of hierarchical authority and closely guarded boundaries of power. Although almost all adult members and many youth in any given congregation have “callings” that confer recognized privileges and responsibilities upon them, there is no confusion about how those callings are organized or who, in any given gathering of members, is in charge.  

Like every institution, the LDS church adapts and evolves as it matures. It has both resisted and accommodated the changing cultural contexts in which it is embedded. In the last half of the 20th century and heading into the 21st, the LDS church and its members have been forced to grapple with two social justice movements: the civil rights movement and the feminist movement. These movements at once resonate with the church’s teachings about the nature and dignity of human beings and conflict with their policies, practices, and doctrines. As such, they pose serious challenges to the church and its members. With this thesis I seek to ask questions, propose explanations, and suggest possibilities about the LDS church’s process of, and potential for, adaptation in response to changing cultural constructions of gender. 

1.c. A Reflexive Methodology

I began my undergraduate studies in the sciences, and it was there I first learned academic writing. I learned well. The third person, passive, detached voice came easily. I liked the authoritative sound of it. There’s something appealing in the idea of complete objectivity, dispassionate description. It was only much later, when the field of women’s studies introduced me to reflexivity that I began to question the legitimacy of such a presentation, even in the sciences.

Today I still find it difficult to insert myself in the scenes I create through writing. This, despite the fact that I am clearly a part of the story, and to omit myself deforms it. Even when describing physical or biological processes, the lens we bring to an inquiry bends and distorts the light passing through it. A highly mechanistic, clockwork model nearly universal to the perspectives of Enlightenment era Western scientists and philosophers severely limited their abilities to see, understand, and describe how the world works. Only recently have some begun to recognize the limitations of that model and seek alternative ways of approaching their studies.

At the same time, that mechanistic perspective allowed researchers to make sense of previously inexplicable phenomena. It facilitated the development of an approach to designing investigations and evaluating explanations that allowed them, and through them us, to see things previously obscured. The mechanistic lens is a useful one. It bends the light in a particular way allowing us to see details and connections previously hidden from view. And therein lies the significance: Whatever lens we bring to a study, it bends the light passing through it, allowing us to see certain features, to appreciate certain aspects, but obscuring others and distorting everything. The problem, and the misrepresentation to our readers, arises not from using a lens (which is unavoidable) but from failing to acknowledge the lens or to examine critically its particular distortions.

As I conduct this project, critically examining the literature, searching for patterns in the LDS change process and parallels between its management of race related and gender related conflicts, I take a reflexive position.31 In making salient the lens I bring to this study, it seems pertinent to begin by acknowledging that I am a woman and that I am trained in feminist critical analysis. I am also intimately familiar with the shape and cadence of LDS

31 For an excellent explanation of reflexivity as a methodology and the importance of utilizing it the field of religious studies see Bado-Fralick, Coming to the Edge of the Circle, 13-4.
religious practice. I am conversant in the “language game”\textsuperscript{32} of LDS doctrinal exegeses and expression of religious experience. Though rusty from disuse, it is my mother tongue. I trace my Mormon ancestry back to the late 1830s, before the great western trek. Many of my ancestors settled in Utah and the surrounding area, raising their families in the LDS tradition. My father—born in 1942 and raised in Heber City Utah—met my mother while they were attending university in Utah. They married in the Salt Lake City Temple. My parents left Utah, taking their six children to live in a series of towns and suburbs all over the United States and, for nearly four years, to Europe to live in a rural German farming village. Everywhere we went an LDS congregation welcomed us. To this day, the vast majority of my family of origin, their families, and my extended family are practicing Latter-day Saints.

Memories of my early childhood converge into a warm cocoon of repetition: the sound of my mother’s voice as she kneels beside me, prompting my bedtime prayers; the smell of consecrated oil and the comforting pressure of my father’s hands on my head giving me a blessing; the itch of my tights while sitting in sacrament meeting; the tingly feeling in the room when my parents returned, smiling and holding hands, from another visit to the temple; the laughter of my sisters as we played board games every Monday evening, followed by scripture study and family prayer; the ethereal tones of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir emanating from the record player. I do not remember thinking of Mormonism as a religion; it was simply the landscape of our lives. Nearly everyone I knew was Mormon.

As I grew older I was called upon to contribute to the community. The other youth and I raked the yards, tended the gardens, and painted the homes of elderly members. I accompanied my father in assisting homeless and transient individuals who called upon him as bishop of our town’s ward. My mother, sisters, and I cooked meals for new mothers and sick sisters, we took our turn cleaning up after ward parties and setting up for events, we

tended children so young couples could attend the temple. I frequently resented the demands on my time. Three hours of church on Sunday was boring; I didn’t like the other girls in my Wednesday evening youth group; getting up to attend religious education class at 6:00AM every school day struck my teenage sensibilities as verifiably mad. However, even as I vented my frustration, I admired the community and the sacrifices of its members. I learned the value and reaped the rewards of service to others.

Those who know me now might suppose that my disenchantment with the LDS church stemmed from a complaint with its treatment of women. Rather, the origins lie with the rebellious, independent instincts of adolescence. The culture of conformity and compulsory obedience in the church provoked my indignation and loosened its hold on me. To assert my independence, I sought out any suggestion of hypocrisy within the church and hurled it at my father. When he could not articulate a compelling defense and instead sent me to my room for insolence, I counted the battle a victory.

At the time, I did not make a conscious connection between a culture of obedience and the degradation of women. While I did note with irritation that men filled all the important positions in our congregation, and while men’s domination of women in the broader society incensed me, I could neither articulate precisely what the problem was nor propose a coherent alternative. In the many arguments I entered on the topic, with my father, with my male friends, with my Sunday school teachers, they always had readily available explanations for the way things were, while I sputtered and grasped for words. I had no vocabulary to express my thoughts, no text to cite, no allies to martial. Feminism was a concept completely foreign to the world in which I lived. I had heard of Femi-Nazis—crazy, ranting, man-haters who went about sucking the fun out of everything (and an excellent insult)—but that was the extent of my exposure to feminism. It was not until my college years that I would discover the women’s movement and be introduced to feminist critical analysis, which finally gave me a vocabulary for expressing my ideas.
As an adolescent rebelling against a culture of obedience, it was race, not gender, that pushed my strained relationship with the LDS church over the edge. I was raised by both church and family to believe that all people were of equal worth and that judging people based on their skin tone or other such superficial traits was among the worst kinds of sins. I was so confident in all humanity’s equality as to be completely incapable of recognizing the privileges my white skin bestowed. Raised in white, middle class, suburban and small town communities, there was little to challenge this view. The only black member of the church I ever met was our Relief Society\(^{33}\) president (highest ranking local leadership position available to a woman) and a good friend of my mother. In school there were a couple of black kids, but I was far beneath their notice in the social hierarchy. I knew they were black of course, in the sense that I knew that in a different time and place they would have suffered under slavery and segregation. But by the 1980s of my childhood, thankfully, all such ridiculous laws were gone, and now the only important distinction [sic] between them and me was that they were popular and I was not.

So it was with shock that I discovered the historical ban\(^{34}\) against men of African descent holding the priesthood. I may not have been able to identify blatant sexism for what it was, but I was well equipped to identify blatant racism. Upon confronting my father (the official representative of the church and local expert on Mormon doctrine—as far as I was concerned) with this new information he presented me with all the classic folklore: cursed lineages, premortal failings, divine commands. But he assured me that none of this mattered any more. The curse had been removed—we are all equal now.

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\(^{33}\) The Relief Society is the organization to which female members of the church over the age of 18 belong. Its official purposes are to bring relief to the poor and people unto Christ. See “Gospel Library: Relief Society.” This organization will be discussed in more detail in section 3.b. of this thesis.

\(^{34}\) This policy was changed in 1978 when the priesthood was opened to all “worthy males.” See chapter two for a more detailed discussion of its history and consequences.
I bulked at such justifications, finding them wholly unsatisfactory. And with that, the tenuous strand that held me to the church snapped. The break was clean. Until that moment, despite my rebellious posture toward my parents, I had planned to repent—just as soon as I was free of their home. (I lived in fear of what would happen if I died before repenting.)

Raised with an ethic of fairness, I would have been shocked to discover someone punishing a child for the misbehavior of her parents. (What fault of hers was that?) Punishing an entire race for the bad behavior of one man, countless generations ago, was an order of magnitude more unethical. Besides, I wondered, what happened to Joseph Smith’s pronouncement in the second Article of Faith that “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression”? The black priesthood ban stuck me as the ultimate contradiction. And all that stuff about premortal failings and the ban itself just sounded like plain old racism to me. I lacked a nuanced understanding of how such ideas and practices might arise, the complexities of folklore and tradition. But I was certain of two things: (1) God wasn’t racist, and if by some small chance I was wrong about that, then (2) He didn’t deserve my worship. And with that I walked away. The church was an all or nothing proposition. Either God directed the church through prophesy, and all the teachings of the church were therefore true, or God did not, and the church was a fraud. So, with all the confidence of a teenager, I declared myself free.

I no longer see the world or the church in such simple blacks and whites. The nuances and complexities of the LDS church’s doctrine and history now appear lively and fascinating. Defining a tradition’s doctrine, even a tradition as young and hierarchically organized as the LDS church, is no small feat, and one certainly need not swallow every authoritative statement in order to see value, even truth, in a religious tradition. So I no longer reject the church in its entirety, any more than I accept it as such. Nor do I cringe at the label Mormon.

35 PofGP, The Thirteen Articles of Faith.
After spending my adolescent years diligently searching out everything wrong with the LDS church, I moved on to other interests and other pursuits. Mormonism was always in the background, but rarely in the foreground. I earned a Bachelor's degree, earned a living, raised my daughter, and decided to return to graduate school to pursue my fascination with religions and feminism. I had no thoughts of delving into my tradition of origin.

It was in an eco-feminism course while in graduate school that I first ran across Mormon feminism. The book: *Refuge* by Terry Tempest Williams. Her book, every bit as much about the human experience in Mormon culture as the troubled ecosystems of the Salt Lake basin, shocked me with its candid feminism—published for all to see. She presented insights that struck me as outside of, and frequently contradictory to, Mormon culture and theology. Her book represents a challenge, an internal critique of both LDS doctrine and American culture.

I would never have anticipated such criticism coming from an LDS woman. Internal critique suggests a potential for internal reform. And even that concept seemed antithetical to a religion that believes in ongoing, infallible revelation enshrined in a strictly patriarchal priesthood hierarchy. Given the acceptance of contemporary, infallible revelation I presumed there was little room for anyone other than the prophet to contribute to a reform of the church’s doctrine. Never having been exposed to Mormon intellectualism (and, to be honest, never having given it much thought), the idea that not all Latter-day Saints believed more or less precisely what my parents believed had simply never occurred to me. To my mind, LDS members believed their doctrine to be what it was precisely because God dictated that it should be thus. I knew Latter-day Saints understood individuals within the church to be fallible, even corruptible, but not the doctrine itself. This creates a culture in which, as Terry Tempest Williams puts it “authority is respected, obedience is revered, and independent
thinking is not.”\textsuperscript{36} After all, President Wilford Woodruff had promised; “I say to Israel, the Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as president of the church to lead you astray.”\textsuperscript{37} If God wanted things done differently, He would let the current prophet know.

But in \textit{Refuge}, Williams addressed the construction of Woman within Mormonism and in our culture more generally. As a member of the Young Women’s organization,\textsuperscript{38} I had been taught and mentored by many LDS women. They all echoed the rhetoric of the priesthood leadership: Woman’s greatest calling was as a mother, her duty to God, church, and family was to raise righteous children in Zion. It had never occurred to me that a faithful woman could at the same time maintain active membership in the church and disagree with this position.\textsuperscript{39} Yet Williams openly spars with this construction of Woman in her book. While she clearly identifies with the feminine, she is, by choice, not a mother (itself a form of resistance) and considers her ideas, not her procreative potential, her greatest value. At the same time, Williams gives expression, through her mother’s voice, to the role of motherhood in womanhood and the allure of the cult of mothers: “Having a child completed something for me.” Her mother shared “I can’t explain it. It’s something you feel as a woman connected to other women.”\textsuperscript{40}

As surprising as I found such open resistance to prescribed gender roles, what startled me the most was Williams’ repeated use of the imagery of “laying on of hands” at poignant moments throughout the book. Such imagery doesn’t represent a simple expression of affection or the human need for physical contact. For Williams’ Mormon readers, such

\textsuperscript{36} Williams, \textit{Refuge}, 285.  
\textsuperscript{37} Homer, \textit{The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff}, 212-3.  
\textsuperscript{38} Youth group for adolescent girls.  
\textsuperscript{39} In my more recent experiences with LDS members I have had no trouble finding women who do not accept such stark gender roles or limited spheres for women. This leads me to question whether my previous perception represents a change in church culture in the last 20 years, an unwillingness of members to discuss alternative gender roles with adolescents, or simply my own unexamined assumptions at the time based on the attitudes of my family of origin.  
\textsuperscript{40} Williams, \textit{Refuge}, 51.
imagery contains embedded layers of meaning regarding God and faith, power and grace. The laying on of hands brings into play all the conscious, unconscious, and emotional connections born of a ritual experienced for the first time at only a few days of age and then witnessed or experienced, for the rest of one’s life, at almost every significant demarcation of life transitions or recognition of individuals’ spiritual needs.

While nothing precludes a woman or child from touching someone while they pray, the laying on of hands has been ritualized in Mormon practice so that the behavior specifically denotes the ability of priesthood holders (men) to utilize the power given to them by God to bestow blessings on others. It is a male ritual, and a power ritual. It denotes the power of God and the social (priesthood) position of the man who engages in the ritual.

By appropriating this imagery Williams also appropriated the power it denotes.

With my hands on my mother’s belly, I prayed.  

I return to her bedside. She takes my hand and whispers, ‘will you give me a blessing?’…In Mormon religion, formal blessings of healing are given by men through the priesthood of God. Women have no outward authority…but within the secrecy of sisterhood we have always bestowed benisons upon our families…Mother sits up. I lay my hands upon her head and in the privacy of women we pray.

I was stunned. The significance of both the act and the phrasing cannot be overstated. These behaviors, it seems to me, represent her and her mother’s subversive appropriation of the tools of power representing a criticism of an institution that endows some with power and to others denies it.

Dad gave mother a blessing to which she added—as the men in the family gathered around her to place their hands on her head—someday, I hope Terry and Ann and my granddaughters will be able to stand in this circle…

It had never occurred to me that a believing, active, temple-worthy, LDS woman could cherish such dreams. I hadn’t imagined space in Mormonism for such objections. Was there room for feminism in Mormonism?

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41 Ibid., 35.
42 Ibid., 158.
43 Ibid., 207.
My understanding of Mormonism was permanently altered. Why, I wondered, had I accepted without question the position that the only resolution to my conflict with church doctrine was to leave the church while Williams remained a member, resisting from within? My curiosity piqued. Where there others like her? There must be. How big was the community of loyal dissenters? How much power did they wield? What were their arguments? How did the church’s hierarchy respond to them? How close was the church to fulfilling Williams’ mother’s dream? How had these Mormon feminists managed to stay while I had left?

In a desire to ground myself in the actual practice of Mormonism, the lived experience of average members, and to avoid overly intellectualizing it to the exclusion of any connection to reality, I began attending the local LDS ward where I live in Ames, Iowa while working on this thesis. I vividly remember those first few Sundays, my initial steps into a world I had long put behind me. It had been years since I visited, over a decade since I had attended with any openness to the experiences of worship—the sounds, the sites, the smells…so familiar. My eyes stung during the Sacrament hymn, a lump forming in my throat—the connection visceral. Even the incessant fussing of babies and shushing by parents, distracting for many visitors to LDS services, felt comfortingly familiar: like my parents’ home on Thanksgiving day—the smell of turkey cooling on the counter and pumpkin pie in the oven. Mormon rituals are my comfort food.

In the prologue of Alone of All Her Sex, Marian Warner describes an experience that resonates with my own. She tells of a Catholic convent school upbringing and the veneration of the Virgin Mary it instilled in her. Explaining the residual hold the Virgin’s mythologies possess, she writes:
...so potent was her spell that for some years I could not enter the church without pain at all the safety and beauty of the salvation I had forsaken. I remember visiting Notre Dame in Paris and standing in the nave, tears starting in my eyes, furious at that old love’s enduring power to move me."

I read these words and my heart went out to her. While I can’t say it awakens fury in me, I too know this feeling.

Ritual and spiritual experience (frequently, but not always intertwined) play important roles in human life. The need we feel for them and the fulfillment they offer vary considerably. For whatever combination of temperament and upbringing, I am one who craves them deeply; their dearth in my rather secular life is a lack I feel keenly. My Mormon upbringing provided me with a rich palette of ritual experiences, words and gestures, songs and behaviors pregnant with meaning and significance. It was bathed in the sacred—“a burning in the bosom” as it is frequently described in Mormon lore. Such color feels rich and inviting to the Midwestern, white-collar, middleclass, European-American canvas on which my life is painted. As I once again entered the rituals of LDS practice, I found the sacred and comfortingly familiar sensation of “the Spirit,” so pervasive in LDS worship, irresistibly appealing.

Because I do not attend Sunday Sacrament meetings regularly, and because I do not accept the vast majority of LDS truth claims at face value, I would probably not be considered a believer by many Latter-day Saints. When I look for personal meaning within a religious tradition, I see their sacred stories as sometimes beautiful, sometimes damaging, but always fascinating allegories. When I find truth within religions’ sacred stories, whether epics of Krishna, legends of Scarface of the Navaho, Bible stories of Jesus of Nazareth, or the recasting into sacred story the experiences of a 14 year old boy in upstate New York, I do not look for it in historicity. For me, that is not where the truths in sacred stories lie. This certainly puts me within the spectrum of attitudes espoused by active Latter-day Saints, but on the margins, and at odds, at least to some extent, with the views expressed by its leaders.

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But Mormonism is more than a list of orthodox doctrine to which one must attest belief. It is more even than a shared praxis, though “activity”\(^{45}\) is an important signifier—perhaps more important than belief—of affiliation with the LDS church. I can reject portions of or even all church dogma and LDS doctrine, I could choose not to participate in the community, but I can never completely forsake Mormonism. I am ethnically Mormon. It is part of my identity. I have no more power to cut it off and forsake it than my white-collar upbringing or the privileges and limitations my white skin bestows.\(^{46}\) Not only does Mormonism pervade every moment of my childhood, Mormonism is in my blood. Immersed in it as I was, Mormon culture shaped my worldview. Whether rejecting or accepting ideologies, I have no choice but to do so in relation to a Mormon worldview. Their stories, whether of pioneer courage or visions of angels, are the mythologies that enliven my imagination and shape my value system.

I have made many good friends within the LDS community in the course of working on this thesis. My local congregation welcomed me with open arms and I have enjoyed the experiences of fellowship in the setting, and surroundings, and ritual practices of my Mormon ethnicity.

It has been good to be home.

I am not an objective observer in studying the LDS tradition—and neither is anyone else. The position of methodological atheism, frequently presented in academic discourse as a neutral position,\(^{47}\) is its own lens, bending the light passing through it, creating its own distortions. When scholars employ this lens without engaging in reflexivity, they mask the very real presuppositions and judgments that atheism brings to a study, misrepresenting the

\(^{45}\) LDS members speak of activity levels in relation to the frequency with which a member attends church meetings and activities and their level of contribution to the community.

\(^{46}\) For a similar sentiment expressed by another Mormon feminist see Ulrich, “Border Crossings,” 203.

\(^{47}\) Bado-Fralick, \textit{Coming to the Edge of the Circle}, 7.
images created. Both the ardent atheist’s and the ardent adherent’s lenses bend the light, distorting the images produced. Or as Nikki Bado put it, we are every bit as blind in complete light as in complete darkness. It is in the play of light and shadows that sight takes place. And sight, after all, is the point of academic inquiry. The particular play of light and shadows in my work, the lens through which I look, distorts the image in ways that allow me to bring some views into focus, permitting us to inspect these phenomena from a particular vantage point. Thereby, I offer my small contribution to the larger conversation about Mormonism and its people.

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48 Ibid., 4-6.
CHAPTER 2 – SCRIPTURE, SOLA SCRIPTURA, AND CONTINUOUS REVELATION

Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.

Proverbs 13:12

2.a. Change process and comparisons

In order to address questions of whether and when the LDS church will change the roles it prescribes for women, we need to explore the process of changing doctrine, policy, and practice within the LDS church. In so doing, it helps to compare its change process to that of other denominations, note distinguishing features of the LDS process, and consider how these features have affected previous changes. By making such comparisons, this chapter brings these distinguishing characteristics to the forefront, illuminating the process and character of change in the LDS church.

The LDS movement originated and is embedded in a U.S. Christian religious culture dominated by Protestantism. Making any statements about “Protestant traditions” or “Protestantism” is unquestionably a grand generalization risking misrepresentation. Protestantism is a large, diverse, and complex religious movement, and addressing this diversity is beyond the scope of this thesis. I use the term “Protestant” here as shorthand for the mainstream Protestant denominations in the U.S. that have powerfully influenced the culture and religious landscape of this country. These denominations have been the subject of much scholarship and are a frequent source of comparison for those studying and calling for changes in the LDS church. My purpose in making this comparison is to discuss some specific ways in which the LDS tradition markedly differs from these mainstream Protestant

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49 Bible: KJV

50 See Jenkins, The Next Christendom, for an interesting exploration of global Christianity.

51 Marty, “Protestant Christianity in the World and in America,” 25-47.
denominations, which resemble each other far more closely than they do the Latter-day Saints.

In drawing this comparison, I primarily consider changes regarding race rather than gender. Racial issues make a good analogy to gender for several reasons. First, for most of its history the LDS church had both clearly defined and distinctly different doctrines and policies regarding race than it does today. Race provides a clear example of historical change in doctrine, allowing us to consider the entire process, including the consequences of that process and the relative success of its outcomes. Second, though the particularities looked different, most mainstream Protestant denominations made a similar transformation in their stances toward race during the 20th century as the LDS church did. We can compare how racist policies and beliefs were justified, how change in those policies came about, and how new policies and beliefs are justified for both Protestant and LDS denominations. Third, race, like gender, is a heated topic with personal, social, and political ramifications. Fourth, for both race and gender, the major source of contention revolves around the priesthood and access to it. The LDS church’s lay priesthood structure combined with the priesthood’s distinctive role in personal salvation, the ministry of sacred ordinances, and the administrative functions of the LDS church as an organization make limiting access to the priesthood both highly visible and particularly problematic. While many other issues provide fodder for passionate and heated debate regarding both race and gender, these discussions nearly always revert to a question of access to the priesthood. Despite these similarities, there are, of course, many ways in which the two cases do not parallel one another. We will consider some of these differences and the resulting limitations of looking at LDS gender doctrine and policies through this particular lens in chapter four.

52 Toscano, “Put On Your Strength O Daughters of Zion,” 411.
53 This is apparent in the literature, as nearly every publication addressing gender equality in the LDS church at some point alludes to priesthood. This tendency is also noted in Toscano, “Are Boys More Important Than Girls?,” 27.
Nonetheless, given these useful resemblances, let us begin by considering how Protestants and Mormons use their most sacred texts, the scriptures. Understanding how these denominations conceive of and use scripture in their respective doctrinal discourse and policy justification helps us understand why the process of changing racial policy looked so different in the LDS tradition than in Protestant denominations. Further, it sheds some light, I believe, on what a change process regarding gender roles would look like.

2.b. Scriptural justification

A defining characteristic of Protestant denominations is commitment to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Enunciated by the original Protestant Reformers of the 16th century, this doctrine leads to a particular approach for interpreting what behaviors and beliefs are Christian. According to *sola scriptura*, scripture has unique authority and can be used to critique both tradition and religious authority figures. How this doctrine is understood has evolved with the denominations that espouse it. Today, it is commonly understood to require that individuals – through the guidance of their own reason, conscience, and/or the Holy Spirit – interpret the meaning of the scriptures. This interpretation must then be held up against the traditions of church institutions and the teachings of church leaders to determine the ethical and moral rightness of practices.54

*Sola scriptura* provides a mechanism for internal critique of traditions and beliefs that has implications for how beliefs and behaviors change over time. Primarily, it provides legitimacy for the individual to challenge dominant interpretations of scripture and suggest alternatives. At least in theory, if not always in practice, no interpretation is sacrosanct, and thus corruption, error, or deceit on the part of religious leaders can be identified and corrected. Significantly, *sola scriptura* also provides an avenue for acknowledging errors and correcting them. Since human interpretations are understood to be fallible, it is possible for

an individual or a denomination to change its stance—even apologize—for erroneous interpretations.

However, understanding the *Bible* as the ultimate and only source of Christian tradition also has a limiting effect. Protestants who rely on *sola scriptura* do not have access to any extra-Biblical source of truth or authority. If the *Bible* doesn’t speak to a particular modern problem, Protestants have no means of addressing it beyond extrapolation from issues that are addressed. Another concern, as E. P. Sanders points out in *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, is that “people want to agree with Jesus, and this often means that they see him as agreeing with themselves.”\(^5^5\) This situation has important implications for how Protestant denominations adapt to changing social conditions and for understanding how and why the options available to Protestants differ from those available to Latter-day Saints.

Before attempting to understand how Latter-day Saints use scripture differently than Protestants, let us consider an example of how the doctrine of *sola scriptura* influenced a particular processes of change in Protestant denominations. The Southern Baptists’ struggle with race relations during the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries makes an instructive example, representing fairly well how the process unfolded for many Protestant denominations that believe God’s will can be known through a study of the *Bible*.\(^5^6\)

The Southern Baptist Convention was created in 1845 when it split from the American Baptist Convention over whether slave owners could be missionaries.\(^5^7\) In the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries most white Southern Baptist churches barred membership to blacks.\(^5^8\) Southern Baptists were also instrumental in providing religious justification for the

\(^5^5\) Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 6.
\(^5^6\) Willis, *All According to God’s Plan*, 1, 26.
\(^5^7\) “Southern Baptists Apologize to Blacks for Racism.”
\(^5^8\) Ibid.
institutionalization of Jim Crow laws. Over a century later, in 1995, the Southern Baptist convention passed a resolution apologizing to blacks for supporting racism.

We...unwaveringly denounce racism in all its forms, as deplorable sin; and... we lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest...we apologize to all African Americans for condoning and or perpetuating individual and systemic racism...We ask for forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters...we hereby commit ourselves to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry.

Today, Southern Baptists have become one of the most racially diverse denominations in America. Clearly this change required a fundamental shift in the understanding of what is Christian and what constitutes evil and sin.

According to Alan Scot Willis, “in the years following World War II, Southern Baptist leaders...promoted a progressive view of race relations quite at odds with the opinions and traditions that dominated the American South.” Based on the resolution of the 1995 convention, it seems safe to conclude that their efforts had, at least in part, the desired effect. Of significance here is the question of how these progressive theologians made their arguments.

The basis of both the Jim Crow Christianity of the South and the post-WWII progressive theology of race were grounded in Biblical interpretations. There were three common explanations for racial segregation and discrimination. (1) The most common of these was the “curse of Ham” found in Genesis 9:25-27 in which Noah curses Ham’s son Canaan to be a slave to his brothers and to Shem. The descendants of Canaan were understood by American whites as well as whites in many other parts of the world to be the

59 Willis, All According to God’s Plan, 18-25.
60 “Southern Baptists Apologize to Blacks for Racism.”
63 All biblical citations in this section not quoted directly from another work reference the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (Bible: NRSV).
64 Hays and Carson, From Every People and Nation, 51-3.
Africans. Therefore, people of African descent, the argument went, must live under that curse. Furthermore, since the Curse of Ham was not shared by all humanity (only the blacks) it was exempt from Jesus’ atonement. (2) Jim Crow Christians also employed Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, in which he implored them not to have partnerships or fellowship with unbelievers or between light and darkness. (3) Another common justification for segregation was the Tower of Babel story, in which God divided the people. What God made separate, they claimed, let no man unite. These are only some of the primary Biblical arguments for Jim Crow Christianity, not an exhaustive list.

Progressive Baptists criticized these interpretations, arguing that: (1) Historical and scientific evidence did not support the claim that Africans are descendents of Ham, and even if they were, the curse was temporary and certainly could not have outlasted the atonement. (2) Most Southern blacks were Christians, even Baptists, making Paul’s warnings irrelevant to the situation. (3) Regarding the Tower of Babel story, they argued that it explained the existence of multiple languages but had nothing to do with race, nor did it suggest relationships of superiority or inferiority as all were punished equally.

Progressive theologians bolstered these arguments with further reference to scripture which they felt clearly demonstrated the sin of segregation and racism, including:

- Paul’s announcement that God made “of one blood all the nations of the Earth,” clearly demonstrates that segregation is a human – not divine – creation.
- Peter’s vision and his pronouncement that God was no respecter of persons and no man could deem another man unclean or defiled. To designate black people as inferior directly contradicted God’s message to Peter.

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65 Clark, “The Fading Curse of Cain.”
66 Willis, All According to God’s Plan, 18-25.
67 Ibid.
• According to the Gospels, Jesus personally reached out to the Samaritans of ancient Palestine. The social divide between Jews and Samaritans of Jesus’ time was just as embittered as that between blacks and whites in America.

• Finally, they cited the “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19 and its counterpart in Acts 1:8 in which Jesus instructed his followers to preach “to ends of the earth.” Racial prejudice and segregation would make this mission mandate impossible to fulfill.  

At every point in the argument, Protestant theologians use scripture as their point of reference for their claims about Christianity and sin. Their dependence on the doctrine of sola scriptura allowed Southern Baptists to reinterpret their tradition, to challenge one another, and eventually to change their collective stance on race as evidenced by their 1995 conference. The 1995 conference also demonstrates the ability which sola scriptura facilitates to acknowledge past errors, apologize for wrongs, and directly confront the sources and responsibility for those errors.

Southern Baptist history on race relations provides a concrete example of how the process of change in belief and policy for Protestant Christians takes place through debate and reinterpretation of scripture. We witness this same process taking place in other Christian denominations. The Report of the Eighteenth Plenary Conference of the Consultation on Church Union  provides an excellent example, as does the work of numerous contemporary Christian theologians.

We can see this same process at work for gender. There is much debate in biblical exegeses regarding the roles that have been prescribed for women. However, as recently as

68 Ibid.
69 “Ecumenical Chronicle,” 114.
70 See Hays and Carson, From Every People and Nation for just one of many excellent examples.
71 Ruether, Women and Redemption; Some early, influential pieces include: Stanton and the Revising Committee, The Woman’s Bible; Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk; Fiorenza, In Memory of Her; Arthur, “The
the first half of the 20th century, the priesthood and ministry were considered men’s occupations, not women’s. Dominant views among mainstream Protestant denominations included divinely ordained gender spheres, limits on women’s participation in theology and exegeses, and their relegation to auxiliary service roles within local congregations. While women have always done much of the work that enabled Protestant churches to fulfill their missions, most denominations did not admit women to the seminary, and formal authority at both the local congregation and church organization levels rested almost exclusively in the hands of men.72

However, during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, much of this changed. The ordination of women into the priesthood and clergy in most mainstream Protestant denominations provides evidence of this.73 In 1976 the Episcopal church voted to ordain women; in 1980 the Methodists ordained their first female bishop; in 1991 the Lutherans ordained their first female bishop; in 1996 evangelicals ordained their first female minister; and in 1996 the Methodist World Council received its first chairwoman.74 However, even though by the 1990s over one third of seminary students were women,75 only 21% of congregational pastors in mainstream Protestant denominations were women, and many of these found themselves confined to lower-status positions such as associate or youth pastor.76

Throughout the history of U.S. feminism, both those seeking to limit women’s roles and those seeking to expand them—especially within church institutions—have used

72 Burn, Women Across Cultures, 211-221.
73 Ibid., 212.
74 Baber, “The Ordination of Women, Natural Symbols, and What Even God Cannot Do,” 145; Burn, Women Across Cultures, 220.
75 Gross, Feminism and Religion.
76 Duin, “Women break through the stained-glass ceiling”; Sullins, “The stained glass ceiling.”
religious arguments. Again, Biblical justifications have played a dominant role in these arguments. Common claims by those seeking to limit women’s religious and secular roles include Old Testament scriptures such as: Genesis 2:18-23 in which Eve (woman) is created as a companion or “help-meet” for Adam (man), and Genesis 3:16 in which God pronounces a curse on Eve that “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

The New Testament, they point out, clearly articulates women’s and men’s respective roles in the church:

- 1 Timothy 2:12 “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”
- 1 Corinthians 11:3 “the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.”
- And 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

In addition to these direct statements from the Bible, they point out that: Men, not women, served as the patriarchs and prophets of God throughout the Bible. Righteous women were modest, chaste, obedient to their husbands, and filled the roles of wife and mother. Further, this argument goes, God incarnate came in the form of a man, Jesus, who chose 12 men as his apostles. Therefore, they conclude, it is clear from the example God provided for us that men, not women, should lead and officiate in the church. Again, this is not an exhaustive list, only some of the highlights.

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77 Burn, Women Across Cultures, 212.
Similarly, feminist theologians such as Angelina and Sara Grimké, Elizabeth Cady-Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Phyllis Trible, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and many others argue on biblical grounds against these positions. They claim that the Bible’s patriarchal order is description not prescription. It was written in a patriarchal culture and so is about, for, and by or through men. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that it reflects the cultural assumptions and attitudes of its time. Trible’s re-translation and -interpretation of Genesis demonstrates that careful reading suggests much of the sexism in the text results from interpretation and translation. And, the minimizing of Old Testament matriarchs was and is a human—not divine—choice.

Feminists go on to argue that for his time Jesus was an incredible liberal with respect to women and there is much to suggest that Christ was attempting to counter the sexism of his society.

- He freely spoke and fellowshipped with women throughout his ministry.
- He praised Mary’s study of theology over Martha’s attention to housework (Luke 10:38-42).
- He utilized women in his metaphors and parables (e.g. Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34 &15:8-10) and counted them significant among his followers and friends.
- It was to a woman that Jesus first declared his status as the Son of God (John 11:25) and a woman who Christ first sent to preach of his resurrection (John 20:10-18, Matthew 28: 1-10).

78 Lerner, The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké; Stanton and the Revising Committee, The Woman’s Bible; Kesselman, McNair, and Schneiderwind, “Sojourner Truth’s Defense of the Rights of Women”; Trible, “Eve and Adam”; Ruether, Women and Redemption; Fiorenza, In Memory of Her; For more examples see Gross, Feminism and Religion, 29-64.
80 Burn, Women Across Cultures, 195.
81 Trible, “Eve and Adam.”
82 Burn, Women Across Cultures, 195.
83 Hyatt, In the Spirit We’re Equal, Chapter 2.
Furthermore, the New Testament contains many scriptures such as Galatians 3:28
“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male
nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” which suggests that Christ intended to
replace the ancient hierarchies with egalitarianism.84

In response to the argument that Jesus gave us an all male model of church
leadership, feminists point out that women featured prominently as early martyrs85 and
hosted early house churches (e.g. Acts 1:13). Jesus and the apostle’s maleness was a
necessity of the culture in which they lived, not an essentialist statement on women’s roles.
Conviction and a call from God, not anatomy, make one worthy to minister in Christ’s
church.

The success of feminist theologians is somewhat mixed. Yet from the examples cited
previously, feminist theologians have clearly made progress. While neither equal in number
nor in positions of top ecclesiastical authority to men, women pastors are a common sight at
Protestant pulpits across mainstream denominations. Such measures demonstrate a clear
change in doctrine and policy regarding women.

In detailing the success of the doctrine of *sola scriptura* in allowing Protestant
denominations to reevaluate their collective stances on race and gender, and make significant
changes in policies and doctrine based on those reevaluations, we should note a limitation:
the fragility of these new theologies. Just as progressive and feminist theologians were able
to critique Jim Crow Christianity and limited gendered spheres, the reverse takes place as
well. With no source of authority outside scripture, there is nothing binding and little
resilience to progressive interpretations. Should social or political conditions provoke it, is
there any reason to think that racist and sexist theologians won’t become more persuasive? A
claim for *sola scriptura* is that it guards against corruption. However, it did not prevent

84 Ibid.
theologians from producing racist theologies that dominated the beliefs of most Europeans from the Colonial period on, or theologies that relegated women to subordinate and sexualized roles.\textsuperscript{86}

Also note the date of the pronouncement that acknowledged and apologized for the evils of racism in the Southern Baptist denomination, 1995. This date is long after the thrust of the civil rights movement (and long after the change in LDS racial policy). We must also acknowledge the incompleteness or limitedness of the change. While blacks now make up a large percentage of Southern Baptists, they are still fairly segregated in congregational worship. For many, black and white, Sunday is the most segregated day of the week. While Blacks may be represented significantly in the Southern Baptist Convention, open and hostile racism is still a serious problem among white Protestants, notably in the American South. We can see similar limitations and incompleteness of change regarding gender. And, while women technically have access to the priesthood in most denominations, they represent only a small percentage of top ecclesiastical positions. The majority of female graduates of seminary are tracked into non-administrative positions, frequently youth or other subordinate ministries with little influence in the larger system—a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the stained glass ceiling.\textsuperscript{87}

2.c. The prophetic tradition in the LDS church

Before moving on to discuss changes in doctrine, policies, and practices regarding race in the LDS church, we need to have an understanding of the form, function, and importance of its prophetic tradition. The LDS church’s particular understanding of the prophetic tradition is a hallmark of Mormonism. Latter-day Saints believe that the Lord has always revealed His will for His people through prophets. One of the primary messages

\textsuperscript{86} This question becomes even more important in light of the racist and sexist rhetoric currently employed by many right-wing Protestant fundamentalists.

\textsuperscript{87} Burn, \textit{Women Across Cultures}, 212.
Joseph Smith proclaimed was the doctrine of continuous revelation. In the ninth Article of Faith he stated, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” He expounded on this concept further, stating:

> This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire…”for all things shall be made known unto them in mine own due time, and in the end they shall have joy.”

Academics continue to debate how revelation was understood originally in the church. Early in the church’s history many members were considered “natural” seers or to have gifts of revelation. For the first half-century or so of the church’s existence, revelation and the use of mysticism and quasi-magical objects as aids in receiving revelation was very common. However, conflicts arose from these activities, and Joseph Smith received revelation clarifying the role of the prophet (himself at the time) as the person whose revelations should supersede all others. This resulted, eventually, in a clear message from church authorities that God gives revelation for the body of the church only to the current prophet. Other priesthood authorities can receive revelation regarding the people or processes over which they preside. Members not in priesthood leadership positions receive revelation only in very limited spheres of life (self, family, church auxiliary callings.)

> Everything recorded in the *Doctrine and Covenants* is understood as revelation directly from the Lord to His chosen Prophet. Today, Latter-day Saints understand the role of continuous revelation in directing the church very literally.

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89 *Smith, Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 256-7. This collection of sermons, portions of sermons and sundry teachings of Joseph Smith Jr. (many of which he did not himself commit to paper) was compiled by Joseph F. Smith who would later become the 6th President of the LDS church. This quote is dated, Aug. 27, 1842, and attributed to the [Documentary] History of the Church 5:134-136.
90 *Quinn, Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*.
91 *Pierce, “Personal Discourse on God the Mother,”* 247.
Jesus Christ is the head of His Church today just as He was in the days of His earthly ministry…He rules and guides its affairs, and is as really present in the Church as if He were among us in the flesh.92 Because Jesus isn’t currently “among us” He must speak through revelation. Joseph Smith made this role explicit in a revelation recorded as D&C 21:5. “For his [the prophet’s] word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith.”93 Members are counseled that “[n]obody changes the principles and doctrines of the Church except the Lord by revelation.”94

The consequences of a theology of continuous revelation are immense, for both the individual believer and the organization of the church. As opposed to Protestants, the individual Mormon’s interpretation is not the final authority on scripture. Neither is scripture the ultimate authority for the church. While individual LDS members interpret both the scriptures and the prophets’ words in various and distinct ways,95 the range of interpretation is limited when compared with Protestantism. The scriptures were in fact written in antiquated languages and styles and in foreign cultural contexts; this is far less true for the words of latter-day (Joseph Smith forward) prophets, and arguably not true at all (at least for English speaking, American Saints) for the words of the current prophet. The interpretations they offer of scripture in their sermons and publications carry a weight “as if from mine own mouth.” As L. Jackson Newell points out,

For many leaders and members, the concept of ‘the true church’ means not only that the doctrine reflects the Lord’s precise purposes and understandings but also that the judgments of church leaders are flawless and that the institution cannot err.96

92 LDS church headquarters in Salt Lake City provide lesson plans for every lesson taught at every level of church education. These quotes were taken from the Sunday school lesson manual—The Latter-day Saint Women, Part B, Duties and Responsibilities, The Latter-day Saint Woman: Basic Manual for Women, 1.
93 “His” in this verse referred to then prophet, Joseph Smith Jr. Today, this verse is understood to extend to whomever is the current prophet. So, Saints are to treat the words of Joseph Smith as if they come “from [God’s] own mouth” and they are to treat President Thomas S. Monson’s words with the same reverence.
94 The Latter-day Saint Woman: Basic Manual for Women.
95 For Further discussion of this see Newell, “Enlarging the Mormon Vision of Christian Ethics,” 146-7.
96 Ibid.
While this perspective certainly isn’t true of all members, it represents a powerful strain within LDS culture.

The LDS church holds in tension this idea of inerrancy and the implication of continued revelation; that is, that current practice is imperfect and change is needed to move closer to truly embodying the Kingdom of God. According to Mormon tradition, the Gospel was restored to Joseph Smith in its fullness. Yet, the oft repeated teaching in 2 Nephi 28:30 of the Book of Mormon, “Thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept… For unto him that receiveth I will give more,” seems to indicate that God continues to unfold more perfect doctrine and practice as both individuals and the church progress toward perfection.

Conceptually, continuous revelation is complicated by the emphasis the LDS church places on personal revelation. The revelation pronounced by Joseph Smith in D&C 21:5 (“For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth”) took place in a particular historical circumstance, the founding of the church. And indeed much of what Smith said and wrote was given the weight of revelation and later incorporated into the Doctrine and Covenants or Pearl of Great Price—and thus holds the status of scripture. However, the words of subsequent prophets are rarely canonized in that manner. Of the 106 sections and two Official Declarations in the D&C, only five were revealed to prophets other than Joseph Smith. The Pearl of Great Price contains only the writings of and revelations to Smith. Thus LDS members are left with the questions: which of the words spoken in the many sermons and writings of the current prophet are doctrine and which are not? Does D&C 21:5 apply to

97 See talk by Cowan, “The Unfolding Restoration of Temple Work.”
98 The LDS scriptural cannon consists of the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C)—divided into sections, this work consists primarily of revelations from God to Joseph Smith Jr. as well as several revelations to later prophets; the Pearl of Great Price (PofGP)—a collection of writing parts of which were translated by, parts revealed to, and parts narrations by Joseph Smith Jr. and canonized by the LDS church in 1880; the Book of Mormon (BoFM)—the translation by Joseph Smith Jr. of ancient writings given to him by an angel; and the Holy Bible: King James Version (Bible: KJV).
all latter-day prophets, or just Joseph Smith? Which of their words should be treated as if spoken “from mine own mouth”? These are complex questions and a full exploration of them is beyond the scope of this paper. Some aspects, however, bear discussion.

While serving as a member of the Twelve, before he became the tenth president and prophet of the church, Joseph Fielding Smith spoke to these questions. He explained,

> It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them. Let us have this matter clear. We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man’s doctrine.

> You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the Church as standards in doctrine, only in so far as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works.\(^99\)

> Members are repeatedly counseled to seek out answers for themselves; confirmations of scriptural interpretations and truth of doctrine declared by the church. This personal revelation acquired through study, prayer, scripture reading, one’s own reason, and listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, bears a resemblance to, and serves a similar function as, *sola scriptura* in Protestantism. It allows scripture and the personal spiritual experiences of individuals to serve as measuring sticks for the words of church authorities. It provides for considerable latitude in interpreting scripture as well as the words of prophets. And it encourages debate among both average church members and church academics about each.

> Other factors further complicate this interaction between scripture, the words of latter-day prophets, and personal revelation. While a strong culture of leadership inerrancy exists within the church, inconsistencies in statements of past and present latter-day prophets and apostles means that, for the individual member, evaluating exegesis by general authorities is a complex process. This evaluation must incorporate the relative

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authoritativeness of the speakers themselves as well as the historical position of their words and the context in which they gave their exegeses.\textsuperscript{100} As Laura Vance points out;

Mormons distinguish between things a leader says in meetings of the general membership (annual and biannual conferences), which are more likely to be considered inspired by God, and things he says in other contexts, which are not normally considered to be inspired by God.\textsuperscript{101}

The inconsistencies individuals have to work through often represent incremental and sometimes dramatic shifts in doctrine, policy, and practice. We will look at this more closely in chapter four, as understanding how such inconsistencies function to produce change is essential to the goals of this thesis. For now, we need only note that unlike \textit{sola scriptura}, internal debate among members and academics has little effect on church-wide doctrine or policy. High ranking authorities, particularly the prophet, can severely dampen the freedom members feel to engage in debate, especially during church meetings, by taking a position on the issue in a sermon or an official publication.\textsuperscript{102}

Despite Joseph Fielding Smith’s above quotation, for the average member, the prophets’ words carry enormous weight, especially when said during official sermons, even when not canonized as revelations. For example, in a recent Sunday school class, a woman expressed her feelings regarding the prophet’s words saying, “Yes it’s just advice, but it’s

\textsuperscript{100} Armand Mauss provides an interesting discussion (which will be considered in section 2.d.) of how members should evaluate the authoritativeness of doctrinal claims in his paper, Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse.” While his system is academically interesting and very useful because it systematically organizes claims the church and its members have made by the level of authority attributed to the spokesperson and venue, Mauss’ system is not official nor is it familiar to the general membership. Thus, given the complexity of the task and the number of interdependent variables to consider, it seems unlikely that the average LDS member is able to evaluate the authoritativeness of truth claims in a consistent, systematic manner.

\textsuperscript{101} Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”

\textsuperscript{102} An example of this I have personally witnessed is the reluctance members feel to debate the morality of same-sex relationships and the politics of same-sex marriage during church meetings. The current LDS leadership has taken strong public stances on these topics. While many members express (in private conversations) discomfort or even outright disagreement with the official church position, these same individuals do not do so while giving sacrament talks or engaging in discussions during Sunday school classes. Unless their personal opinion mirrors that espoused by church leaders, they do not feel free to express them during church meetings.
advice from the Prophet.”

Clearly “as if from mine own mouth” plays a significant role for her. Ultimately, debate among church members has little effect on church-wide doctrine or policy because a relatively small number of men at the top of a complex hierarchy make such decisions. (With the possible exception of when that debate takes place between individuals who have personal influence on the individuals who compose the top tier of the church hierarchy.) And, ultimately, church leaders do not answer to the membership, but to God.

Once the Council of the Twelve Apostles has sustained a prophet’s words as “revelation” they become nearly impossible to change or even challenge. The LDS concept of revelation “line upon line” enables future prophecy to negate previous prophecy; this does not, however, make the previous doctrine in error.

Appeals to scripture can never contradict modern revelation. Church doctrine justifies an interpretation of scripture—scripture does not invalidate church doctrine. As a result, unlike in Protestantism, the use of scripture to argue for changing doctrine is not very effective, unless one can demonstrate that the policy, practice, or belief stems from popular folklore or tradition, not modern revelation. Even then, the debate’s effect has limited reach unless it takes place at the highest levels of the church hierarchy.

Before moving on, it is worth taking a moment to acknowledge that discussing revelation raises the question of its source. While I wish to acknowledge this, such debate is

103 Expressed by a member of the Ames 1st Ward during a discussion in Gospel Doctrine class. The subject of the lesson was how we should receive the words of current day prophets, and the discussion had drifted to dress codes. Ames, Iowa, Spring 2009.

104 For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”

105 See BofM, Nephi 28:30; D&C, 98:12; See Bible: KJV, Isaiah 28:9-10.

106 See White and White, “Integrating Religious and Racial Identities,” 295-311; See also discussion in Mauss, “Casting off the ‘Curse of Cain’,” 106-7 regarding what he calls the “myth of continuity” or linear progressive understanding of Mormon history. Mauss argues that this myth plays the duel function of validating the canonical claim of continuous revelation and protecting the church against charges of pragmatic or expedient revelations.
irrelevant to the purpose of this thesis. Ultimately, whether revelations claimed by the LDS church come from God or not, they are treated as though they do by the membership and believed so by most loyal members from the bottom of the hierarchy to its top. I recognize that cynics would call it naive to assume that LDS prophets probably believe the revelations they receive are from God, and I don’t discount the potential of power to corrupt. However, even if the leadership of the LDS church is intentionally manipulative, whether an idea comes from God through the prophet or from the prophet in the name of God, it makes little practical difference.

2.d. Doctrine, policy, and folklore

Making sense of the moves LDS authorities made in the process of changing the church’s official policy on men of African descent holding the priesthood requires a closer look at the words doctrine, policy, and folklore. The terms “doctrine” and “policy” are difficult to tease out. Harold B. Lee, eleventh president of the church, discussed what constitutes church doctrine in his address in 1973 at a European church conference.

If anyone, regardless of his position in the Church, were to advance a doctrine that is not substantiated by the standard Church works, meaning the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, you many know that his statement is merely his private opinion. The only one authorized to bring forth any new doctrine is the President of the Church, who when he does, will declare it as revelation from God and it will be so accepted by the Council of the Twelve and sustained by the body of the Church. And if any man speak a doctrine which contradicts what is in the standard church works, you may know by that same token that it is false and you are not bound to accept it as truth (emphasis mine). 107

Clearly Lee is using the word doctrine in two different ways. There is the official doctrine of the church and the personal doctrine of individuals. Official church doctrine is set down in scripture (the standard works). Additions can be made by revelation through the prophet, but anything not so designated, whether declared by a teacher in Sunday school, or by the Prophet himself, is not church doctrine, and it is to be evaluated and accepted or rejected by the individual member. If this seems relatively straightforward, the matter

becomes more complicated when considering church policy. While individuals can interpret scripture for themselves, the priesthood hierarchy determines church policy. They derive policy from three sources; tradition, interpretation of scripture, and inspiration. Policies do change, but at least for the present, they represent official interpretations of scripture, and members are bound by them. For example, the Word of Wisdom, outlining what substances members should and should not consume and other advice for the care of one’s body, is laid out in *Doctrine and Covenants* 89:1-2. However, these verses do not designate it as commandment, only recommendation.\(^{108}\) Subsequent church presidents have elevated it to commandment and made following the Word of Wisdom a requirement for full fellowship in the church. Since the scriptures require that individuals obey the commandments, and the church identifies the Word of Wisdom as a commandment, is this policy now doctrine?\(^{109}\)

The blur in this line between doctrine and policy is further illustrated by the difference in how George Albert Smith, church president 1945–1951, and David O. McKay, church president 1951–1970, labeled the withholding of the priesthood from black men. In 1954 McKay is reported by Sterling McMurrin to have claimed;

There is not now, and there never has been, a doctrine in this Church that the Negroes are under a divine curse. We believe that we have scriptural precedent for withholding the priesthood from the Negro. It is a practice, not a doctrine, and the practice will some day be changed. And that’s all there is to it (emphasis mine).\(^{110}\)

While in 1947 the First Presidency wrote in the letter to Lowry Nelson;\(^{111}\)

From the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith until now, it has been the doctrine of the Church, never questioned by any of the Church leaders, that the Negroes are not entitled to the full blessings of the Gospel (emphasis mine).\(^{112}\)

The 1947 letter is an official statement by the First Presidency, however, given that nowhere in the standard works is there laid out any racial restriction on priesthood


\(^{109}\) For a more detailed discussion of this see Allred, “The Traditions of Their Fathers,” 36-7.


\(^{111}\) The events surrounding this letter are discussed in the section 2.e.

\(^{112}\) Quoted in White, “Mormonism’s Anti-Black Policy and Prospects for Change,” 40.
ordination, the word “doctrine” seems to incorporate official church policy as well as
revelation explicated in scripture.

In the end, perhaps trying to distinguish between doctrine and policy isn’t useful as
there are no clear, consistent lines drawn by church authorities. It is simpler to think of
policies, practices, popular folklore, and beliefs espoused by authority figures all as types of
doctrine. However it is important to keep in mind that not all doctrines, when used in this
way, are equal. Mauss\footnote{See Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 174-6 for his more
thorough presentation of this tool.} offers a useful tool for LDS members to determine the authenticity
of a doctrine, practice, or policy. By “authentic” he means, “a claim can legitimately be made
that [it] had divine origin.” It should be noted that this tool is neither officially promoted by
the church, nor is it in wide circulation or use among the membership. However, I find it
useful for our purposes in helping to disentangle the complex and inconstant use of
vocabulary within the church and for discussing reasons why certain avenues for change are
or are not available to the LDS church.

Mauss’ authenticity scale contains four levels: canon doctrine, official doctrine,
authoritative doctrine, and popular doctrine. Canon doctrine includes those writings,
statements, and policies that a prophet represents as direct revelation and which are sustained
as such by the membership (as Herald B. Lee indicated in the previous quote). These include
the four standard works and all their addenda, but probably nothing else. While this might be
all that qualifies as canon doctrine, clearly the church takes official stances and creates
policies that members must follow in order to be considered “in good standing.” These
represent official doctrine. These can and do change. Nonetheless, they represent the official
position of the church as expressed by its legitimate spokespersons at the time of their
pronouncement. While sometimes changed, they are very rarely repudiated. These include
official statements by the first presidency, church lesson manuals and handbooks, and publications in church magazines.\textsuperscript{114}

*Authoritative doctrine* includes all the talks,\textsuperscript{115} teachings, books, and other publications by church authorities on LDS doctrine.\textsuperscript{116} The authors of these doctrines may derive their authority from high ecclesiastical office or formal scholarly credentials or both. *Popular doctrine*, which I will usually refer to as *popular folklore* or *Mormon folklore*, often consists of residual doctrine that at one time was authoritative or official, but is no longer official nor espoused by authorities from the pulpit. It also comprises a host of apocryphal prophecies, common beliefs, popular explanations for quandaries, and other ideas having either local or general circulation within the church.\textsuperscript{117} As stated earlier, this tool is useful for us in discussing how change in doctrine take place due to the shifting status of many church beliefs and practices along his scale. However, it is also important to remember that most church members do not utilize this tool to make clear distinctions between these levels of authority.

Before applying this discussion to changing gender roles, it would be useful to look at how the LDS church evolved and changed its policies, practices, and doctrinal stance on

\textsuperscript{114} Some current examples of official doctrine would include: “The Family: A Proclamation to the World”; *Doctrine and Covenants* student Manual; *The Latter-day Saint Women: Basic Manual for Women*; and articles published in the *Ensign*.

\textsuperscript{115} “Talks” is the word commonly used in the LDS church for sermons given during official church meetings. These are not always given by authority figures as the LDS church democratizes not only its priesthood, but all ministry functions by having lay individuals hold all priesthood, leadership, service, and educational roles within the church. Sunday sermons in local congregations are typically “talks” given by members (both men and women) of the congregation. When church priesthood or auxiliary authorities give sermons, whether at local meetings or General Conference, they are also called “talks.”

\textsuperscript{116} Examples of authoritative doctrine are incredibly numerous. A few influential examples include Smith, *Answers to gospel questions*; Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, vol. 1; McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd edition; McConkie, *She Shall Be Called Woman*.

\textsuperscript{117} Again, examples of Mormon folklore are incredibly numerous. A few examples suggested to me by members of the Ames 1\textsuperscript{st} ward include: Africans are descendants of Cain, Ham, or both; Mormons should not wear a cross; temple garments should always be worn under, never over other underclothing; the conflict and violence in Palestine/Israel anticipates the imminent Second Coming; and so forth.
race. As we should expect from the forgoing discussion, the process looked very different than its paralleled process in Protestantism.

To begin with, we should familiarizing ourselves with the history of the LDS church’s relationship to people of African descent.\textsuperscript{118}

\section*{2.e. The history of the LDS church’s relationship to people of African descent}

When considering this history we need to keep in mind a few relevant points regarding the history of race relations in the United States. Throughout the life of the LDS Church, (19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries) Christian theologians of every denomination have struggled with conceptions of race, freedom, slavery, equality, segregation, and prejudice.\textsuperscript{119} LDS members were subject to the same beliefs about racial origin and prejudices characteristic of other European American Christians.\textsuperscript{120} At the time the LDS Church was organized on April 6, 1830\textsuperscript{121} black slavery was still legal. The early period of the church coincided with intense political turmoil over the issue of slavery. By the time the civil war broke out, Joseph Smith had been martyred and Brigham Young, the most senior surviving apostle, had coalesced the largest group of Smith’s followers and led them west to the Utah territory.\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{118} I specify "African descent" because LDS theology and history regarding relations with other racial groups is very different than their relationship to people of African descent. For a thorough discussion of this subject see; Mauss, \textit{All Abraham's Children}.
\textsuperscript{119} Willis, \textit{All According to God's Plan}, 41-65.
\textsuperscript{120} Mauss, “Mormonism and Secular Attitudes Toward Negroes,” 91-9.
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{D&C}, 21:3; and “Church History Chronology.”
\end{flushleft}
There has been considerable debate in the last fifty years over the exact origin of the church’s racial policy known as the black priesthood ban. What seems clear is that Joseph Smith ordained at least two black men to the priesthood and one to the Quorum of the Seventy (a leadership position) before his martyrdom. While questions remain regarding Smith’s opinions about race, there exists no documentation of him institutionalizing the priesthood restriction.

In the mid and late 1800s, while the Saints where building their religious community in the intermountain West, they participated in both slavery and segregation. Brigham Young, Smith’s successor, set the tone for the first 100 years of the church’s existence with regard to race. Perhaps best known is his pronouncements on the subject in 1852 when he stated; “Any man having one drop of the seed of [Cain]…in him cannot hold the priesthood, and if no other prophet ever spake it before I will say it now.” Several more quotes of this type exist in the record. Later apostles and prophets who reiterated both Young’s decisions and his expressed attitudes towards blacks reinforced this tone and fortified explanations for it.

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124 In this thesis I use “black” as shorthand to refer to people of African descent. It is not a perfect solution. Individuals not of African descent who might consider themselves black (e.g. Australian Aborigines) were not affected by the policy, at least in its later variations. Also, individuals with black African ancestry who appeared white were affected by this policy. However, the vast majority of those affected were dark complexioned and self identified as black.

125 A fact finally publicly acknowledged by the church in 2002 when M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spoke to it at the dedication ceremony of a monument honoring Elijah Able, one of the two black men referred to. His quote is published in the Deseret News, Arave, “Monument in S.L. Erected in Honor of Black Pioneer,” B-3.

126 Mauss, All Abraham’s Children, 219-30. The majority of the literature, both academic and non, refers to the pre-1978 LDS policy on black men holding the priesthood as the “black priesthood ban.” Currently the preferred terminology among church leaders is the “priesthood restriction.” I use these two phrases interchangeably.

127 Quoted in Ibid., 112.
For the next century, Mormon authorities were largely quiet on the subject. Slavery was legal in Utah for the short time before the civil war ended, but there were few black residents and fewer slaves. Mormons did not proselytize in black communities either in the States or abroad, so black converts were few. When the subject of blacks holding the priesthood surfaced, authorities were ambiguous in their reasoning, but upheld the ban.\textsuperscript{128}

As missionary work moved into South and Central America, South Africa, and the Pacific islands, the church needed to develop official policy in order to determine who did and did not qualify for the priesthood. By this time a precedent had developed legitimizing the priesthood restriction.\textsuperscript{129} The first known official declaration identifying the priesthood restriction as doctrine came in the previously quoted 1947 letter from the First Presidency (the Prophet and his two counselors) to Lowry Nelson stating:

\begin{quote}
From the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith until now, it has been the \textit{doctrine} of the Church, never questioned by any of the Church leaders, that the Negroes are not entitled to the full blessings of the Gospel (emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

This was in response to correspondence between Nelson (whom the church had requested to look into the possibility of opening a mission in Cuba) and church authorities, in which he argued for ending the practice. In 1952 Nelson went public in \textit{The Nation}, criticizing the church for its racism, which he believed unjustified.\textsuperscript{131}

During this post World War II era of the 50s and 60s (when theologians of every variety were criticizing Christian support of racist policies and attitudes) the LDS church came under attack both internally and externally for its policy of institutionalized racism:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 213-5. \\
\textsuperscript{129} Mauss, \textit{All Abraham’s Children}, 215; See also Embry, “Spanning the Priesthood Revelation (1978),” 76 for an interesting perspective on how the ban’s status was elevated. \\
\textsuperscript{130} Quoted in White, “Mormonism’s Anti-Black Policy and Prospects for Change,” 40. \\
\textsuperscript{131} Nelson, “Mormons and the Negro,” 488.
\end{quote}
forbidding any male having any black African ancestry from holding the priesthood.\textsuperscript{132} While it made attempts to repair its tattered public image, the church stood by its doctrine.

Despite the apparent immobility of its stance, there is a clear pattern of church authorities reducing the reach of the ban and distancing themselves from the explanations historically used to defend it.\textsuperscript{133} This culminated in 1969 when the First Presidency made a public announcement reaffirming the priesthood restriction but failing to acknowledge any of the scriptural folklore surrounding it.\textsuperscript{134} Instead, they emphasized that the ban existed “for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man.”\textsuperscript{135}

Despite the fact that the church experienced the most intense pressure to change its policy during the 50s and 60s, it was not until June 8, 1978, long after most critics had abandoned their efforts, that they officially extended the priesthood to black men. Following a revelation received by President Spencer W. Kimball, while praying in the Salt Lake Temple with members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles, he declared that “all worthy male members of the Church [might] be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color.”\textsuperscript{136}

It is my position that this delay in removing the restriction is indicative of a system of change which follows from the combination of centralized, hierarchical authority and a belief in continuous revelation, and that this combination results in a very different approach to

\textsuperscript{132} Mauss, \textit{All Abraham’s Children}, 118-9.


\textsuperscript{134} See the section 2.d. of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{135} Quoted in Mauss, \textit{All Abraham’s Children}, 234.

changes in doctrine than is represented by Protestantism, which relies heavily on the doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

### 2.f. Scripture and interpretation

Having briefly considered the history of the LDS church’s relation to people of African descent, we can see that discrete, even dramatic, as well as gradual, subtle changes in doctrine, policy, and practice did take place. In order to use this history as an analogy for examining how the change process might in the future take place regarding gender roles, it will be instructive to look more closely at ways the LDS church’s belief in continuous revelation informed the change process and made it distinct from similar processes taking place in Protestant denominations. Then we can attempt to identify the conditions that preceded change, the steps taken to prepare for and implement change, and the level of success the LDS church’s particular process has experienced in producing deep, authentic change in its community. Finally, what all these considerations tell us about current and potential changes in roles prescribed to gender is the question I address in the following chapters.

When comparing the processes of change that took place in the Southern Baptist tradition and that of the LDS tradition, it is important to note that they both used scripture, but in very different ways. For Southern Baptist theologians, scripture was the source of authority, and changing policy was a matter of arguing for the validity of particular interpretations and insisting that what followed from those interpretations required changes in attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and institutions. In the hands of Latter-day Saints, these same verses and stories were put to different uses.

Recall that Jim Crow Southern Baptists used the curse of Ham to argue for segregation and the inferiority of the African race. This belief is well documented in Mormon
folklore,\textsuperscript{137} and even alluded to in the previous quote by Brigham Young, as an explanation for why God forbade the priesthood to black men. In addition to this, the LDS church has “The Book of Abraham” in the \textit{Pearl of Great Price}, which mentions both the Curse and Ham’s marriage to a woman named Egyptus.\textsuperscript{138} While LDS scholars and theologians have interpreted the passage in a variety of ways, historically many Mormons interpreted it to indicate that through Egyptus, the line of Cain survived the flood, resulting in Africans’ dark skin and (compounded by the curse of Ham) the continuation of a curse precluding those of African lineage from holding the priesthood.\textsuperscript{139} While this interpretation represents popular pre-1978 Mormon folklore, the book itself makes no such claims nor have church authorities officially interpreted it as such.\textsuperscript{140}

Use of the premortal existence (spirit life before birth) in reference to the restriction developed later. For some LDS members it represented an alternative, while for others an additional explanation. The doctrine of the premortal existence took shape in the late 1800s in relation to the \textit{Plan of Salvation}, elements of which are drawn from all four of the scriptural canons of the LDS church\textsuperscript{141} as well as statements made by church leaders.\textsuperscript{142} In brief, this doctrine explains that humans existed in a pre-earth life. During this period, God

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{137} Mauss, \textit{All Abraham’s Children}, 238.
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{PofGP}, Abr. 1:21-7; For more discussion on this see Mauss, \textit{All Abraham's Children}, 238.
\textsuperscript{139} Mauss, \textit{All Abraham’s Children}, 238. I have not included all the complex lineages of figures in the LDS scriptural cannon that have curses associated with them nor do I attempt to explore to what extent any of them bear a relationship to the priesthood restriction previously institutionalized in the LDS church. My purpose is only to highlight some of the prominent sources of folklore justifying the ban.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} For some scriptures used by LDS leaders in explaining the \textit{Plan of Salvation} see BofM Alma 13:-5, Ether 3:6-16; \textit{D&C} 29:36-8, 76:24-9, 77:2, 138:56; \textit{PofGP} Moses 4:1-3, Abraham, 3:22-8; \textit{Bible: KJV} Isaiah 14:12-4, Jeremiah, 1:4-6, Acts 17:29, Romans. 8:16, 1 Peter. 1:19-20, 2 Peter. 2:4, Hebrews. 12:9, Revelations. 12:7-9 & 13:8.
\end{flushright}
presented His spirit children with the *Plan of Salvation*, which would allow them to attain exaltation by receiving a mortal body and then returning to live with Him. A contest referred to as “the war in heaven” ensued over the conditions under which humans would receive this salvation. Jehovah (Jesus Christ) proposed freely chosen obedience, while Lucifer proposed compulsory obedience, thus guaranteeing everyone salvation. Spirits chose sides in this war. God chose Christ’s plan, and Lucifer and his followers were cast out to become Satan and his evil spirits. Many LDS writers have used this to explain why the spirits of Africans were born under the Curse of Cain and denied the priesthood, claiming that spirits later born into bodies of African descent were not valiant in this premortal war.¹⁴³ For example, writing as an apostle in 1956, Joseph Fielding Smith (who would in 1970 become the 10th president of the church) explained:

> There were no neutrals in the war in heaven. All took sides either with Christ or with Satan. Every man had his agency there, and men receive rewards here based upon their actions there, just as they will receive rewards hereafter for deeds done in the body. The Negro, evidently, is receiving the reward he merits.¹⁴⁴

While this and similar statements by church leaders clearly represents authoritative doctrine at the time, and the letter to Nelson represents official church doctrine, none of this popular folklore explaining the ban was claimed as revelation or canonized.¹⁴⁵ Racist interpretations of these mythologies also receive support from the use of skin color curses and the use of “white” to signify purity, righteousness, favor with God, perfection, and so forth in the extra-biblical LDS canon.¹⁴⁶ This surrounding context helped explanations such as the curse and premortal failings fit relatively comfortably into a Mormon worldview. As church leaders and academics provided these explanations for the church’s racial policies, 

¹⁴³ For a more detailed explanation see Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 238-9; also Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 155-6.
countless Sunday school and seminary teachers propagated and sometimes continue to propagate them, entrenching them into LDS culture.\(^{147}\)

Notice the distinction between how LDS members understood these scriptural explanations as compared to Protestants. For Latter-day Saints, the interpretation of scripture helped explain why God created certain doctrines for His church, not the reasons the church instituted the policies, nor justification for instituting them. Church doctrines exist because God revealed them to His prophets. Latter-day Saints do not believe their doctrines require further justification. Therefore, LDS members and leaders typically employ scripture to demonstrate or reaffirm the rightness of their doctrines as well as to encourage each other in following them.

We observe the same pattern in the use of scripture following the 1978 declaration. In 1979 Elder Howard W. Hunter of the Council of the Twelve Apostles gave a sermon in which he called for recognition by members of “the brotherhood of man.”\(^{148}\) He cites Acts 17:26 “And [God] hath made of one blood all nations of men…” and Acts 10:34-35 “Of a truth I perceive that God is not respecter of persons” to demonstrate this principle. To these he added the “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19 as well as its counterparts in Acts 1:8, Mark 16:15, and Luke 24:47. Hunter also invoked 2 Nephi 26:33 “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” which bears a close relationship to Gal 3:28.\(^{149}\) In Hunter’s sermon, he emphasizes that all these scriptures make it clear that all men are invited, making no distinction by race or color or nationality. He also alludes to the fact that “several significant developments have taken place recently…” including the extension

\(^{147}\) See Mauss, “Mormonism and the Negro,” 11-5 for a discussion of how these beliefs are propagated and his scholarly refutation of their validity.

\(^{148}\) Hunter, “All Are Alike Unto God” an address delivered at a fourteen-stake fireside.

\(^{149}\) Ibid.
of the priesthood to black males. In 1981 the *Ensign*, an official LDS publication, included a piece by David Hanna and Steven Ostler, which again used biblical verses from Acts to demonstrate how God is “no respecter of persons” and implore the membership to “overcome any prejudices and cultural patterns we might have in order to extend a hand of friendship and fellowship to all individuals of all races, cultures, and tongues.”

In both of these cases, church leaders use scripture to demonstrate the repetition with which the Lord has asked the members of His church to accept doctrines of inclusiveness, to reach across difference, to overcome prejudice. Never are these scriptures used to justify the change in church doctrine or to explain why the Presidency made that change. Scripture only demonstrates the rightness of the current situation. Neither did Brigham Young (President 1847–1877) nor Spencer W. Kimball (President 1973–1985) appeal to scripture in their declarations. Young appealed to no authority other than his own as a prophet, and Kimball appealed only to revelation from God.

2.g. From race to gender

In 1984, L. Jackson Newell, editor for *Dialogue*, made a poignant remark in the Forward of *Neither White nor Black*.

But even as this volume goes to press the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints begins to implement its historic decision to ordain women—poignantly reminding us of another issue that will surely persist and require the attention of our best minds and most earnest spirits.

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150 Ibid.
152 *Dialogue* is probably the most prominent scholarly periodical specifically intended to give LDS and other Mormon scholars outlets for research and debate on the Mormon tradition. I use articles published in it heavily in this thesis. According to their website, “Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought – About Us.” “*Dialogue* is an independent quarterly established to express Mormon culture and to examine the relevance of religion to secular life. It is edited by Latter-day Saints who wish to bring their faith into dialogue with the larger stream of world religious thought and with human experience as a whole and to foster artistic and scholarly achievement based on their cultural heritage. The journal encourages a variety of viewpoints; although every effort is made to ensure accurate scholarship and responsible judgment, the views expressed are those of the individual authors and are not necessarily those of The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints or of the editors.”
And persist it has. Our next task is to consider what the theology of continuous revelation and the change processes considered in this chapter might mean for the prospects of change in LDS doctrine regarding gender roles. To do so we must take a closer look at the situation of women within the LDS church and consider the difference in level of entrenchment and centrality to the LDS worldview of doctrine regarding gender roles and women as opposed to doctrine regarding race.
CHAPTER 3 – GENDER AND THE LDS CHURCH

I defined [feminist] as anyone, male or female, who is concerned about the status of women in the world. Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith would have to be considered feminist.

Ida Smith, director of the BYU Women’s Research Institute154

3.a. LDS feminism

‘Mormon feminist! That sounds like an oxymoron!’…Yes, I am an active, believing Mormon… And, yes, in the tradition of my Mormon heritage, I am a feminist. I deplore teachings, policies, or attitudes that deny women their full stature as human beings, and I have tried to act on that conviction in my personal and professional life.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, MacArthur Fellow & Pulitzer Recipient155

If your only exposure to women in Mormon traditions are images from pop culture of polygynous wives, or sensational news stories depicting raids on fundamentalist sects emancipating scores of calico clad women and their children, then the phrase Mormon feminism must indeed seem a contradiction in terms. However, the relationship of women to the LDS church as an institution and a spiritual path has a long, varied, and complex history.

As Ulrich eloquently points out regarding Mormon feminists,

Those who assume that Mormonism is inherently hostile to women or, conversely, that feminism undermines faith, sniff at the phrase. But when confronted with a real person claiming to be both things at once, they are forced to reconsider their assumptions. Feminism may be larger than they imagined and Mormonism more flexible.156

By and large, individuals who claim both the labels Mormon and feminist believe the tradition and/or the God it speaks of is, at its core, egalitarian.157 Ideas of what that egalitarianism would look like if it were manifest in the LDS church and how to achieve it vary widely. However, Mormon feminists158 converge on a belief that the Latter-day Saints

156 Ibid., 201.
157 For a beautifully written example of the deep love many feminists have for the gospel and their conviction that at its heart it is egalitarian, see Anderson, “The Grammar of Inequity,” 215-6.
158 I use the term Mormon feminist to refer to individuals actively arguing for change in the LDS church on feminist grounds. The majority of the authors I draw on have at some point expressed a deep commitment or devotion to the Gospel of Jesus Christ or the LDS church or both. However, some have not explicitly done so,
movement’s base assumptions, core philosophies, or divine source are not ones of subjugation but of individual worth, personal responsibility, and infinite potential. Early Mormonism was shaped by a critique of power and an ideal of equality that these individuals feel resonate with both 19th century and modern feminism.

The *Book of Mormon* prophet Lehi explains, in 2 Nephi 2:26, “because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not be acted upon.” Ulrich points out the striking similarity of this formulation with the modern distinction between subject and object, “that each person be free to think, speak, and act for herself” she claims, “is both a feminist and a Mormon dream.” According to Mormon feminists, whatever the damage done to that dream by the men—from Joseph Smith Jr. to Thomas S. Monson—who have cherished, nurtured, and spread its message and provided leadership to its followers, Mormonism and its God have a liberating potential for women.

I have tasted equal worship in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Unfortunately, I have also observed the smug condescension of men who believe they have been called as lord and tutor. Against such behavior I assert both my Mormonism and my feminism.

Mormon feminists who advocate for change in the church’s doctrine, policies, and practices claim a difference between the *Gospel of Jesus Christ* and the LDS church as an organization, an assertion most, if not all, church authorities would concede.

Since its founding, the Mormon tradition has appealed to women. The great-great-grandmothers of many of today’s Mormon feminists fought for and enjoyed a level of

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159 For further discussion see Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 21.
161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.
163 See Upstill Werner, “Sisters Speak” for example.
independence, civil rights, and positions of authority and influence nearly unprecedented in
the Union at that time. Most contemporary Mormon women would find shocking the
powerful feminist rhetoric espoused by the revered pioneers and leading women of the early
church. Their exploits are nicely summarized by Maxine Hanks in the introduction of her
book *Women and Authority*:

Through their labors to help build an ambitious religious society, Mormon women mastered a range of
employment skills and professions and gained prominent places in the public sphere. They became
merchants, politicians, and scholars; the University of Deseret, founded in 1850, enrolled women.
Mormon women managed wheat and silk industries through four decades. Utah had a higher
percentage of women doctors and midwives than any other U.S. state or territory; female doctor Ellis
Shipp alone trained 500 midwives and practitioners. Mormon women published an independent
women's newspaper and young women's magazine for four decades. Women were granted suffrage in
Utah in 1870, nearly fifty years before the Nineteenth Amendment gave the vote to American women.
Women's grass-roots organizing regained the vote in Utah after the Edmunds-Tucker law rescinded it
in 1887. Between 1871 and 1920 Mormon women collaborated and traveled with eastern activists such
as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony to lobby for national women's suffrage.\(^{165}\)

While these early pioneers fought for their civil rights they also wrote theology
arguing for a variety of progressive interpretations of scripture and the Latter-day Saint
tradition:

Cultural feminism found outlets in the Mormon doctrine of a heavenly mother and female priesthood,
implicit in Joseph Smith's discussions of God, the temple, and priesthood keys. Eliza R. Snow…was
widely regarded as a “priestess” and “prophetess,” as well as “presidentess” of the Mormon women's
organizations including the Relief Society. Founded in 1842, the women's Relief Society showed much
cultural feminism; it was a benevolent society as well as a self-governing “kingdom of priests.” Sarah
Kimball, who first conceived the Relief Society, claimed upon its establishment that “the sure
foundations of the suffrage cause were deeply and permanently laid.” Later in 1850, she emulated
priesthood patterns by setting apart women "teachers" and "deaconesses."\(^{166}\)

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\(^{164}\) Women have outnumbered men in the LDS church from pioneer times forwarded. While current activity
levels among male and female LDS members are equivalent, The Pew study indicates that the LDS church has
one of the largest gender gaps (56% female), larger than any tradition other than Jehovah’s Witnesses. For more
details see “The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life”; also see claims made by McConkie, *She Shall Be
Called Woman*, 5.


\(^{166}\) Hanks, “Women and Authority: Introduction,” xiv; For a good selection of their original writings see Hanks,
During this period the LDS church actively practiced polygyny\(^{167}\) regarding it as central and a necessary prerequisite for the highest levels of salvation. Many of the “leading ladies” were themselves plural wives. While Emma Smith (first wife of church founder Joseph Smith Jr.) actively worked to oppose polygyny,\(^{168}\) many early, influential Mormon feminists argued vehemently on feminist (as well as theological)\(^{169}\) grounds for it and the benefits to women of practicing it. In plural marriages, they argued, women were freer to pursue careers and independent business interests without the meddling of a man (as a man with many wives would not have the time or energy to closely oversee the activities of multiple wives frequently living in separate homes). A woman need not, they claimed, find all (or any) of her happiness in the attentions of a man, having less access to one meant less time caring for his needs, often fewer children and more space between pregnancies, and more time to pursue her own financial interests and talents. Furthermore, the particular version of polygyny practiced in Utah allowed women to “trade up” if a man of higher ecclesiastical authority made her an offer and her present husband agreed. Divorce was relatively easy for a woman to obtain and the procedures, uncomplicated.\(^{170}\)

These women’s stories, buried beneath a glossy enamel of official church histories emanating from LDS headquarters, are largely unknown to the average member.\(^{171}\) Of course, this is not particular to the LDS tradition. We see the same phenomenon in many

\(^{167}\) I use polygyny instead of polygamy or plural marriage (the LDS church’s preferred term) because it best describes how “the principle” was practiced in Mormon culture for the majority of the period during which it was instituted. However, early in Mormon history, especially during the Nauvoo period, a greater variety of forms of polygamy were practiced, including a limited form of polyandry. Joseph Smith married women who were already married, so these Mormon women had more than one husband. However, after this initial period men had more than one wife, but the reverse was not true.


\(^{169}\) For an interesting discussion of the theological rationale for polygamy see Miles, “Polygamy and the Economics of Salvation.”

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 38-40.

\(^{171}\) References to the independence and power of women in the early LDS church appear constantly throughout pages of Mormon feminist journals and magazines. As an example, consider Bookstaber, “Sisters Speak,” 183.
religious traditions around the world. The religious lives of women go unspoken and hidden due to the androcentric ways in which traditions are passed down, and the ways both theologians and scholars of religion ply their trades.\footnote{Falk and Gross, \textit{Unspoken Worlds}.}

All this is not to suggest that 19\textsuperscript{th} century Mormon culture represented an idyllic situation for women or feminists. If “by their fruits ye shall know them,” then one who defines Christianity in feminist terms would find much in past and present expressions of Mormonism both to recommend and condemn it. Mormonism has never been a woman centric or even gender-equality centered religious movement. Its original precepts were articulated by a man, in male language, using male imagery, from a male perspective, for a male audience. In a patriarchal tradition such as this, feminism and feminist theology are necessities. They counteract prevailing images of men’s competency and agency and women’s inferiority and dependency inherent in any nearly exclusively male authoritative discourse.\footnote{Faludi, \textit{Backlash}.} Yet from that beginning emerged a theology many see as inherently egalitarian.

Despite the presence and perseverance of a strong feminist movement within Mormonism, it has been neither monolithic nor continuous. Mormon feminism expresses itself in multiple and sometimes conflicting ways. Like the feminist movement more generally, Mormon feminists have been unable to connect their discourses through time.\footnote{For further discussion see Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 49 ; Hanks, \textit{Women and Authority}, xi; \& Firmage, “Reconciliation,” 343. I use the term “male discourse” to refer discourse that is dominated by men and expresses a patriarchal point of view.} There is no broadly understood tradition of feminism, no momentum to the movement that spans generations. Mormon feminism has suffered from the regular and predictable backlashes and authoritative dismantling of feminist agendas present in the broader culture. As Hanks explains,
Authoritative discourse is not easy to alter. This helps explain why twentieth-century Mormon feminists repeat the rhetoric, texts, and causes of their liberal/cultural great-grandmothers (emphasis in the original).\(^{175}\)

And Mormonism illustrates historian Gerda Lerner’s theory that,

…women have collaborated in their own subordination through their acceptance of the sex-gender system. They have internalized values that subordinate them to such an extent that they voluntarily pass them on to their children.\(^{176}\)

However, feminism has persistently stayed a part of Mormonism since its conception. With each generation it reemerges, for some women spontaneously as a natural and logical extension of the values they learned in Sunday school or through their spiritual and secular experiences.\(^{177}\) For others, feminism blossoms out of family history or academic research during which they discover the powerful stories, convictions, and victories of their great-grandmothers.

In 1974 a group of devout Mormon feminists launched a magazine intended to give voice to women within the church. In their opening pages they stated:

*Exponent II*, posed on the dual platforms of Mormonism and Feminism, has two aims: to strengthen The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and to encourage and develop the talents of Mormon women. That these aims are consistent we intend to show by our pages and our lives.\(^{178}\)

In this chapter I try to highlight some of primary arenas in which Mormon feminists have attempted to engage the LDS membership, its academics, and the church institution\(^{179}\) in discourse, advocating for changes that would enlarge the roles and opportunities for women within the organization and empower them and their sense of dignity and worth as


\(^{176}\) Learner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 234.

\(^{177}\) Consider, for example the following description by Carol Lynn Pearson of her childhood perception; “It [society] was a man’s world. And at church, God’s world was a man’s world too. The heavenly beings we sang praise to were all male. Every prayer we uttered was to a male and through a male. God’s prophets, ancient and modern, were male. His crowning creation, Adam, was male. Even the stories in Sunday school were almost always about boys or men. People in the Bible prayed for sons, never daughters. Every act of religious importance needed the authority that only males had. It was as clear as the vertical line on the blackboard: ‘God—man—woman.’ Eve and I were a beloved support, but we were auxiliary. God’s house was designed and furnished and owned by males and it was a Motherless house.” Pearson, *Mother Wove the Morning*, 6-7.

\(^{178}\) Bushman, “Exponent II is Born.”

\(^{179}\) Both members and outsiders often experience the LDS church and feminism as being at war. Consider for example Bushman’s discussion in, Ulrich, “Border Crossings,” 201.
individuals. These women and men do not always agree, nor has the church institution presented a uniform response to their assertions. However, as Hanks points out, they are in consensus in the stance that “Mormon women should be involved in defining their relationship to religious authority.”

This chapter represents an overview of Mormon feminist discourse. It is not intended to be comprehensive, only to expose some of the most interesting and persistent themes and provide a sense of both the evolution of these discourses and the LDS church’s current stance with respect to them. Dividing this overview into themes provides a framework for considering the past and present state of discourse. However, these themes are interrelated and interdependent. They do not neatly segregate along the lines I have drawn for our convenience, and other organizational themes would have been equally legitimate.

3.b. Authority and autonomy of the Relief Society

Joseph, like all of us, was a product of his society. While his teachings may fall short of the full equality that many of us desire today, nonetheless they are an important doctrinal foundation which gives historical precedence for women’s right to priesthood. Perhaps Joseph went as far as he could for his day, and perhaps it is for our day to establish the importance of the equality of men and women.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir*.

The organization and structure of the LDS church as today’s members experience it is largely a result of the priesthood correlation program. The correlation program coincided with the centralization of all sources of information under strict authority. It is part of a larger agenda to deal with image and message control for an expanding church. Church leaders required a system of quality and consistency control in order for the messages defining the church for the public to reflect the theological positions of top ecclesiastical authorities. This was particularly true as the church spread out of its mountain stronghold and began

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182 For many feminists, the restoration of women’s authority is intimately tied to the authority of the Relief Society. See, for example, Hanks, “Women and Authority: Introduction,” xxvi.
183 Quinn, “Interviews for documentary film *The Mormons.*”
encouraging new converts to stay where they were and build up the kingdom of God in their native communities. Depending on one’s perspective, the Relief Society is either a sad casualty or a targeted victim of that process.

Through the priesthood correlation program, the church identified three missions: to preach the gospel, perfect the saints, and redeem the dead. All of the church’s programs, publications, and outreach efforts were coordinated with lines of authority to validate their content and sanction their use. As its name suggests, this correlation process centered on the priesthood organization as the approving authority at every level of the church bureaucracy. One could fairly argue that the correlation program’s purpose was a noble one (clarifying the church’s mission, streamlining procedures, ensuring accuracy of message and consistency of implementation, avoiding misinformation, etc.), not just a malevolent attempt by men to control women. On the other hand, in an organization that bars women from the priesthood, any attempt to have this much centralized control doesn’t just put power and information in the hands of a few, it also puts it solely in the hands of men. The unavoidable consequences of combining such a system with segregated gender roles is to privilege one gender and subjugate the other.

The correlation program was a slow process. So slow, in fact, that many of its changes and consequences went unnoticed by average members. Looking back, it seems Joseph F. Smith, sixth president of the church, signaled its beginning in 1906 when he predicted that much of the work then done by auxiliaries would eventually be done by the

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184 Founded in 1842, the Relief Society is the organization to which female members of the church over the age of 18 belong. Its official purposes are to bring relief to the poor and people unto Christ. See “Gospel Library: Relief Society.”


186 See, for example, the talk by Thomas S. Monson, “Correlation brings blessings.”

187 For further discussion see Lindsey, “Women as Healers in the Modern Church,” 443; Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?,” 154; Yeates, “Why Shouldn’t Mormon Women Want This Priesthood?,” 357.
priesthood quorums.\textsuperscript{188} In 1921 the general president of the Relief Society, Emmeline Wells, was released from her position, which had previously been a lifetime calling, like apostle or prophet.\textsuperscript{189} Between 1928 and 1937 the correlation program consolidated all church activities and auxiliaries under priesthood quorums. The Relief Society lost control of choosing its leaders, which are now called\textsuperscript{190} by local and general priesthood leaders.\textsuperscript{191} Making the general Relief Society president a position selected by the First Presidency and making it a calling with a limited rather than lifetime appointment, gives the priesthood a great deal of power over what personality directs the Relief Society and how she behaves while in that position. The Relief Society also lost control of its funds, which now rest in the hands of priesthood leaders.\textsuperscript{192}

Between 1960 and 1980, the correlation program began its final push. The church priesthood organization ended or took over all officially sanctioned publications. This included those by and for women. All lines of communication and decision-making for every activity of the church: programs, organizations, auxiliaries, publications, educational

\textsuperscript{188} Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?,” 154.
\textsuperscript{189} Hanks, “Women and Authority: Introduction,” xv.
\textsuperscript{190} To receive a call or hold a calling in the LDS church refers to being asked to fulfill a set of responsibilities. Every calling has an understood (sometimes written down) job description. Every active member of the church is supposed to have a calling of some type. Most of these callings are unpaid and members volunteer their time (anywhere from <1 to 40+ hours per week) to fulfill these callings.
\textsuperscript{191} A letter by Eliza R. Snow To the Branches of the Relief Society, reprinted in Hanks, “Women and Authority: Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse,” 85, provides an example of how the Relief Society acted as a self-governing organization with local leadership taking problems to regional and general Relief Society leaders in the same way local priesthood leaders defer to regional and general priesthood leaders. Now local Relief Society leaders defer to local priesthood leaders, severing the administrative ties between women. Add to this that men now choose new leadership for the women’s organizations, rather than women promoting women through the ranks, independent of men, and a situation emerges in which there is much less autonomy and much more male control of who (and consequently what attitudes and beliefs) get promoted into more prominent (if not necessarily more powerful) positions and thus who acts as role models for LDS women.
\textsuperscript{192} See the May 1994 talk by Russell M. Ballard, “Counseling with Our Councils.” Elder Ballard explained; “Only the bishop may allocate welfare resources, but the committee helps care for the poor by planning and coordinating the use of ward resources.” Woman have no decision making power. They are leaned on heavily to make recommendations and carry out welfare and compassionate service to needy members, but even in the realm for which the society was charged at its creation, they do not make final decisions. Priesthood authority must provide its stamp of approval. See also Elliott, “Let Women No Longer Keep Silent,” 204.
materials, meetings, finances—everything—was realigned under male priesthood leaders, quorums, and correlation committees. As Arthur Bassett points out,

The correlation program has unified to an amazing degree the things we will talk about and the way we will talk about them. Not only are we told what we should discuss but (if one reads the teachers’ manuals) also the conclusions that we should reach.

So what did the Relief Society lose? Its institution in 1830 included a pronouncement by Joseph Smith that its president, Emma Smith, was called of God, that she was “ordain’d” (a word currently only used in reference to priesthood), that she was to “expound the scriptures,” and to “teach the female part of the community.” Similar statements exist regarding the ordination of her councilors. At that time the society was self-governing, calling the women members into offices within the organization. Ordination was understood by them to include the authority to ordain those beneath them. The Relief Society preached and pronounced revelation to its members and conducted healing rituals for the sick and afflicted in the same manner as did the male priesthood. While the early organization does not look, from a contemporary perspective, to represent true equality for women within the church, it certainly suggests a more autonomous and authoritative position for women than they hold today. Female leaders of the Relief Society in the early church were routinely referred to as prophetesses and priestesses. They pronounced revelations, gave blessings, healed the sick, and provided leadership, guidance, and wisdom.

Many contemporary Mormon feminists see evidence in the original structure of the Relief Society that Joseph Smith was organizing it parallel to the male priesthood, and many

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193 For further discussion see Elliott, “Let Women No Longer Keep Silent,” 205; Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?,” 154; Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 62; Also consider Yeates’ interview with Sister Spafford in 1974. In the interview Spafford made it clear that she believed the significant change in the Relief Society was in whether its president had the authority and autonomy to make her own decisions regarding what was best for the organization she led. See Yeates, “Why Shouldn’t Mormon Women Want This Priesthood?,” 256-7.
195 Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts,” 69-85; also see Newell, “Mormon Women and Priesthood”; Quinn, “Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843.”
believe that God intended for the organization and the church to evolve to a point where true equality (perhaps not possible in 19th century U.S. culture) would develop. Upon organizing the Relief Society, Joseph Smith stated that “the Society should move according to the ancient priesthood” and that he was “going to make of this Society a kingdom of Priests as in Enoch’s day—as in Paul’s day.” In addition to these statements he stated that “I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time” (emphasis mine). This last quote is particularly significant because priesthood keys are the authority to receive certain spiritual gifts, perform sacred rituals, administer God’s church, and call upon the powers of God that are passed down through priesthood ordination. Joseph’s words could be (and have been by some feminists) interpreted as the handing over of at least some priesthood authority to women.

For the most part, church authorities do not even acknowledge these historical claims. Reprinting of meeting transcripts for church publications do not use the original meeting minutes from 1842. Instead, they use George A. Smith’s 1851 rewording of the proceedings, as well as incorporating later changes. The culmination of many minor adjustments to the text changes its implications to more closely reflect the current understanding of the relationship between the priesthood and the Relief Society. What acknowledgement there is of alternative interpretations consists of pointing out that the use of words such as “ordain”

197 Ibid.
198 Ibid., 26.
199 Newell, “Mormon Women and Priesthood,” 26; see also research by Quinn, “Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843,” 367, 375, 387-8, 391.
200 The LDS church often touts the Relief Society as the largest and possibly oldest women’s organization in the world. It is, however completely subjugated by the male organization of the church. It is not self-governing in any way. Women cannot even design and write lessons for use in their own organization without male approval in the form of a priesthood correlation committee. Furthermore, every adult female member of the church, is automatically a member of the Relief Society, whether active in the organization or not. For more discussion see Toscano, “Are Boys More Important Than Girls?,” 23.
have evolved to convey specific meanings that they did not in Joseph’s day, and that the revised version more accurately reflects the meaning of the text given today’s usage of these words.\textsuperscript{201} Church leaders also admonish feminists for presuming from historical records things that are not explicit and, given later pronouncements by subsequent prophets, not accurate.\textsuperscript{202}

Indicative of this situation is a passage found in the introduction of Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith’s book \textit{Black and Mormon}, published in 2006. Smith demonstrates both an understanding of feminist critique and clear sympathies with Mormon women’s struggles.\textsuperscript{203} Yet these scholars and activists for racial equity within the LDS church make the statement “Mormon women have never been ordained,” without problematizing the issue in any way.\textsuperscript{204} This suggests that the church has been so successful in propagating its preferred version of history that even Bringhurst and Smith are not aware of the complex and contentious history of women’s ordination.

Not all feminists agree with the position presented above. While early Mormon women did claim authority,\textsuperscript{205} there is no record of explicit claims to have \textit{the priesthood} held by men.\textsuperscript{206} Whatever right women had to perform priesthood-like functions (blessings, prophesy) it was not accompanied by the authority to officiate in the church and was in no way equivalent to the male priesthood that provided the backbone for the church.
As always, women were doing much of the work that ensured the survival of the church, but were given no authority to accompany it. These feminists would not have the future of the Relief Society tied to a questionable past with its own set of problems. Still, most agree that, at its inception, the Relief Society was not an “auxiliary” in the way the organizations for children or church education are, but played a central role in the church’s administration. Today, church leaders have clearly relegated the Relief Society to an auxiliary, along with every other church organization excepting the male priesthood. Priesthood leaders are advised to consult the auxiliary presidents, as well as promptings from the Holy Ghost in making decisions, but, ultimately, the decisions lie with the men. The setting apart of women who hold positions within the Relief Society is always conducted by male priesthood leaders—symbolically reaffirming their higher relative position—never by the women who hold Relief Society leadership positions. As Margaret Merrill Toscano points out,

> 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.

Along with the autonomy the Relief Society once had, it has also lost the role it once played in training and coordinating women’s efforts in performing ritualized blessings of

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\text{207} \quad \text{Indeed, many claims by both feminists and their critics about what individuals meant, thought, anticipated, or intended in Joseph Smith’s era seem dubious and unsubstantiated. For an example see Newell, “Mormon Women and Priesthood,” 26.}
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\text{208} \quad \text{Ballard, “Counseling with Our Councils”; Toscano, “Are Boys More Important Than Girls?,” 22-24; Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?,” 124. A priesthood leader can delegate some decisions, of course (e.g. use of ward budget designated for children’s program) but the priesthood leader has the choice to delegate or rescind that power, so the final decision still lies with him. Furthermore, when he so delegates, he sends the message that this decision is not significant and thus women can be trusted with it. Given the current structure, even the most well-meaning actions by a priesthood leader disempower the women who serve under him.}
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\text{209} \quad \text{A ritual blessing given to individuals before taking up the responsibilities of a new calling. These blessings provide comfort, guidance, and assurance that their recipients are capable of the tasks assigned to them. They also confer promises of special inspiration related to the position if the recipient lives worthily and seeks it out.}
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\text{210} \quad \text{Toscano, “Are Boys More Important Than Girls?,” 23.}
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various types. Today, the church clearly defines the conducting of such ordinances as priesthood functions. As such, women have no authority to perform them. Perhaps the most disempowering development, slamming the door on any pretense of authority the Relief Society had, was a message from the first presidency during Joseph F. Smith’s administration (1901–1918) that acknowledged the long held practice of women performing the ritual spiritual work of blessing the sick, but made clear that no membership in the Relief Society or temple endowment ceremony was necessary for a woman to perform these functions. It only required faith in Christ. In other words, these activities were not predicated on having received any special authority.

One of the foundational theological concepts of the LDS church is that authority does not stem from revelation (which anyone can claim) or charismatic persuasiveness. If this constituted authority the human race would be led astray. Authority from God must be passed down from one who has it to one whom God wishes to have it. Even Joseph Smith did not simply acquire authority to perform ordinances when God spoke to him. He had to receive that authority by the laying on of hands (a priesthood ritual) by one who had both the authority being given and the authority to pass it on. In Smith’s case, resurrected beings had to perform this function as none still living had this authority. This is why the LDS church understands itself to be a restoration of the gospel and its priesthood. These keys were on the earth in Jesus’ day, but as they were not passed on, they died with the early church. After

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211 An ordinance is “a sacred, formal act performed by the authority of the priesthood” according to the “Gospel Library: Index of Topics.”

212 This letter from the First Presidency titled “To the Presidents of Stakes and Bishops of Wards,” is reprinted in full in Newell, “Mormon Women and Priesthood,” 44.

213 My analysis of the implications of this letter is concurred by Quinn, “Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843,” 380.

214 The lesser, Aaronic, priesthood was conferred on Joseph Smith Jr. and Oliver Cowdery by the resurrected being of John the Baptist. They received the greater, Melchizedek, priesthood from Peter, James, and John.

215 This is also why baptisms by other Christian sects are not considered legitimate ordinances by the LDS church. The performer of such rites did not have the authority passed to them by one who already had it. Thus the baptism was not legitimate.
the original founding of the restored (LDS) church, Smith passed the authority to perform ordinances to his successors who passed it to their successors and so forth. By defining women’s activities as outside this line of succession, outside the line of authority from the angels to Joseph to priesthood leaders, it made clear that women had no authority, priesthood or otherwise, not available to anyone who believed in Christ. Only those who have been “called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof” act with God’s authority. Joseph F. Smith’s letter declaring blessings by women as not among the official duties of the Relief Society disempowered not only the individual women, but also the organization and made the male priesthood the only organization with authority to sanction the performance of ritualized ordinances.

3.c. Women’s access to authoritative speech

It isn’t that these women necessarily agree or disagree with what either the Church or the world is saying about women’s issues, but rather that they express an urgency to be part of the discussion.

Shirley Gee, Sisters Speak

LDS feminist Maxine Hanks argues, using Foucault’s theory, that discourse and language are mediators of power and authority. Therefore, “discourse can be a powerful strategy for creating or altering authority.” This highlights the significance of the church’s actions to centralize all sources of discourse and, frequently, to punish those who attempt to speak authoritatively outside its control. The silencing of dissent that such punishment brings about contributes to the culture of conformity, obedience, and silence that pervades the church. Members do not express dissenting views, especially in official church meetings, so alternatives to official interpretations do not get propagated. Both this lack of access to

218 Gee, “Sisters Speak.”
authoritative speech and the silencing it precipitates are major concerns of many Mormon feminists. As Hanks points out;

Because authority in the LDS church exists in male discourse, Mormon women have struggled for and lack authority. They have also lacked identity: women are always either conforming to or resisting male perspective, male identity.\(^{220}\)

Organizational theory suggests that authority exists in three forms: formal, informal, and personal.\(^{221}\) Positions such as church president, apostle, committee chair, bishop, and Relief Society president bestow *formal* authority. *Informal* or indirect authority acts independently of formal positions and includes roles such as advisor, expert, charismatic leader, friend, and relative. Individuals in these roles exert influence without having the titles of formal authority. *Personal* authority is measured by one’s ability to “advance personal knowledge or views in the organization.”\(^{222}\) Women’s positions as wives and mothers are a primary source of their authority within the church. It is an informal source of authority that priesthood leaders not only allow but advocate for women. Offered as a consolation prize, women are assured that through their husbands they have as much potential as anyone, and more than many men, to present their perspective and influence the church. While personal authority follows naturally, if not always inevitably, from formal authority, such is not the case with the informal authority offered women. As Hanks points out,

Denying women formal authority while encouraging their indirect authority sends a clear message of inferiority and invalidation. It also causes women to seek power indirectly, behind the scenes, such as manipulation.\(^{223}\)

In Mormonism, authority has positive connotations. But the concept is related to men in the form of priesthood authority. Because it is understood to derive from God, this authority is not just perceived as good, but is a source of comfort to members. Yet in relation

\(^{220}\) Ibid., xxiii.

\(^{221}\) Ibid., xx.

\(^{222}\) Ibid. Hanks provides a more in depth discussion of formal, informal, and personal authority in the introduction of *Women and Authority*.

\(^{223}\) Ibid., xx-xxi.
to women, Hanks claims that the notion of authority “often leads to a discussion of how power corrupts.”\textsuperscript{224} It seems likely that this difference stems from the fact that women do not have access to the primary source of legitimate authority in the church: priesthood.

Authoritative discourse within the LDS church takes various forms. The church produces a plethora of printed educational materials and publications including proclamations, manuals, books, magazines, videos, and websites. These are augmented by statements by church representatives, published works by well-known members, and verbal talks given by members at every level of church organization. Because the LDS church is centrally and hierarchically organized, a speaker’s position within the organization and the venue of his or her speech sends a clear message about the authority with which he or she speaks. The most authoritative discourse in the LDS church takes place in its semiannual General Conference.\textsuperscript{225} Historically this has been an all male discourse primarily consisting of instruction by the First Presidency and members of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles. In the last few decades, church authorities have invited leaders of the auxiliaries (including nine positions held by women) to participate.\textsuperscript{226}

Feminists express concern with the way an exclusively male priesthood structure as the central administrative and ecclesiastical organization of the church has effectively

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., xxii.
\textsuperscript{225} Elliott, “Let Women No Longer Keep Silent,” 205. The most visible function of the General Conference is the instruction given by church leaders to the membership. All members are strongly encouraged to watch these talks live and revisit them often by reading their published versions in the church’s official magazine, the Ensign. General Conference is also a venue for church business including announcing changes in administrative positions or structure and the calling for a sustaining vote from the membership of the current president as prophet, seer, and revelator.
\textsuperscript{226} In a quick survey of the past few years, I found a consistent pattern. One woman speaks during one of the two general sessions held on each day of the conference. Her talk is sandwiched in the middle of the session, never in the key positions of opening or closing. No women speak at the priesthood session to which only men are invited. The women’s sessions feature the presidencies of either the Young Women’s Program or the Relief Society with the 4th and main speaker being a male General Authority.
stripped women’s speech of authority. Doric Williams Elliot illustrates the problem with this anecdote:

In a recent ward conference leadership meeting I attended, all of the ward leaders were asked to speak in turn, starting with priesthood leaders; as Relief Society president, I spoke following the Deacon's quorum president. This speaking order implied (however unintentionally) that the words of the highest ranking woman in the ward organization were less important than those of a twelve-year-old boy. Even in women's conferences, men are virtually always listed as the main speakers, on both stake and general levels. Women, however, rarely (if ever) speak in meetings for men only.227

The authority with which priesthood leaders speak stems from more than just their titles and the reverence church members are taught to give the priesthood they hold. As Elliot points out, many of the conventions of talks given during church meetings reinforce men’s greater access to power (even when intended to affirm women’s power). Such conventions include reliance of position and official experience, and anecdotes drawn from stories collected through interviews and ecclesiastical work. An excellent example is provided by Boyd K. Packer’s April 1992 address:

I have been a General Authority for over thirty years, and a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles for twenty-two. During those years, I have interviewed I don't know how many, surely thousands, of members of the Church and have talked with them in intimate terms of their worthiness, their sorrow, and their happiness. I only mention that in the hope that the credential of experience may persuade you to consider matters which have us deeply worried.228

Claims to such experience, and thus authority, exclude those people, primarily women, for whom such credentials are impossible. Even when given the opportunity to speak, women’s words never carry the weight and force that male priesthood leaders’ convey. While general leaders of the women-run auxiliaries elicit great reverence from many LDS members, and are understood to have access to revelation within their sphere, nothing they say holds anything approaching the authority of the Brethren.229 They have not been set apart as prophets, seers, and revelators; they do not speak with the authority of the priesthood

229 While the term “brethren” in a common way of referring to all male members of the church, as “sisters” refers to all women, “the Brethren” refers specifically to top ranking members of the priesthood hierarchy, typically members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.
or the experience priesthood leadership positions afford. Even at the local level where women have many opportunities to speak publicly they do not carry the titles that endow them with authority.

Whether giving lessons during Sunday school classes or talks in church meetings, members are given clear instructions of what sources they should draw on for their presentations. They are to draw their material primarily from lesson manuals, scripture, general conference talks, and official church publications. These sources are predominantly by and about men, guaranteeing the propagation of ideas and attitudes expressed by men.\footnote{Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.” All these guidelines and lesson manuals are available online through www.lds.org. Even a cursory scan will reveal how these documents work to encourage conformity of talks given at a local level.}

This is further complicated by a culture of conformity and obedience and fear of disciplinary actions. Even members with non-orthodox convictions do not feel free to express them.\footnote{I speak here from personal experience and conversations with dozens of members, as well as extensive research of the writings of LDS academics.}

The structure of the local LDS congregation’s organization also silences women’s voices. To illustrate this, Elliott recounts programs for women that her local priesthood leaders instituted without consulting the women’s organization. She believes that most authorities would “dismiss these incidents as dumb mistakes by their peers.” Even so, she argues, the structure of the church hierarchy results in a concerning phenomenon where male priesthood leaders believe they “have the right—even the responsibility—to speak for and direct women in every area of their lives.” She also claims that church leaders who would dismiss these occurrences as “dumb mistakes by their peers” would, if pressed, “likely admit that, structurally, these leaders acted within their rights ‘if so inspired.’”\footnote{Elliott, “Let Women No Longer Keep Silent,” 201-2.} Perhaps due to the
inspiration and experience their positions entitle them, many male leaders assume an ability to speak for women. 233 Elliott explains,

As women in the church, we are deluged with male voices counseling us, cautioning us, warning us, teaching us; even when they are thanking us, they tend to subtly reinforce our difference and our subordinate status. 234

The form is “sisters, I have a message for you.” 235 Priesthood authorities spend a great deal of time instructing men as well, of course. However, when men speak to men they do so from a position of shared authority. 236 That is, the individual speaking holds a calling and thus access to special inspiration from God that the men he’s speaking to may have held in the past, and/or may hold at some point in the future.

It would likely never occur to LDS women that they should or could make a policy or program regarding men; they simply are not a part of the organization that creates policies for anyone. They may recommend that a policy or program be instituted for the women’s organization and, in some congregations, such a recommendation would be implemented almost automatically; but only almost automatically. Ultimately, the decision lies with the Bishop. If uncomfortable with the suggestion, he has the authority to refuse. The same is not true in reverse. The Relief Society president does not have the authority to override a bishop’s decision. The organizational structure puts male priesthood leaders in a position of power regardless of whether they desire or feel it personally. Conversely, the Relief Society president is unlikely to even be asked to weigh in on policies for male members or men’s

233 Consider, for example, the stunning arrogance of the opening lines of this talk by Elder Ballard; “Perhaps being the father of our five daughters and now the grandfather of 22 granddaughters makes me an expert on the subject of women,” Ballard, “Women of Righteousness.” Such arrogance is not limited to priesthood leaders. In “Why Shouldn’t Mormon Women Want This Priesthood?,” 353-4, Yeates provides an example of such male arrogance within LDS academic discourse.


235 Ibid., 202.

236 Ibid.
organizations and it would not occur to anyone around the table, man or woman, for the Relief Society president to institute a policy or program for the priesthood quorums.\textsuperscript{237}

The church does provide women with opportunities for input. As members of committees, as advisors, and as wives, women are encouraged to share their perspective with local and general church leaders. These representatives of the female perspective often translate women’s concerns into something palatable to the decision-making men.\textsuperscript{238} For example, consider Russell M. Ballard’s statement:

\begin{quote}
In a recent council meeting with the presidencies of the women’s auxiliaries, the sisters told me that very few women in the Church express any interest in wanting to hold the priesthood. But they do want to be heard and valued and want to make meaningful contributions to the stake or ward and its members that will serve the Lord and help accomplish the mission of the Church.\textsuperscript{239}
\end{quote}

“The sisters” are not speaking for themselves here, but are being spoken for by Ballard. Still, it seems they did play the role of representing the concerns of female members of the church to the priesthood leadership.

The correlation program compounds the problem. Because correlation committees put lesson manuals and most other church publications together, they do not have individual authors (except periodicals and official statements). Thus, what work women do in writing these texts,\textsuperscript{240} they do not get credit for. The people who do get credited are the authors of scripture (ancient and contemporary) and authoritative talks to which these lessons refer—these sources compose the core of every lesson. The former are exclusively men (even those few stories about women in scripture are understood to be written by male prophets), and the latter are predominantly men. Even in lesson manuals used for women’s classes, the primary

\textsuperscript{237} For further discussion see Ibid.

\textsuperscript{238} From my own experience, confirmed in the writings of many feminists of their own experiences, Ballard’s statement is accurate. Most LDS women don’t want the priesthood, but they do want to be seen as inspired, intelligent, wise, and having something meaningful to offer.

\textsuperscript{239} Ballard, “Strength in Counsel.”

\textsuperscript{240} Men write and edit the vast majority of official church publications and chair, if not always completely comprise, the priesthood correlation committees that approve all church educational materials.
Women’s voices usually appear in the form of anecdotal evidence to help demonstrate the male authority’s point. Women’s access to authoritative discourse within the LDS community has waxed and waned over its history. For the first forty-two years, the vast majority of published discourse was male, in the form of sermons, essays, articles, letters, and journals printed in church newspapers. The first church sanctioned publications written specifically by and for women appeared in 1872. From 1872-1970 Mormon women published regularly. Their writings were perceived as authoritative because the church sanctioned them and because the “leading sisters”—who were widely known and revered—orchestrated their publication. These publications were not subject to rigorous review or approval by church leaders. There was a “female elite,” which was “visible and powerful in early Utah,” who did much of the writing and editing for these publications. Vella Neil Evans argues that these publications and role models were a source of empowerment, providing Mormon women with some level of expression and representation in the larger Mormon discourse.

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241 It should be noted that both Relief Society and Priesthood Sunday school classes are taught out of the same lesson manual. This arguably has an equalizing effect as both men and women are taught the same material.

242 Elliott, “Let Women No Longer Keep Silent,” 204-5; Also see Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 204-5.


244 This period produced three women’s magazines written and edited by and for LDS women: the Women’s Exponent 1872-1914—a bi-monthly newspaper for Relief Society members; the Young Women’s Journal, 1889-1929—a monthly magazine for members of the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association including single and teenaged women; and the Relief Society Bulletin, re-titled Relief Society Magazine in 1915, 1914-1970—monthly magazine to replace the Woman’s Exponent.

245 Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 62.


247 Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 50.

248 Ibid.
For many women today, discovering these writings both elates and initiates a crisis of faith. Contemporary women who experience discontent with the status quo often feel alone and isolated. Writings by early Mormon women evidence a feminist candor that both shocks and validates them. For some, discovering how the church institution slowly silenced these female perspectives draws into question the authenticity of the contemporary church’s claim to divine guidance.

Evans argues that publications by women provided a platform for challenging traditional images of proper relationships between men and women. Male discourse “insistently defined what was ‘natural’ or God-given and justified separate statuses for the genders, which limited women to passive, domestic, and support roles.” Women’s discourse both accepted and reproduced this dichotomy, and also presented alternative perspectives. Within the early magazines we find arguments against damning interpretations of Eve’s curse, against the assumption that women should find happiness only or primarily in men or children, against the idea that women are natural caregivers, and against the idea that man is always the “head” and woman the “helpmate,” arguing instead that if the woman is the superior of a couple then she should also take the lead, and that it in no way diminishes man for woman to have her dignity or access to the same opportunities and positions as he.

Even though women’s publications were fundamentally orthodox in nature and largely reflected the perspective of the patriarchal male discourse (supporting or promoting polygamy, marriage, large families, good housekeeping, women’s dependence and submission, and loyal church service), there was within it a much broader range of characteristics and a wide range of ecclesiastical, secular, and domestic roles for women that


251 Ibid.
contradicted the expressed attitudes of male church leaders. Women’s publications defined women as independent, assertive, and strong. As the publications were authoritative, they provided a greater range of voices for women to identify with and see their own experiences in while still understanding themselves as faithful members.252 This, Evens argues, “would undoubtedly increase the female reader’s self-esteem and perceived agency.”253

As the correlation program proceeded, the church discontinued or merged women’s publications with men’s.254 At the same time that women’s voices in the form of published word were losing ground, the church also lost the presence of women with perceived power. The successors of the “leading ladies” of the early church had some influence through social ties to powerful men, but not the independent power and veneration of the generation before.255

According to Evans in the 1980s, “Mormon women serve[d] as writers and in assistant editorial positions” for church publications, “Men manage[d] the publications, h[e]ld top editorial positions, and [wrote] essentially all doctrinal discourse.”256 Whether or not this still accurately portrays the makeup of writer and editorial boards of church publications, the most significant point is that since priesthood correlation committees oversee all these activities, ultimately men always make the decisions regarding who will serve on editorial boards and whose writings will get published. For even the opportunity to have any influence on church publications, one has to win the approval of these men. There seems little chance for diverse or progressive women’s voices and certainly no chance for

252 Ibid., 50-1.
253 Ibid., 50.
254 Ibid., 62.
255 This change may relate to the hardships of pioneering and the fact that male leaders had to lean heavily on women to “build Zion” during its early period. This dependence by the men on the women’s work and leadership provided them with an authority not easily stripped away. As Utah became established, men usurped all positions of authority, and no new crop of authoritative women leaders replaced the older ones as they passed on.
256 Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 63.
dissenting voices to receive any public hearing under such a system.\textsuperscript{257} With the discontinuation of women’s magazines, there is little chance for the average LDS woman to learn what other women think on topics important to them, religious or secular from within the church.\textsuperscript{258} There is no open discussion of these topics by women, with women, for women. The discourse is entirely male and orthodox. One has to actively seek out views not specifically and directly promoted by church leadership in order to find alternatives. In the current gendered priesthood system, men always control the means of disseminating information to the membership. Whatever the intent, the correlation program has the effect of silencing women.

This progressive elimination of diverse or dissenting perspectives from authoritative discourse has not gone unresisted. Women resort to unofficial outlets as a means of self-definition and expression including the \textit{Mormons for ERA Newsletter},\textsuperscript{259} \textit{Exponent II},\textsuperscript{260} and the \textit{Mormon Women’s Forum Newsletter}.\textsuperscript{261} Mormon academic journals also provide women with a potential outlet. The best known of these are \textit{Sunstone} and \textit{Dialogue: A Journal for

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\textsuperscript{257} This is true for men’s dissenting voices too, of course. But as men control the system it is a male perspective and male discourse receiving authoritative statues, even if some men who have alternative views also cannot voice those opinions.

\textsuperscript{258} This theme is repeated throughout contemporary, unofficial publications, whether in print or online, and also in my own experience talking with dozens of LDS women. Women express shock when they discover they are not the only ones with these thoughts and feelings. The culture of conformity and silence isolates women, leaving them with no idea that others share their concerns and no legitimate means of exploring them. Many of the opinions of LDS women on feminist topics are captured in Hanks, “Emerging Discourse on the Divine Feminine”; and Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts.”

\textsuperscript{259} The \textit{Mormons for ERA Newsletter} was started in 1980 as part of a campaign by Mormon women both to promote the passing of the ERA and to resist the interference by the LDS church in that process. Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 66; Pottmyer, “Sonia Johnson: Mormonism’s Feminist Heretic.”

\textsuperscript{260} Founded in 1974 as the “spiritual descendent” of \textit{Women’s Exponent}. It is independent of LDS church authority, written by and for and edited by women promising to address the wide range of concerns of Mormon women in their own voices. Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts,” 86.

\textsuperscript{261} Founded in 1988 by Karen Erickson Case and Kelli Frame in response to a claim that the volume of requests that the LDS church offices were receiving regarding mothers holding their children during blessing and to “encourage public discussion of Mormon women’s issues.” It included public lectures and a newsletter. Ibid., 137.
Mormon Thought. These are not widely read by the general membership, however.\footnote{Ibid., 86.} An explosion in recent years of blogs, vlogs, online forums, tweets, social networking groups, podcasts, and so forth by and about LDS women and topics of interest to them supplement these more traditional outlets.\footnote{I have not found a study that investigates how this access to self-definition and the ease with which ideas can spread through online communities affects women’s self-esteem, edification, or empowerment.} However, the church does not sanction any of these publications, and members do not see them as authoritative. Those online forums that are official and sanctioned, and thus authoritative, fall under the responsibility of priesthood correlation committees.

With correlation, the church has a unified image and presents a single message, but at the cost of free discourse and diverse voices and—because the priesthood is held only by men—at the cost of female perspectives. The LDS church is not an organization in which everyone is invited to debate, discuss, and hammer out church policies, in which different factions come to different conclusions and pass their ideas and arguments onto the next generation to struggle with. It is not one in which the general membership join factions, make alliances, and leverage influence. All that messiness is confined to a relatively small number of elite men. Of course, dissenters have and will always find avenues for expression. How successful they are in providing real, practical, and legitimate alternatives and diversity for church members is an open question.

The church has not ignored these concerns. In Elder Ballard’s spring 1994 General Conference talk, he acknowledges a problem of priesthood leaders not seeking input from ward members (particularly women) calling it “systematic and severe.”\footnote{Ballard, Counseling with Our Councils: Learning to Minister Together in the Church and in the Family.} Whether the impetus came from finding the arguments of feminists\footnote{Such as those found in Elliott, “Let Women No Longer Keep Silent,” 210-14.} reasonable and persuasive, from an internal priesthood organization critique, or some other motive, the church has made an
active attempt to mitigate this discrepancy. Not only has Elder Ballard\textsuperscript{266} counseled priesthood leaders to specifically seek out the advice and perspective of auxiliary leaders, he has gone to some length in attempting to expand the range of topics and issues for which priesthood leaders perceive it valuable to seek input from women (liberating women from the children, youth, and welfare box). Local and general priesthood leaders take this council very seriously.\textsuperscript{267} Along with including women on church wide committees, editorial boards, and correlation committees, it is now standard practice to have at least one woman speak in every worship service, to call on women as well as men to perform public prayers, and to have leaders of women’s auxiliaries give talks in General Conference and tour the world speaking at regional and stake events. However, their representation is by no means equal in either quantity or position.

Of course, it only makes sense for women to receive the equal representation in church discourse that many feminists call for if women’s voices \textit{should} be equally authoritative as men’s. This seems unlikely from the church’s perspective. The bottom line is that the priesthood only has real value as the authority to speak for God if it does, in fact, give a speaker’s message greater authority. There is an essential authority women do not have access to. Church leaders would claim this in no way decreases women’s value. To the contrary, they would say, women are just as valued and have just as important a role, but that role is not as the authoritative voice in church discourse. That role is for the individuals God has called as prophets, seers, and revelators. That voice, belongs to the priesthood. That voice is therefore male.

\textsuperscript{266} Ballard, “Strength in Counsel”; Ballard, “Counseling with Our Councils.”

\textsuperscript{267} I have in my records correspondents from priesthood leaders at both the ward and stake level indicating that they take these recommendations seriously and that they are certain they are not unusual in this respect. They rely heavily on such input when making decisions and would feel “unsafe” and “uniformed” without such “reassuring” input.
3.d. Feminine divinity

When I was young, I wrote a poem about living in a Motherless house, where the kindest patriarchal care does not ease the pain.

Carol Pearson, *Mother Wove the Morning*  

Like other Christian feminists, Mormon feminists have struggled with a conception of God in near exclusively male terms and the pervasiveness of masculine God language. Yet Mormons are in a rather different position than most Christians when searching for the feminine reflected in the divine. Many of the reconstructions of divinity that Western feminists perform both as theologians and to express their personal experiences of the divine are not available to Mormon women. Latter-day Saints conceive of God as anthropomorphic and completely embodied. He is not metaphorically male nor does He transcend gender. He is unequivocally, physically male. At the same time, The LDS plan of salvation stipulates Heavenly Parents who through their union produced spirit children. These children (you and I included) become embodied through birth into earthly bodies, traversing a period of trial and growth. After participating in certain ordinances and completing our time on earth (death), we are reunited with our resurrected and perfected bodies. The goal is to become like our parents and, with our spouses, attain godhood. Embedded in this theology, implicitly—and at moments in historical discourse, explicitly—is a Mother in Heaven, a Goddess, a feminine deity. Thus, LDS women and men have access to feminine divinity.

While the empowering potential of this theology is exciting, as it has actually unfolded in Mormon culture, theology, and practice, it has left many women frustrated and

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269 Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 17-8.
270 *D&C*, 130:22.
271 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Strengthening the Family.”
disappointed. Male discourse has successfully subordinated Heavenly Mother, and frequently made Her a source for subjugating women rather than a source for empowerment. As Hanks points out, the “gap between a dual-gender theological blueprint and an exclusively male theological construction communicates an authoritative omission of femaleness in our religion.” The doctrine of a Heavenly Mother has been explicitly linked to the “true mission of women” on earth—to become mothers. It is used to limit women’s options, restrict her roles, and justify priesthood denial. Difficult questions arise when taking a close look at the Mormon concept of a God the Mother as partner to a God the Father.

Most Mother in Heaven theology in the LDS tradition has developed at the folklore or popular doctrine level. Other than a few explicit acknowledgements that a feminine deity is implicit in LDS theology of the eternities, there is currently no official exegesis on God the Mother by ecclesiastical leaders. The prominence of God the Mother in Mormon consciousness has varied somewhat through time. Though implicit in Joseph Smith’s theology of godhood, the only written record of him teaching about a Mother in Heaven comes from his followers’ personal journals. Prominent early LDS women often wrote of Her, and one poem by Elisa R. Snow originally known as “The Eternal Father and Mother”—later renamed “O My Father”—has become a favorite Mormon hymn. In it Snow illuminates the concept of an eternal couple as our Gods. Linda P. Wilcox points out that

President Wilford Woodruff gave Snow credit for originating the idea: “That hymn is a revelation, though it was given unto us by a woman.” President Joseph F. Smith claimed that God revealed that principle (“that we have a mother as well as a father in heaven”) to Joseph Smith; that Smith revealed it to Snow, his polygamous wife; and that Snow was inspired, being a poet, to put it into verse.

273 For many examples see; Toscano, “Put On Your Strength O Daughters of Zion,” 412; Pearson, “Healing the Motherless House”; Pearson, Mother Wove the Morning.
274 Pierce, “Personal Discourse on God the Mother,” 251.
276 Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” 9?
277 Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 15-6.
278 Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” 5.
279 Quoted in Ibid.
A frustrating aspect of Mormon feminism is that, as validating as Woodruff’s version is, the concept of a Mother in Heaven holds more authority if we accept Joseph F. Smith’s rendition. Yet his rendition marginalizes female power and authority at the same time that it legitimizes the revelation.

Some feminists argue that the God articulated by Joseph Smith and other early prophets and apostles was not “God the Father” as most Mormons read it today. Instead, masculine terms were used for God due to a tradition of masculine God language in Western culture. According to these feminists, the word “God” in LDS context actually referred to the male and female elements of God together. Wilcox puts it this way “To [Apostle Erastus] Snow, God was not a male personage with a heavenly mother as a second divine personage; both of them together constituted God.”

Today, the word “God” when commonly used in LDS context refers only to Father in Heaven, with Mother as a separate individual not included in the term.

Male church leaders in the 19th century did not speak frequently of Mother in Heaven, instead Her existence seems to have been taken for granted as commonsensical. In the 1920s and 1930s there was an emphasis on the idea of “eternal” or “everlasting” motherhood. The Mother in Heaven theology was employed in defining motherhood, like godhood, as ongoing and eternal. This move set the stage for much of what has transpired since in LDS gender theology, including comparing motherhood to priesthood, and using motherhood as a reason for patriarchy. It also functions to place women and motherhood on a pedestal, claiming equality while stripping women of self-determination and formal authority. And it provides a foundation for the development of a doctrine of gender as eternal not just temporal, so that women are female spirits and men are male spirits, and they have different

280 Ibid., 6-7. She provides several quotes by Snow to this effect.
281 Ibid., 6.
282 Ibid., 9.
mortal and eternal roles. This, in turn, bolsters the position of maintaining the priesthood for men alone, as well as delineating specific roles in the family and society for women.

In 1994 Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley advised regional priesthood representatives that it was “inappropriate for anyone in the Church to pray to our Mother in Heaven.” Priesthood leaders were to be “on the alert” for this expression and “make correction where necessary.” While Hinckley ostensibly based this instruction on the fact that he found “nowhere in the Standard Works an account where Jesus prayed other than to His Father in Heaven,” this may have been a backlash to what Wilcox described as “an increase in popular Mormon discourse on Heavenly Mother and speculation about how women can relate to her.”

The reaction to this shunning of the Mother in Heaven doctrine has varied. For some, Heavenly Mother represented a background theology—implied, but not an active part of practice. Hinckley’s pronouncement on the matter (commonly referred to as the “Mother in Heaven gag order”) therefore held few practical implications. At the other extreme were those for whom belief in Her and prayer to Her was (is) an integral part of practice and a source of both spiritual sustenance and powerful, meaningful, spiritual experiences. Consider Carol Pearson’s response:

Should we include the Mother in Heaven in our worship? My answer is an unequivocal yes. As a child of God, I claim my Mother without apology. She is in my heart and my mind and I need her in my

283 Hinckley would soon thereafter become president of the LDS church, 1995-2008.
284 Several excerpts from his address are reprinted in Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” 16.
285 Ibid. An underlying motivation may be that for the last 80 or so years the LDS church has clearly worked hard to become more respectable, to gain access to legitimacy within U.S. culture. It seems to desperately want to be understood and accepted by others as a Christian religion. This theme was particularly evident during Hinckley’s administration. Suppressing feminine deity, implicit in Mormon theology, hides the fact that its theology is not really monotheistic. It highlights instead the ways in which the church, for all practical purposes is monotheistic.
286 Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” 14-5; Also see Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?”
worship. I wish that our daughters and sons might raise their hands and say, “I request that we acknowledge this doctrine and allow it to nourish us.”

And this letter from Mimi Irving to Hinckley:

To Brother Hinckley I would like to suggest that our Mother in Heaven will answer the prayers of her daughters just as swiftly as our Father in Heaven responds to his sons. She opens her outstretched arms to the sisters and eventually the whole Heavenly Family will sit together in equal council.

In the middle lies a range of ambiguous feelings or discomfort with what appears like an attempt to hide or downplay a uniquely Mormon theology and enforce conformity through disciplinary actions.

Members who believe the church is wrong to place a prohibition on worshiping Heavenly Mother have made their arguments in several ways. Individuals argued that a lack of directive does not equal forbiddance, that limiting how members can pray is inconsistent with the general principles of the gospel, that psychological violence is done to women when they are forbidden to seek after and worship the divine person in whose image they are formed, and that both men and women benefit from being able to meet their spiritual needs and find sustenance in feminine divinity. Many pointed out that worship is not a zero-sum game. Or put more eloquently; “It doesn't take from our worship of the Eternal Father, to adore our Eternal Mother… We honor woman when we acknowledge Godhood in her eternal Prototype.”

A primary problem with prohibiting the worship of Mother in Heaven, according to many feminists, is that to do so both results from and perpetuates the devaluing of the feminine.

While President Hinckley says this prohibition in no way “belittles or denigrates her,” it surely makes her secondary in some way to Heavenly Father, as does President Hinckley’s assertion that men have a “governing responsibility” over women.

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289 Multiple examples of all these arguments can be found in Hanks, “Emerging Discourse on the Divine Feminine.”
291 Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 16.
From its rhetoric about the value of women, one would expect church leaders to subscribe to Virginia Woolf’s view that “Men and women are different. What needs to be made equal is the value placed on those differences.” If such were the case, those characteristics deemed feminine should be valued, and women and Goddess should embody them. This is impossible if the Goddess is excluded from worship and theological contemplation, and from models for women.

This firestorm of protests incited by Hinckley’s pronouncement had no apparent effect. Today it is taboo in the LDS church to pray to or call on Mother in Heaven publicly. Even discussions of theology about Her in church meetings are severely curtailed. Therefore, women (and men) are often isolated when their personal experience of God is as feminine even though the Mormon concept of personal revelation legitimates their perspective. As this transposition of President Bruce R. McConkie’s talk illustrates, the church must grapple with this inconsistency in order to insist that members pray and communicate only with their Father in Heaven.

Every member of the Church independent and irrespective of any position that [s]he may hold is entitled to get revelation from the Holy Ghost; [s]he is entitled to entertain angels; [s]he is entitled to view the vision of eternity and if we would like to go the full measure, [s]he is entitled to see God in the same way that any prophet in literal and actual reality has seen the face of deity.

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293 Ibid.
294 I have yet to personally meet anyone willing to take the risk of sanction, even among those whom I know believe the taboo wrong. When one brings her up for discussion in church meetings the room becomes immediately uncomfortable; the nervousness palpable. My own experience is confirmed by the testimonies of others. For examples see Hanks, “Emerging Discourse on the Divine Feminine”; and Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 21.
296 Bruce R. McConkie, BYU fireside address, 11 Oct. 1966—Transposed by Julie J Nichols, and printed in Hanks, “Emerging Discourse on the Divine Feminine,” 291; This portion of his talk was also published in 1980 as McConkie, “How to Get Personal Revelation.”
To argue with personal experience requires the dismissal of some individuals’ experiences as self-productions or misinterpretations while at the same time maintaining that the spiritual experiences of those who experience God as masculine are not self-productions or misinterpretations. The church accomplishes such theological acrobatics, at least in part, by limiting access to authoritative speech supplemented by a culture of conformity that works to enforce silence from those whose experience of the divine does not match sanctioned expressions. While the church encourages those who experience God as masculine to share their experiences through talks, testimony meetings, and in Sunday school discussions, authentic expressions of the feminine divine are not welcome. As Pierce explains;

Testimonies given in such meetings must conform to tacit guidelines. Among those guidelines are that members must testify of male power and authority: the father, the son, Joseph Smith, and the current president of the church. These guidelines discourage women from cultivating a relationship with feminine deity. They also guide women who have had spiritual experiences with a feminine deity to define those experiences as emanating from a masculine deity.297

Furthermore, as Toscano points out, “members take their cues about what is acceptable doctrine from talks of General Authorities and official Church manuals and magazines.”298 Her search of church publications has produced only 26 direct references to either “Heavenly Mother” or “Mother in Heaven,” of which most were only references to older talks by past church authorities. She concludes, “such sparse referencing to Mother in Heaven implies that she should not be a topic of major concern for members of the Church.”299 For this reason, Latter-day Saints cannot learn about their peers’ views on God the Mother within the confines of sanctioned church activities.

A great deal of folklore has developed in recent years to explain the prohibition on worshipping, and silence surrounding Mother in Heaven. Perhaps most common is that She

297 Pierce, “Personal Discourse on God the Mother,” 247.
298 Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 15-6.
299 Ibid.
is too sacred to speak of and to even utter Her name is akin to profanity, thus to include Her in one’s life is a type of blasphemy or apostasy. Also common are the ideas that: longing for the Mother God is an insult or shows lack of appreciation for God the Father and a lack of gratefulness for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; it is inappropriate to speculate about a topic for which there is so little information in the scriptures; She is not essential to human salvation; and, if Her identity were important, then God would reveal it through proper priesthood channels. However, Toscano points out;  

While some regard the need for silence about the Heavenly Mother as reverence, absolute silence about her does not protect her, it erases her. Temples may be considered too sacred to reveal much of what goes on inside, but still we constantly talk about them, put up pictures of them, attend them, and devote resources to them—all of which reinforce their importance and sacredness.

In addition to the silencing or “shaming,” as Pierce calls it, which results from this folklore, there is legitimate fear of repercussions should one break the taboo. Official reproof—in the form of being called in to the bishop’s office, released from a church position, receiving a probation or excommunication, and loss of employment if one’s job is contingent on church status—is real and serious. The publicly discussed excommunication of six feminists in 1994, many of whom were disciplined, in part, for including Mother in Heaven in public discourse, as well as the related cases in which faculty charged BYU with academic censorship, adds to the general sense that discourse about Her is strictly forbidden.

In an address delivered to religious educators in 1976, then president Ezra Taft Benson said that

301 Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?”  
302 Pierce, “Personal Discourse on God the Mother,” 249-250.  
303 Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 16.  
...facts should not only be taught as facts; they should be taught to increase one's faith in the Gospel, to build testimony... We would hope that if you feel you must write for the scholarly journals, you always defend the faith. Avoid expressions and terminology which offend the Brethren.

As Richard J. Cummings points out, “There is something disquieting about the manner in which that term, “the Brethren,” can be invoked within the church as a vague sanction or threat.”

In her brief *Exponent II* article, Susan Howe provides an argument echoed by many that the reason we know so little about Mother in Heaven is simply that we don’t seek Her with the earnestness we seek the Father. Mormon revelation, both personal and ecclesiastical is predicated on seeking. All members, regardless of status or position in the hierarchy are taught, “[t]o understand the things of God requires a continuance effort, a pure and receptive heart, and an open mind. Revelation comes in response to our desire and seeking.” *The Doctrine and Covenants* instructs members to “study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you.” Given this process for receiving revelation, it seems worth asking if the lack of official theology on God the Mother is a consequence of the fact that ecclesiastical leaders, by virtue of the priesthood structure, are all male. It seems reasonable that men would tend to focus on male aspects of God—their reflection in deity. Because women are excluded from authoritative discourse, their reflection in deity—the feminine in deity—doesn’t get the attention or time the male does.

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307 Howe, “Our Mother’s Love.”
308 Elder Haight, “Come to the House of the Lord.”
310 When the details of theologies such as those regarding creation and salvation are worked out, everyone around the table is male (the brethren). Perhaps the presence of the feminine in creation and other sacred stories never felt important or significant. They are talking about how God made *them. They* are all men. Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” 17, also explores this concept.
Many authors cite collections of letters, essays, and interviews in which women and men share stories of personal resistance through praying to Mother in Heaven, the giving of priesthood blessing which include Her, teaching children to pray to Her, replacing the words of hymns and scripture to include Her, and so forth. The ninth Article of Faith states, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” This passage comes up repeatedly in feminist discourse. It justifies, in many feminist minds both public and private resistance. As Toscano states, “certainly among the great things to be revealed is knowledge of the Goddess and her place in the work of creation and salvation.”

Feminists tend to take issue with the Mormon construction of feminine divinity on two fronts: her absence and her subordinance. Mother in Heaven is absent in many ways, including those just discussed. She rarely appears in church education materials, and when She does, it is only in the context of explaining the concept of the eternal family. Unlike Her husband’s title, the standard practice in church educational material for writing “mother in heaven” is in lower case letters. Her pronouns are also lower case in materials produced by the LDS church. She almost never comes up in church meetings, and church leaders do not spend time discussing Her qualities or attributing action to Her as they do the Father, the Son, and even the Holy Ghost.

Mormonism’s rich creation story including a council of gods

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312 PofGP, The Articles of Faith.

313 Toscano, “Put On Your Strength O Daughters of Zion,” 434.


315 Ibid.

316 Ibid.
assisting in the formation of the world is written entirely in male terms with male characters—creation without a Mother.\footnote{Ibid., 84-5.}

In Toscano’s words,

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?\footnote{Toscano, “Are Boys More Important Than Girls?,” 24; see also Pierce, “Personal Discourse on God the Mother,” 253.}

Because members are forbidden from publicly theologizing about Heavenly Mother, it becomes taboo as well to probe into women’s roles and potential in the eternities.\footnote{Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 21.} LDS women have no means of asking what they can expect from their celestial future. What exactly is this exaltation the church promises them? The expectation to become like their Mother in Heaven does not provide the explicit model that expecting to becoming like Father in Heaven provides their husbands. What reward can women expect worth the faith, trust, and obedience required of them? Such limits create a vacuum of uncertainty for LDS women.

The second issue Mormon feminists have with this doctrine is the many ways that the presence of a God the Mother in Mormon theology does not function to liberate. Instead, authorities use her to limit women, place them on a pedestal, and create ambiguous feelings regarding whether godhood is really something worth striving for. In 1987, Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone of the First Quorum of the Seventy summarized what women have gained from their Mother in Heaven:

Women are endowed with special traits and attributes that come trailing down through eternity from a divine mother. Young women have special God-given feelings about charity, love, and obedience. Coarseness and vulgarity are contrary to their natures. They have a modifying, softening influence on young men. Young women were not foreordained to do what priesthood holders do. Theirs is a sacred, God-given role, and the traits they received from heavenly mother are equally as important as those given to the young men. Sometimes misguided women or men direct our youth away from their divinely appointed role. Worlds without end, men will never be able to bear children. Every young woman may be a procreator with God and carry a little one under her breast either in this life or in the
eternal worlds. Motherhood is a wonderful, priceless blessing, no matter what all the world may say. Priesthood ordination is a blessing to men. There are serious consequences when either motherhood or priesthood is abused or laid aside.320

If the limits placed on them in this life weren’t enough, the prospect of being priestesses to their husbands while their husbands are priests to God, of producing endless spirit children while their husbands create worlds and inspire mortals to fashion reasonable governments and legal systems, of being the shrouded figure too sacred to be seen while their husbands orchestrate the salvation of their children, simply doesn’t appeal to many women.321 This unbalanced eternity feels “absurd,” “humiliating,” and “degrading.”322 Of course, some woman humbly accept a second class status in both this life and the next, while others imagine that in perfection such things cannot exist, so our status however it might appear from this vantage point cannot be truly second class. Yet the future offered Mormon women sounds eerily like the promise of a good match—the spiritual equivalent of marrying well—the prospect of being on the arm of a high-status male, and thereby sharing in the delights of his wealth and power. Aren’t bliss and perfection worth having regardless of class? If everyone is perfectly humble, why care about such petty things as who’s in charge?323 “Degrading” seems a mild adjective for a future offering such shallow and paltry rewards. One woman expressed this sentiment saying,

No one can definitively prove to me that I will be equal in my Heavenly Parent’s home, that I will hold the priesthood and reign myself equal with Ralph. What a nebulous carrot anyway, to hold out in an exchange for putting up with all the flying you-know-what in this life! I feel so cheated… 324

Still, fear of missing out on the “carrot” is motivating. However disappointing goddesshood might be, it has to be better than a non-goddess status. Believing the church’s teachings leaves women little alternative but to swallow one of two bitter pills: accept second

320 Featherstone, “A Champion of Youth.”
323 Such an argument carries no price for the ruling class who makes it.
324 Quoted in Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts,” 123.
class status now and in the future, or bear it now while choosing to hope and believe, despite evidence to the contrary, that Heavenly Mother’s position is more palatable than it appears.

For other women the whole concept of a *Mother* in Heaven is unappealing. In their view, the term itself forefronts women’s relation to men and to children. For women with no desire for either, a Mother God does not offer a model of exaltation they wish to attain, no matter what other traits she may or may not encompass.\(^{325}\)

Another uncomfortable prospect for many Latter-day Saints is that being more open about Mother in Heaven or seeking revelation about Her might bring the issue of polygyny back into the spotlight.\(^{326}\) Does the LDS doctrine of eternal increase\(^{327}\) suggest that God too is polygynous? Or could be? Or was? Does this suggest that the Mother in Heaven referred to in Elisa R. Snow’s poem, though couched in the singular is actually plural? Mormon folklore has posited that in order to populate worlds with billions of children, there must be multiple goddesses per male god.\(^{328}\) This folklore probably developed when the church practiced polygyny in order to explain why polygyny was not only allowed, but necessary for the highest levels of exaltation, just as folklore explaining why we have a Mother in Heaven, but aren’t supposed to pray to Her blossomed after Hinckley’s address. There is a dark side to seeking after truth. What type of model do we have if revelation comes and the Goddess turns out to have one role in the eternities—to create spirit children—while God plans, creates, directs, and administers worlds? Or if the eternities are polygynous and the Mother women want so badly to know turns out to be an unknowable mass of polygynous wives of

\(^{325}\) Hanks, “Emerging Discourse on the Divine Feminine,” 264-9, 281-2. It is interesting, not just in Mormon, but more generally in Christian discourse, that identifying a god as Mother limits her, but identifying a god as Father does not. No one seems concerned that by using the modifier “Father” we reduce the Christian God to a fertility god, sperm donor, childcare provider, or even a breadwinner. God the Father is understood by Western culture in expansive parental, not restrictive, biological terms, the way mother goddesses are.

\(^{326}\) Pierce, “Personal Discourse on God the Mother,” 251.

\(^{327}\) See *D&C*, 131 & 132.

\(^{328}\) Ulrich, “A Little Bit of Heaven,” 100.
God the Father? Some LDS women have anxiety that the eternal universe really is sexist and that no amount of fighting will make a difference, because it is the eternal essence of how things are. Women really are inferior; polygyny really is of God. The danger of the church making salient an archetype for women that reinforces their subordinate status seems perilous.

Entangled with the silencing of Heavenly Mother is the problem of gendered worship- and god-talk and their effects on women and men.

It is not right that our history, our theology, our present, and our future be given us solely in masculine terminology and from a male point of view. The injury to the female psyche is incalculable. But we have lived with it for so long we have come to accept it as natural. We have come to accept the absence of the female as just the way it is.329

Like feminists in other disciplines, Mormon feminists have argued for more inclusive language in LDS worship. “The way we arrange words is determined by and in turn determines the way we arrange our reality.”330 Elliott points out that language which emphasizes the power of one, and by implication the powerlessness of another, inevitably makes the powerless group feel vulnerable, excluded, and devalued, however much they are assured of their goodness and value.331

Lavina Fielding Anderson argues for the advantages of deliberately choosing gender-inclusive language in religious contexts. She claims its importance not only on ethical grounds, but because there are “profound spiritual consequences”332 to exclusive language. She recommends several ways, very specific to LDS belief and practice, in which individuals and the church as an institution could and should be more inclusive in their language.333 Paramount to this is allowing worship of Mother in Heaven back into LDS practice so that we can call on the divine in plural and inclusive language.

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329 Pearson, “Healing the Motherless House.”
Reading the scriptures inclusively, singing hymns inclusively, and praying with inclusive language are quiet grammatical revolutions that will reshape our reality to make it more truly a partnering—an equal honoring—of maleness and femaleness. But it will be inadequate without an underlying commitment [by the church institution], which must be renewed often, to inclusiveness.  

While church authorities have thus far been unwilling to give any ground on the Mother in Heaven controversy, some of the other gender inclusive arguments seem to be taking hold. Anderson recounts multiple talks during recent general conferences and some lesson manual materials that intentionally use gender inclusive language. Yet she is disappointed by the extent to which simple measures are not taken to use inclusive speech and in the church’s failure to update hymns to be more inclusive. For myself, the shift from my childhood is dramatic. Following the authorities’ lead, many local speakers insert gender inclusive language into talks, lessons, and their reading of the scriptures. While impressive, given the resistance I remember to such measures in the 1980s and 1990s, the shift is far from complete. It is worth asking, however, whether changing and adding a few pronouns can bring about the revolution Anderson is looking for as long as women have almost no access to formal authority in the church.

3.e. The LDS church’s prescription of women’s lives

…I think it the most arrogant presumption for man to assume the right to decide all points of right and wrong, all questions of propriety or expedience, and even what is womanly.

Being a profound believer in reciprocal rights and duties, I protest against further allowing men’s opinions to be our highest court of appeal until they shall pay the same high honor to our opinions (just think, in that case, of the vast overturning there would be in the world’s affairs!) Until that happy day, I insist upon my right to have and to hold my own opinions, and to act upon my own judgment…

L. L. D., St. George, UT.

334 Ibid., 226. There is good evidence in the pages of unofficial publications such as Exponent II, Mormon Women’s Forum Newsletter, Feminist Mormon Housewives, etc. that many LDS members participate in this “quiet revolution.” For examples see Elliott, “Let Women No Longer Keep Silent” and Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts.”


336 Ibid.


The golden period of the Mormon movement is often presented as the relatively tranquil years of growth and prosperity after the Saints settled in Nauvoo, Illinois and before the conflict and violence erupted which lead to Joseph Smith’s martyrdom. The LDS church is fond of one of Smith’s quotes from that period—“I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves”\(^\text{339}\)—as a way to illustrate how the church relates to its members, how priesthood leaders should relate to their congregations, how parents should relate to their children. But as Elliott points out, “In current church practice women are taught correct principles and then are governed.”\(^\text{340}\) A major source of frustration for many LDS feminists is the narrow way the church prescribes the lives of women.

The quantity of rhetoric explicating ideals for women has increased dramatically in the last century and a half, peaking during periods of national debate over women’s roles in society.\(^\text{341}\) Some LDS feminists turn to Jacques Derrida’s theories of Western language and thought to explain why the construction of gender in LDS discourse creates binary oppositions that privilege one side of the binary. The consistent reference in male church discourse to women’s otherness and their essential difference from men places them in binary opposition, constantly reinforcing women’s subordinate status and men’s relative position of power, authority, and autonomy.\(^\text{342}\) Regardless of the level of genuine compassion and concern for women expressed by male leaders, their constant speaking to women reinforces and subtly reminds woman of her place.\(^\text{343}\)

The LDS church frames gender roles as separate-but-equal.\(^\text{344}\) While all humans are equal,\(^\text{345}\) God did prescribe different roles for men and women. Because of this, traditional

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\(^{341}\) Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”


\(^{344}\) Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 21.
domestic roles for women hold religious power in Mormon subculture and exert tremendous pressure on LDS families.\textsuperscript{346}

Feminists resist the constrained definition of women as wife, mother, and homemaker.\textsuperscript{347} These terms, in LDS discourse, are narrowly defined as women’s biological ability to reproduce and physically and emotionally care for her home, husband, and children. As Hanks puts it,

\begin{quote}
A continuing theme in Mormon discourse is a notion of compulsory motherhood, euphemized as every woman’s “duty,” “first calling,” “sacred obligation,” or “full measure of creation.” While feminism confirms motherhood as one of many opportunities for women, patriarchy advocates motherhood as women’s mandatory duty.\textsuperscript{348}
\end{quote}

While fatherhood is also encouraged for men, their primary identification as priesthood holders encompasses far more than contributing sperm and providing for the emotional and physical needs of their wives and children. The priesthood holder’s role involves ecclesiastical, ministerial, and administrative roles. As the individual responsible for providing financially for the family, priesthood holders have, and are supported in, career-related identities as well. All these roles are available to priesthood holders, to a greater or lesser degree,\textsuperscript{349} whether they marry or have children, or not. As priesthood holders, the implications to their personal righteousness (and value) is not as tightly bound as it is for women to any one of their many available roles (especially not their biological function as reproducers). As we have already seen, authoritative discourse emanating from the church is

\textsuperscript{345} LDS leaders regularly make this claim, but one could argue that Mormon theology does not support it. Race and lineage, as well as gender theologies bring such claims into question. To explore this interesting aspect of evolving Mormon theology, see Mauss, All Abraham’s Children.

\textsuperscript{346} In her book, Williams subtly portrays some of the ways this division of labor plays out in everyday Mormon life. Some example can be found in Williams, Refuge, 35, 48, 125.

\textsuperscript{347} Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”

\textsuperscript{348} Hanks, “Compulsory Pregnancy,” 9.

\textsuperscript{349} Many of the top administrative position are only open to men who have been sealed (eternally married) in the temple (i.e. currently married or widowed).
male discourse. Therefore, men produce these prescriptions for women’s lives—an imbalance that exacerbates the power differential between these binary opposites. From a feminist perspective, by the 1900s, any attempt at “equal citizenship for women was replaced by glorification of motherhood.” The church began to draw clear and distinct tracts for men and women. For men, God ordained priesthood, for women, motherhood. This comparison between the priesthood for men and motherhood for women was first articulated earlier, but it was not the main focus of discourse as it has remained from the 1950s forward. Women have reacted to the equating of motherhood with priesthood in multiple ways. Obviously some embrace the comparison and exalt in their sacred role as mothers. Mormon feminists have the difficult task of not wanting to disparage motherhood while seeing the comparison as both illogical and a means of denying women access to both spiritual power and the church hierarchy. Comparing them in this manner suggests equality, and yet the two sides of the dichotomy are grossly unequal and, predictably, favor men in all questions of personal, family, and organizational power, authority, influence, and decision-making. It also either ignores the important role and sacred calling of fatherhood or renders it of no value, making motherhood alone able to balance out both fatherhood and the priesthood.

Perhaps the most frequently quoted early passage equating motherhood and priesthood appeared in the 1954 revision of John A. Widtsoe’s *Priesthood and Church Governance* in which he stated: “The man who arrogantly feels that he is better than his wife because he holds the Priesthood has failed utterly to comprehend the meaning and purpose of

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350 According to Vance, “author gender is also significantly correlated with gender role ideation in Mormon periodicals… with male authors advocating more traditional and female authors more expanded and non-traditional ideals for women.” Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999”; see also, Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 58-61.

351 Newell, “Mormon Women and Priesthood,” 42.

Priesthood.” He goes on, “the Lord loves His daughters quite as well as his sons...men can never rise superior to the women who bear and nurture them...woman has her gift of equal magnitude—motherhood.” This mantra finds expression in church meetings at every level of the hierarchy. In the *Doctrine and Covenants* student manual Elder Neal A. Maxwell is quoted in reference to the importance of women in the Lord’s plan:

> We know so little, brothers and sisters, about the reasons for the division of duties between womanhood and manhood as well as between motherhood and priesthood. These were divinely determined in another time and another place.

The reiteration of such talks making a comparison between motherhood and priesthood, and indicating the eternalness of a gendered division of labor in lesson manuals explains why these rationales are commonly accepted among the membership. In his talk, originally given during General Conference in 1978, Maxwell goes on to insist on the importance of women despite this division of labor, saying:

> Greatness is not measured by coverage in column inches, either in newspapers or in the scriptures. The story of the women of God, therefore, is, for now, an untold drama within a drama...

Despite this reassurance, many women likely find little comfort in the examples of important contributions by women that he provides, which note these women only for birthing and rearing important men.

Just as certain men were foreordained from before the foundations of the world, so were certain women appointed to certain tasks. Divine design—not chance—brought Mary forward to be the mother of Jesus. The boy prophet, Joseph Smith, was blessed not only with a great father but also with a superb mother, Lucy Mack, who influenced a whole dispensation.

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353 Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Governance*.
354 Ibid.
357 For another example see Featherstone, “A Champion of Youth.”
358 Maxwell, “The Women of God.” His word choice seems unlikely to be a coincidence. More likely, his talk represents the church’s direct response to a common feminist critique—women’s lack of access to authoritative speech.
359 Ibid.
Such rhetoric equating motherhood for women to priesthood for men combines it with essentialist claims about the nature of women. Such claims both acknowledge the value of women’s contribution and are used to deny women access to avenues of making contributions unrelated to the domestic domain:

In our modern kingdom, it is no accident that women were, through the Relief Society, assigned compassionate service. So often the service of women seems instinctive, while that of some men seems more labored…When the real history of mankind is fully disclosed, will it feature the echoes of gunfire or the shaping sound of lullabies? The great armistices made by military men or the peacemaking of women in homes and neighborhoods? Will what happened in cradles and kitchens prove to be more controlling than what happened in congresses? When the surf of the centuries has made the great pyramids so much sand, the everlasting family will still be standing.\(^{360}\)

Lastly he goes on to clarify once again women’s role in the world and present consequences for those who desire something else: “for the act of deserting home in order to shape society is like thoughtlessly removing crucial fingers from an imperiled dike in order to teach people to swim.”\(^{361}\) Maxwell’s convoluted entanglement of awed-but-patronizing, revering-but-limiting, celebrating-but-admonishing approach to women is typical of male, church, authoritative discourse.

Beneath the poetic verse so common in such talks lies a fear of women that occasionally surfaces. D. Michael Quinn cites several examples including Boyd K. Packer’s talk in which he explains that that men need to feel dominant, and if a young woman takes that from him, she reduces his manhood.\(^{362}\) This letter written by Hartman Rector, Jr., Mission President for the California San Diego Mission, provides a particularly vivid example:

“…He who made them made them both Male and Female and there is a difference. The female has the greatest influence on the children of our Heavenly Father, because she prepares their earthly body and then nurtures them during the most formative period of their life. Therefore there is no power on earth as strong as mother love and mother influence.

“In order to attempt to get the male somewhere near even, the Heavenly Father gave him the Priesthood or directing authority for the Church and home. Without this bequeath the male would be so

\(^{360}\) Ibid.
\(^{361}\) Ibid.
\(^{362}\) Quinn, “Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843,” 381-2.
far below the female in power and influence that there would be little or no purpose for his existence in fact would probably be eaten by the female as is the case with the black widow spider.

“Therefore the Lord has made plain by revelations both ancient and modern that the male rules over the female but always with love and great respect...”

It seems to Quinn that “[i]n the contemporary LDS church there are uncomfortable evidences for Apostle Franklin D. Richards' century-old observation that jealousy and fear motivate LDS men to limit LDS women.”

Another indication of the power differential between men and women in the church is the constant reassurance church authorities provide women. This reassurance most often takes two forms. First they are assured of their value to Heavenly Father; that they are every bit as loved and important as men. Second they are assured that, should they be unable to find husbands and have children in this life, they will have that opportunity in the next.

President Hinckley’s attempt to comfort women in this “unfortunate” situation included encouraging single women to use this opportunity to work great righteousness, rather than see themselves as disadvantaged for not being married. Yet none of the accomplishments by single women he speaks of admiringly relate to innovation or success in political activities, commercial entrepreneurship, scientific breakthroughs, scholarly influence, or technological inventions. He instead focuses entirely on service and care-giving work (war nurses, Red Cross founder, care provider for the poor), the roles Joseph Smith outlined for the Relief Society. Church leaders do not give these reassuring and comforting talks to men. The LDS church regularly encourages and expresses admiration for men’s secular endeavors and success, and as priesthood holders, their importance and worth is self-evident.

364 Quinn, “Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843,” 382; Newell provides several examples of the ways these feelings surface in conversations between members. See Newell, “Mormon Women and Priesthood,” 23.
366 Hinckley, “To Single Adults.”
367 Ibid.
Simply the fact that church authorities feel the need to console women for their “undesirable” circumstance, but don’t feel the need to do the same for men speaks volumes about what is valued in women, what is considered to represent a meaningful life, and the interpreted causes of women’s unhappiness. When communicated by individuals in authority, these messages undoubtedly contribute as much to women’s anxiety over singleness and childlessness as they are the result of it.

LDS women also struggle with conflicting messages. The high rate of post-secondary education among LDS women\(^{368}\) probably relates, at least in part, to the church’s heavy emphasis on education for all its members. At the same time the church nurtures female achievement, it also mistrusts it.\(^{369}\) Women have been repeatedly admonished by church presidents that “no other success [in life] can compensate for failure in the home”\(^{370}\) and “The [greatest] work you will ever do will be within the walls of your own home”\(^{371}\) thus dissuading women from seeking achievements outside it.

Women also receive conflicting messages about their importance to the church’s stated mission to spread the gospel. While members are regularly reminded that proselytizing is an essential function of the church, men are obligated to serve a full time mission upon reaching adulthood, while women are not. Instead, women are informed that their “foremost responsibility” is marriage. A program requiring them to go on missions might “prevent them from finding—or place a hardship in their way toward finding—a proper companion in

\(^{368}\) “The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.”

\(^{369}\) Ulrich, “Border Crossings,” 199; Thayne, “Applause,” 193-5. Thayne responds to these admonitions by pointedly stating: “what I keep hoping for women is that we will…receive encouragement with cooperation from our families, just as it’s given to men to spur them to the applause of the world if they deserve it. My experience has shown that just as no success may compensate for failure in the home, so no success in the home can compensate for failure to be all that one can be anywhere else. So many women whom I love and respect have demonstrated success in both to the detriment of neither.”

\(^{370}\) President David O. McKay, quoted by Hinckley, “The Women in Our Lives.”

\(^{371}\) Lee, “Maintain Your Place as a Woman.”
marriage.” Their service is, therefore, optional and only permitted if they reach the age of twenty-one still unmarried.  

Feminists resist these mandates and the complex theology that underpins them on both theological and personal levels. From the 19th century, one woman speaks out in frustration:

It has been the popular cry that no woman could be a good, true, loving wife, and at the same time successfully follow any profession. If so, neither can a man do justice to any professional calling and prove a kind, affectionate, and loving husband.

Over a century later we encounter this emphatic statement:

Amy [her newborn daughter] is my sister and my neighbor and my child and I hope someday she will be my friend, but she is not a rung on my ladder to the celestial kingdom.

In 1992, Sonja Farnsworth claimed that an “idea absolutely germane to the partnership of motherhood and priesthood is that of sex-role separation.” She points to then president Ezra Taft Benson’s use of a passage form Genesis to make the point:

The Lord’s way to rear our children is different from the world's way…in the beginning Adam—not Eve, was instructed to earn bread by the sweat of his brow. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a mother's place is in the home, not in the marketplace.

Farnsworth went on to argue, using Trible's logic:

The use of scripture to support the idea of separate spheres for male and female is powerful, presented as it is through the voice of both scripture and living prophet. But the casual reader might not notice two things. First, the idea of eliminating the woman from the work force does not contradict conventional wisdom but coincides with it. Second…President Benson's example describes Adam and Eve after the “fall.” It was this fall which caused separation and separate spheres. Why, one might ask, should a fallen and corrupt gender model be raised up as an ideal for the “redeemed” membership of the church?

372 Monson, “Status Report on Missionary Work.” Young men are expected to serve their mission when they turn 19.

373 For many examples see Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 56-8; and Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts.”

374 “Heart vs. Head,” 92.

375 Ulrich, “Poor Mother,” 119.

376 Farnsworth, “Mormonism’s Odd Couple,” 310.

377 Benson, “To the Mother’s in Zion, pamphlet,” 5.

378 Trible, “Eve and Adam.”

379 Farnsworth, “Mormonism’s Odd Couple,” 310.
And Laurel Thatcher Ulrich insists:

As a Latter-day Saint, I say with Mary Wollstonecraft, ‘Let not men then in the pride of power, use the same arguments that tyrannical kings and venal ministers have used and fallaciously assert that woman ought to be subjected because she has always been so.’

In the current atmosphere of essentialist gender rhetoric, LDS feminists again take solace in their history.

Central to the Mormon articulation of the ideal family is definition of ideal gender roles. Recent scholarship on Mormon women indicates, however, that ideals for women have been far from monolithic over the course of the movement’s history.

In the 19th century, authoritative discourse took place in women’s as well as men’s publications. Women’s discourse supported the pursuit of both motherhood and a profession or politics, admonished women who didn’t take responsibility for themselves, and validated the choice to avoid marriage and children if so inclined. They argued that if God gave a woman the aptitude and the drive then she should be at liberty to pursue any vocation. While male authorities offered women far narrower models, church authorities did put out calls for women to take up the professions and receive the training necessary to fill community needs (frequently resulting from men being called away to serve missions). Articles and news briefs featuring successful career women, scientists, artists, and heads of state, along with traditional wives and mothers provided implicit as well as explicit support to a whole range of women’s interests, talents, and potential, in both wage and non-wage work. Even in publications dominated by men, the breadth of possibilities was historically much wider than it is today.

Vance’s research demonstrated the following trend:

381 Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”
383 Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 56.
…during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, all Era [an official church publication] articles advocate non-traditional, or extra-domestic, activities for women. Between 1911 and 1920 a greater percentage of articles continue to advocate non-traditional roles for women (66.7 percent) while one places greater emphasis on women's roles as wives, mothers and homemakers (expanded traditional, 33.3 percent). After 1921 a significant proportion of articles place primary or exclusive emphasis on women's domestic roles, though some Era authors in each decade promote a more expansive interpretation of ideals for women. The greatest emphasis on restriction of women to domestic roles is found between 1971 and 1980 (73.7 percent)… Era authors promoting more non-traditional (43.9 percent) and expanded traditional (19.5 percent) ideals and the Ensign advocating more traditional (54.8 percent) ideals for women (p < .000).  

The emerging picture is of a young, struggling church in the 1800s that promoted expanded roles for women quite at odds with the prevailing cultural norms of the time, informed as it was by the Cult of True Womanhood. As the church matured and emerged from its mountain stronghold, it slowly accommodated—advocating an ideal for women in sync with cultural messages of the post World War II 1940s and ‘50s that promoted domesticity. Becoming increasingly entrenched in this position as time passed, the church built up a precedent of official rhetoric defining women’s domestic roles as a divine mandate.  

As the women’s movement gained momentum in the 1960s the LDS church positioned itself in the stance it holds to this day: as a defender of “traditional family values.” Reaching its peak in the 1970s and 1980s, the church’s admonitions unambiguously defined ideal womanhood in domestic terms. In 1971 the official message was unequivocally opposed to women’s wage labor except in extenuating circumstances.  

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386 Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.” According to Vance, the sampling for her analysis “consists of one hundred and fourteen articles articulating ideals for women (and indexed under "women") (2) included in the two major periodicals published by and for Mormons between 1897 and 1999, the Improvement Era and the Ensign. (3) Both periodicals contain directives from Church leaders, news announcements, faith-promoting articles and accounts, and sermons by Church leaders; members are (were) encouraged by Church leaders to subscribe to and read each periodical. The Ensign, the Church’s primary official publication for members, provides readers information and directives approved prior to publication by Church priesthood leaders and reflects Church leaders’ “explicit or implicit positions” on subjects…”  

387 Ibid.  
388 Ibid.  
390 Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”
From its first issue, the *Ensign* took aim at the feminist movement. Apostle Thomas S. Monson (who would become church president in 2008) accused it of “deceiving” women and of having “cunningly led them away from their divine role of womanhood down that pathway of error.” Though women are equal to their husbands, he explained, their roles are inherently and essentially different. He instructed women: “Your husband, as the priesthood bearer, is the head of the home. You, the helpmeet, are not the head, but just as important—the heart of the home.”

According to Vance, The *Ensign* lays the framework for expectations of Mormon women in the 1970s, as well as much of the 1980s and 1990s by identifying women's obligations as being to their husbands, children and church.

In 1979, Oscar W. McConkie, in his book *She Shall Be Called Woman*, expounded on this essentialism, which would in 1995 become codified as second-only-to scripture when incorporated into *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*. According to McConkie, not only are the roles of men and women on earth different, but our souls are different in essence, and this difference is fundamental to our identities. Women have female souls. Female souls and male souls have different eternal roles and they are prepared for these roles with different characteristics. Women have “great[er] sensitivity to spiritual truths,” and righteous husbands are “the savior of the wives.”

According to McConkie,

Marriage is a partnership, but there is a senior partner. God set man to lead, to preside, to be the last word. Woman is obligated to conform, to obey, to be in subjection to the will of the husband, as long as his rulership is exercised in righteousness.

Elaborating on the concept of eternal gender, Ahmad S. Corbitt explained “Jesus’ teaching shows [a] hierarchy of truth applies to our identities; that is, certain truths about our

\[391\] Monson, “The Women’s Movement: Liberation or Deception?“
\[392\] Ibid.
\[393\] Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”
\[394\] McConkie, *She Shall Be Called Woman*, 117. However, on page 6 he mentions briefly that “some radical feminists” seem to have lost all “womanlyness.”
\[395\] Ibid., 4.
\[396\] Ibid., 100.
identities are more important than others. “397 According to this model, the most essential or fundamental truth about our identity is that “we are spirit children of God, our Heavenly Father, that we are disciples and covenant children of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Less fundamental, but still essential to the essence of who we are as spirits is our gender. Characteristics such as race, ethnicity, class, and nationality are often important to our lives on earth, but are not essential characteristics of our eternal souls.

The entrenchment represented by McConkie’s book took place against the backdrop of profound social transformation of gender ideals and sexual norms. As Hanks points out:

Male church leaders responded to Mormon feminism with unprecedented emphasis on the nuclear family and patriarchal authority during the 1970s, drawing heavily on republican motherhood discourse. The church opposed the Equal Rights Amendment, organized and funded efforts to defeat it. 398

The pro-ERA movement arguably represented the peak of both internal and external pressure on the church to reform its gender doctrine, policies, and practices. Shirley Paxman represents many LDS women at the height of this conflict in saying

I, like some of you, feel no personal frustrations about a woman’s role. But I am concerned about some of the things that are happening…I feel that we are really losing a great many wonderful things that women have by tradition in our church, and this is distressing to me. 399

The church was hostile to its members who supported feminist goals, as evidenced by this letter written in 1979 and later published Dialogue.

Dear President Kimball:

We speak for a sizeable minority of LDS women whose pain is so acute that they must try to be heard. Does the First Presidency really know of our plight? …Suddenly many devoted Mormon women are being treated like apostates…We desperately need to know whether, after serious consideration, soul-searching, and prayer, you…find us unworthy, a minority open to attack, and ultimately expendable…If not, can the word get out that Mormon feminists are not to be subjected to intimidation, rejection for Church assignments, loss of employment, and psychological

397 Corbitt, “The Rock of Our Redeemer and the Stumbling Stone of Our Generation.” In this talk, given by invitation at BYU, Corbitt presents this model for evaluating the importance of race to one’s identity. The talk does not directly address gender. Corbitt explained to me how gender fits into the model in a personal conversation.


excommunication. Every difference of opinion or sincere question should not be answered with a threatening indictment of one's testimony. We are women who love the Lord, the gospel, and the Church; we have served, tithed, and raised righteous children in Zion. We plead for the opportunity to continue to do so in an atmosphere of respect and justice. For decades we have been part of the solution, whatever the need has been; we are saddened to be now considered part of the problem…

In 1979 and 1980 Linda Sillitoe wrote articles for *Sunstone* magazine detailing the church’s involvement in anti-ERA efforts. She summarized her findings in an article for the *Mormon Women’s Forum Newsletter*:

Did I still expect someone to knock on my door and ask to see the letter signed by then Apostle Ezra Taft Benson instructing bishops to send ten women from every ward in Utah to the IWY meeting? Or the brochures and petitions placed in Virginia ward lobbies, linking Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum with the LDS Virginia Citizens coalition in fighting the Equal Right Amendment? Would someone want to see the newsletter of the Arlington Stake announcing that President Spencer W. Kimball had enlisted the membership to fight the ERA? Or copies of Sonia Johnson’s speeches to be sure she never asked for priesthood nor applied the term “savage misogyny” to Mormon church leaders? Who would ask to see evidence that funds raised by Virginia bishops were laundered by pseudo-account called FACT, that word houses and Church meetings were used in Florida to lobby legislators, that church Boy Scout troupes passed out anti-ERA literature to ward members in Arizona, and that anti-ERA leaders were set apart in Missouri where Relief Society sisters were bused (wearing dresses and carrying sack lunches, as instructed) from stake centers to the state legislature? Who would want evidence that the national LDS anti-ERA movement was run by top Church leaders through the Special Affairs committee in Salt Lake City?

Despite their church’s adamant stance on the ERA, Mormon women and organizations were actively involved in the movement to pass it. Several activists attended General Conference with the intention of protesting the church’s efforts to defeat the ERA. They described their actions and intentions in an article printed in the *Mormons for ERA newsletter* following the event:

Time and again pro-ERA church members have petitioned the First Presidency of the Mormon Church to reconsider or discuss with them the Church’s anti-ERA policy… We have seized our one opportunity to voice our conscience to the First Presidency, the occasion of the sustaining vote on church leaders, in order to demonstrate our deep indignation over the church’s anti-ERA policy. We wish to make it clearly understood that we, as active members of the church support and sustain Spencer Kimball as church president and religious leader. We also emphatically state that we cannot, do not, and will not accept him as our unelected political leader…

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400 Reprinted in Ibid., 107.
401 Sillitoe, “Off the Record.”
Cheryl Dalton highlighted the power of the social expectation of obedience within LDS culture when she described her experience of this event:

We were about to do the unthinkable in the Mormon culture: look the patriarchy in the eye and vote NO… afterwards, I thought with satisfaction: At last, woman’s voice has been heard within the tabernacle.\(^{403}\)

In addition to the demonstration at the Tabernacle, pro-ERA activists marched outside Temple Square, staged demonstrations and rallies—much like the activities only a decade earlier regarding priesthood for blacks.\(^{404}\)

As LDS feminists all over the States mobilized in pro-ERA groups, others were swayed by the church’s rhetoric,\(^{405}\) and many actively resisted LDS feminism—dividing the church’s women. Mormon women took up banners and provided counter protests at International Women’s Year meetings, and during pro-ERA rallies. The following example poignantly points out the desire for dependency so common in women’s culture both inside and outside the church.

I enjoy a man’s joy at fixing my flat tire and never would I let him know that I can repair any part of my car that needs fixing…you have lost your femininity and beauty as a lady…I am a happy fulfilled woman and I don’t want my lifestyle destroyed by you and your kind.\(^{406}\)

The church finally succeeded in cowering the worst of its internal critics with the excommunication of prominent leaders of the pro-ERA movements. Sillitoe writes:

Sonia Johnson did not do the things she was excommunicated for—saying Church leaders were savage misogynists, disrupting Church programs…telling people not to obey the prophet. But she did far worse. She and her Mormons for ERA exposed, via the media the highly-organized anti-ERA campaign which the Church claimed was only the independent effort of concerned citizens who happened to be Mormon…Sonia Johnson didn’t break the rules in the Church handbook so much as the unspoken taboos. She wasn’t nice. She did not conform. She didn’t obey. She laundered the Church’s dirty linen in public. By all rights Sonia Johnson should have died simply from taboo-breaking, but she wouldn’t, and so they held a witch burning.


\(^{404}\) Ibid., 113-127.

\(^{405}\) For one example see Firmage, “Reconciliation,” 339.

\(^{406}\) Quoted in Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts,” 120.
According to Sillitoe, within months of Johnson’s excommunication the burgeoning Mormons for ERA split in Virginia and splintered in Utah “as fear and frustration ran rampant within the groups that could not affect the institution and could only self destruct.”

Reba Keele asked:

How are the anti-suffrage arguments B. H. Roberts made similar to the anti-ERA arguments now being made? …What is the impact on both men and women of the priesthood’s being both the governing arm and a sex-linked characteristic in the church? …“Savage misogyny” is a weak term for some of what I have seen during my history here…

Vella Neil Evens draws a correlation between the male takeover of all church publication and the disconnect between LDS women of the late 19th and the late 20th centuries. The earlier generation of LDS women had advocated for equal rights and suffrage, while most LDS women in the 1970s followed the male authorities’ lead and voted against every agenda item of the IWA including equal pay for equal work, directly opposing their grandmothers’ efforts.

According to Sillitoe, even though the church’s campaigns in critical states and the ruling by (LDS) judge Marion Callister clearly played a crucial role in defeating the ERA, the church didn’t dare claim its victory. LDS public relations carefully distanced the church from the whole affair, omitting the battle from LDS official histories. “As history became reshaped, only local Church leaders had been involved in anti-ERA politics and in the excommunication[s]”

After the tumult and crackdown of the 1970s the church backed off—making overt moves to present itself as compassionate toward women. In 1978 the church created the

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407 Sillitoe, “Off the Record.”
409 Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications,” 55.
410 Sillitoe, “Off the Record.”
411 Ibid.
412 Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”
Brigham Young University’s Women’s Research Institute (WRI) charged with promoting research on women’s history, concerns, and accomplishments.\textsuperscript{413} As the 1980s progressed, authoritative discourse began to acknowledge that the realities of women’s lives frequently made reaching church ideals impossible. Changes in the expression of ideals for women, however, were more a matter of degree than kind.\textsuperscript{414} In the 1990s the church became increasingly flexible in its rhetoric regarding women’s roles. Young women were strongly encouraged to attain higher education and prepare themselves for the possibility of a career. Leaders expressed acceptance of women’s choices including the choice to pursue wage labor or a profession while rearing children. They also acknowledged the realities for women who had to work in order to support their families—expressing admiration for those who sacrificed much to provide for their children on their own.\textsuperscript{415} This trend in official rhetoric continues to this day. While LDS women are presented with motherhood and homemaking as their primary responsibilities, widowhood and divorce are no longer the only reasons acknowledged for women to enter the paid workforce. Instead, couples are encouraged to make divinely inspired decisions pertaining to whether a wife should work and local leaders and members are discouraged from judging women for their decisions.\textsuperscript{416} Sillitoe’s exhaustion surfaces as she points to mounting symbols of the esteem in which the church holds women:

\begin{itemize}
\item From a 1991 interview by \textit{Student Review} with Ida Smith, director of the WRI from its creation in 1978 until 1983. Reprinted in Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts,” 130. In a similar way to its racial conflicts, the church’s showcase university BYU became embroiled in controversy over feminism. Women’s studies classes began to appear in the mid 1970s. Since that time, the university has struggled with a conflict between the need to meet accreditation requirements and a desire to present students and the world with messages consistent with official LDS church positions. Feminism as a philosophical and academic perspective must have a voice for the university to appear relevant and respectable. Feminist faculty both male and female have struggled with university administration testing boundaries and the lengths to which the church will go in silencing dissent in an academic setting.
\item Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”
\item Ibid.
\item For lists of articles in church periodicals representing these stages in LDS authoritative discourse, see Ibid.
\end{itemize}
…statues in long skirts were being dedicated in the Nauvoo garden; auxiliary presidents were joining male authorities on the stand in general conference; women’s conferences were held at BYU. 417 Delicate icing to cover a spoiled cake.

Despite these overtures, the church’s position on gendered roles is still firmly entrenched in essentialist patriarchy. The more authoritative the speaker and occasion of the speech, the more narrowly women’s roles are prescribed. 418 The authoritative voice in the church is still overwhelmingly male, and male voices are still overwhelmingly conservative in defining women’s roles. 419

The church still clearly places the responsibility for rearing children, and with it any guilt should the children’s needs not be met, on the mother, not the father. In 1995 the First Presidency presented The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 420 arguably the most authoritative statement published by the church since the revelation extending the priesthood to all worthy males (removal of the black priesthood ban). The church instructs its members to study and ponder the Proclamation, and keep it on display. 421 According to the careful language of the Proclamation,

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. 422

A statement of exception is provided when “disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation.” 423 It nevertheless sends a clear message that mothers

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417 Sillitoe, “Off the Record.”
418 Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”
419 Ibid.
420 The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”
421 One sees this document everywhere, on home mantles, church office walls, in every press packet handed to journalists, tucked inside pamphlets, and referenced constantly in talks and lessons.
422 The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”
423 Ibid.
should be at home and if they choose to work, it is on them, not their husbands should the children not receive sufficient attention. As Toscano puts it:

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.  

The church does seem sincere in its attempt to hold men more responsible in the home and provide women more freedom outside it. In a fascinating turn of rhetoric, President Hinckley took two previous statements by church authorities, originally intended to admonish women to fulfill their roles as mothers, and instead directed them at men. In a priesthood session of General Conference, he reminded the men that;

Well did President McKay remind us that “no other success [in life] can compensate for failure in the home” (quoted from J. E. McCulloch, Home: The Savior of Civilization [1924], 42; in Conference Report, Apr. 1935, 116).

Likewise, the truth of which President Lee reminded us: “The [greatest] work you will ever do will be within the walls of your own home” (“Maintain Your Place as a Woman,” Ensign, Feb. 1972, 51).

In so doing, Hinckley was not calling men to be the primary caregivers of their children, but to be better husbands, to care for and respect their wives by supporting them in their responsibilities and making their happiness and wellbeing central. Yet he followed this turn of rhetoric with essentialist claims about gender characteristics:

The women in our lives are creatures endowed with particular qualities, divine qualities, which cause them to reach out in kindness and with love to those about them. We can encourage that outreach if we will give them opportunity to give expression to the talents and impulses that lie within them.

Later in the same talk Hinckley described his children stating; “I think I can say that my sons are able and wise. My daughters are clever and kind.” The difference in the way he thinks of his sons versus his daughters highlights the way the church understands gender differences, and the way women are socialized in the church to think about themselves and

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426 Ibid.
427 Ibid.
their potential. As Toscano explains, when authorities revere women as the culmination of creation, as Hinckley does in this talk, they relegate women to second-class citizens. “Isn’t it secondary for an all-male godhead to create woman after the man as a helpmeet for him?” she asks.

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.  

If sincerity and good intentions were sufficient, perhaps the church and feminists would have mended fences by now. But the church’s own system limits it by excluding female perspective. Those in a position to provide guidance to women are simply not in a position to understand women’s perspective. Consider, for example, this heartfelt talk by Elder Ballard in 2002 in which he addresses a letter sent to him by a distressed woman.

Ballard opens by presenting her letter, which reads:

I have been going through an identity crisis most of my life. I have never dared utter these feelings out loud but have hidden them behind the huge, confident smile I wear to church every week. For years I have doubted if I had any value beyond my roles as a wife and mother.

To this he responds:

Of this you may be certain: The Lord especially loves righteous women—women who are not only faithful but filled with faith, women who are optimistic and cheerful because they know who they are and where they are going, women who are striving to live and serve as women of God…

Motherhood and marital status are not the only measures of a woman’s worth. Some women do not have the privilege of marrying or rearing children in this life. Yet if they are worthy, these blessings will come later…

Just as the Savior stepped forward to fulfill His divine responsibilities, we have the challenge and responsibility to do likewise. If you are wondering if you make a difference to the Lord, imagine the impact when you make commitments such as the following: ‘Father, if You need a woman to rear children in righteousness, here am I, send me’…

We men simply cannot nurture as you nurture. Most of us don’t have the sensitivity—spiritual and otherwise—that by your eternal nature you inherently have. Your influence on families and with children, with youth, and with men is singular. You are natural-born nurturers…

We don’t need women who want to be like men, sound like men, dress like men, drive like some men drive, or act like men. We do need women who rejoice in their womanhood and have a spiritual confirmation of their identity, their value, and their eternal destiny.

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429 Ballard, “Women of Righteousness.”
430 Ibid.
It seems he may have missed her point.

A male church member, Lew W. Wallace presents the pervasiveness of the problem in this letter to the editor of *Exponent II*:

Today I had a chance to teach a lesson in elder’s quorum, so I chose #26… The hidden premise in the lesson title, “The Role of Women,” is of course, that there is such a thing as a single “role” for “women.” The lesson—by the usual…anonymous author(s)—assures the readers that we Priesthood holders treat women as “equals,” then proceeds to quote the statements of seven men relative to the subject. That there might be pertinent female opinion is not even considered!

Laura Steele uses this metaphor to explain why the church’s best intentions fail to satisfy:

> I am reminded of a time I offered a cup of coffee to a ragged man. He often begged change at the 7-11 near my west side apartment and I had come to regard him as a familiar sight. One day, I bought a cup of coffee for him without asking if he wanted it. When I offered it, he said, “Oh no, thanks, I just had a cup.” When I pressed him further, he put me off with a simple, natural dignity. Without understanding his needs, how could I possibly meet any of them? My intentions were as good and as misguided as those of the “brethren.”

3.f. The common thread

There is no space within the Church where one can argue that “separate but equal” inevitably creates a hierarchy privileging the powerful and disenfranchising the weak—there is no space to argue that “separate but equal” is no more an ethical policy when applied to the genders of a church than when applied to the races of a nation.

Margaret Merrill Toscano

Even this cursory look at Mormon feminist struggles makes salient the thread winding its way through every concern, suggestion, and argument. Whether the gendered priesthood system is itself the focus of analysis or being carefully avoided, priesthood ever looms over the discourse. It is impossible to consider any question of gender and equality without the male only priesthood surfacing as a factor. It is a reality that informs the dynamics and must be taken into account for any description to be authentic, analysis accurate, or proposition for reform practical. The priesthood forms the backbone of the

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432 Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 21.
433 Toscano, “Are Boys More Important Than Girls?,” 27; Even when articles have carefully steered clear of priesthood, authors frequently seem unable to help themselves from alluding to the real problem in concluding paragraphs. For examples see Anderson, “The Grammar of Inequity,” 226-7; Pearson, “Healing the Motherless House,” 238; Elliott, “Let Women No Longer Keep Silent,” 211-3.
church’s administrative structure. It is a manifestation of sacred power, the source of ecclesiastical authority necessary for the performance of sacred ordinances and salvation of individuals, and a force that demands members’ reverence and deference. As such, whether concerned about the personal growth and salvation of individual women, their access to a theological voice, or their ability to influence the administrative decisions that govern and support the community to which they belong, the priesthood structure is the central issue with which Mormon feminists must wrestle.

A constant struggle for Mormon feminists is the circular argument employed to justify the male only priesthood. According to Elder Boyd K. Packer, “From the beginning the priesthood has been conferred only upon the men. It is always described in the scriptures as coming through the lineage of the fathers.” However, lineage is clearly not essential since priesthood does not pass from father to son (or daughter) in the contemporary church. So “fathers” is the operative word here. If one presses, asking why “fathers,” “sons,” and “men” in scriptures discussing priesthood refer to males, but in other scriptures are generic terms for all humans, the answer is to simply circle back around and point out that only males have priesthood so we know from context that these terms are gender specific. In the end, the church has simply defined men within its organization as people holding priesthood, and it has defined priesthood as a power that men hold. There is no space within such a closed circle for woman to make her case.

This argument is supplemented with a preponderance of folklore justifying gendered priesthood. Much of it originates in the talks and publications of general authorities. These

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435 Packer, “A Tribute to Women.” He cites D&C 84:6, 14-16; D&C 107:40-41; and PofGP Abraham 1:3-4 as evidence.
ideas are propagated, embellished, and legitimized when expanded upon by trusted church leaders (such as bishops and stake presidents) during gatherings and individual counseling.\textsuperscript{436}

Of course many LDS women, possibly even a majority of LDS women, say they do not want the priesthood, and if offered, would not take it.\textsuperscript{437} Members feel sanctioned in expressing this sentiment, and so one hears it often. Such vehement denial of any desire for priesthood is frequently presented as evidence that women don’t need it, shouldn’t have it, aren’t ready for it, or aren’t meant to have it. According to Dorice Elliot, one explanation for why many women don’t want priesthood is that “We are not trained for it, not prepared for it, and have been trained to believe ourselves not capable or worthy of it, and hence it seems frightening.”\textsuperscript{438}

However, regardless of the reason many women do not want priesthood, it does not follow that women as a class should not have priesthood. If the priesthood was not defined vis-à-vis men, but instead as something bestowed upon only those wishing to or showing promise as healers, caregivers, leaders, or administrators within the church, many men who under the current system now exercise priesthood power in all these capacities would neither want it nor take it if offered. Why? Because many of them would not see themselves as caregivers or healers, or do not desire or strive for the prominence and responsibility of leadership positions within the church. They have enough responsibilities in their personal or

\textsuperscript{436} Consider, for example, the idea that women having the "veil" within them balances men’s ability to exercise priesthood power. This idea stems from women acting as the vessel in which souls move from their premortal to mortal existences during procreation. Mormon theology describes a veil between our earthly world and that inhabited by premortal beings preventing us from remembering our premortal lives. The logic of this folklore is that this veil must reside within women since souls must pass through the veil in order to don the body of a child growing within a pregnant woman. While the concept of the veil is found in scripture neither the idea that it exists in women nor that this somehow balances male priesthood is found in either canon or official doctrine. Yet it circulates widely in the Mormon community and I have heard it presented during firesides (informal gatherings intended to educate youth and catalyze spiritual experiences) and individual counseling of members by ecclesiastical leaders.

\textsuperscript{437} Bushman, “The Mormon Female Experience.”

\textsuperscript{438} Elliott, “Between the Lines,” 51.
professional lives, and would be quite content to leave the administration of the church and ministering unto its members to others. Holding the priesthood is a lot of work.

But because they are defined as priesthood holders, men willingly, if sometimes reluctantly, take on those roles. Men who would never choose to undergo the training to become clergy in a system with a volunteer priesthood become quite competent ministers in the LDS church. Those who would rather blend into the background take on administrative roles and are groomed for greater leadership. Those not inclined toward caregiving are pushed out of their comfort zones and learn to recognize and provide for the emotional and spiritual needs of others. In short, as members of the male gender, they are both blessed and saddled with the skills and responsibilities of a lay ministry. As a result they grow as human beings, they develop in competence and confidence. By defining one gender as those holding priesthood and the other as non-priesthood holders, the church denies its female members—those who want it as well who those who would happily pass—these opportunities for personal growth while encouraging, mentoring, and supporting such growth in men.

Speaking in 1967, Mauss defended his faith against a declaration by the NAACP condemning it for its doctrine regarding blacks and the priesthood. Despite his rejection of LDS racial folklore, Mauss argued that racial policies were purely internal matters for which outsiders should have no concern. His position was based on evidence that LDS members were no more likely than non-members to be racist or engage in discriminatory behavior and the fact that outsiders were neither subject to the priesthood restriction nor compelled to accept LDS truth claims. He proposed that

To say ‘we violate the rights and dignity of our Negro brothers’ by withholding the priesthood from them makes no more sense than to say that we violate the rights and dignity of our women by withholding the priesthood from them. \(^{439}\)

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\(^{439}\) Mauss, “Mormonism and the Negro,” 16.
Mauss later reconsidered his position on whether ‘the rights and dignity of our Negro brothers’ were violated by the church’s policy. In 1984 he presented an argument retracting his earlier position and detailing how these doctrines do psychological damage to black individuals’ sense of self, and violates their dignity, if not their rights. He also claimed that such doctrines damage whites and constrain our ability as a society to grow.

His use of “our women” as a basis of comparison may lead him to reevaluate his assumption about gender doctrine and policy as well. Does it violate the dignity—if not the civil rights—of women to deny them the priesthood? Regardless of whether Mormons are more likely to be sexist or engage in discriminatory behavior toward women, does espousing sexist doctrine and the folklore surrounding it psychologically damage women and men within the church and constrain our ability as a society to grow? Is this, in fact, a problem worthy of the concern of both insiders and outsiders? Mormon feminists would answer “yes.”

Even for feminists not seeking access to the priesthood, its influence in church structure informs whatever issues they are struggling with, so that one must account for its influence on the present circumstances in order to legitimately propose any change. Yeates explains the common position of women within the LDS tradition:

While I recognize and respect women's differences, I claim the essentialist position that in the church women as a gender-class occupy a common position structurally in relation to “this priesthood.” Men make up the governing body, while women exist outside of church governance. Men “have” the priesthood, women do not. No matter what their race, class, age, or experience, all women are structurally excluded, and the basis of that structural exclusion is gender.

Nothing approaching a consensus exists among feminists regarding a solution to the institutionalized subordination of women through priesthood exclusion. Some feminists would have the priesthood, more or less as it is currently structured, simply opened up to women. Others claim women already have priesthood authority through the prophet

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440 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse.”
441 Yeates, “Why Shouldn’t Mormon Women Want This Priesthood?,” 355.
442 See for example Cowley, “Church Evolution.”
Joseph Smith’s transfer of keys to Emma Smith and passed down through the temple endowment ceremony. All women need do is rise up and claim what is rightfully theirs.

Then there are those who argue that reform that simply incorporates women into the current priesthood system will never be effective in producing real change. Some of these feminists would disentangle the administrative functions of running a large, complex church from the ecclesiastical functions of ministering to its people, reforming each system, separately. Others have suggested keeping the sacred power of God as the informing influence on administrative decisions, but reforming it and creating a parallel system through which women are trained and serve at every level without erasing differences between gendered experiences. Still others have suggested women find their power separately from the male priesthood system and negotiate with the male power structure for equal representation in the church hierarchy. Many believe the system has become corrupt, with a self-perpetuating power structure evidenced by a top-heavy hierarchy and the reduction of democratic processes to empty rituals with only affirming power.

Some of these reform efforts draw on history, believing that the church took a wrong turn in its evolution and needs to realign itself with the ‘restoration of all things’ and the true divine will for Christ’s church. Others’ efforts focus on reasonableness in addressing these questions, rather than looking to history (and risking its pitfalls) for solutions. These

443 Toscano, “Put On Your Strength O Daughters of Zion,” 413.
444 See for example Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?,” 357-60; See for example Yeates, “Why Shouldn’t Mormon Women Want This Priesthood?,” 357-9.
446 See for example Toscano, “Put On Your Strength O Daughters of Zion.”
447 See for example Yeates, “Why Shouldn’t Mormon Women Want This Priesthood?,” 357-8.
448 See for example Compton, “Non-Hierarchical Revelation.”
449 See for example Newell, “Mormon Women and Priesthood”; also Toscano, “Put On Your Strength O Daughters of Zion,” 411.
feminists ask whether current claims and practices really make sense? “Do they create an environment in which we do what we say we, as a church, want to do?”

Since women’s exclusion from priesthood activities has been interpreted into scripture by the omission of the feminine from sacred texts, it represents official interpretation and a accumulation of official policy, not canon doctrine. The black priesthood ban was also interpreted into scripture. And just as the ban has been largely interpreted out of it, so, theoretically, can women’s exclusion from the priesthood. As the history of the church’s policies on black men holding the priesthood demonstrates, change can and does happen under the LDS prophetic and hierarchical system of priesthood authority. However a strong resistance to change is also apparent. An implication of such resistance is a resiliency of official positions. Such resiliency provides some protection for the 1978 revelation should political tides shift toward a less egalitarian conception of race. And if the church could be persuaded to adopt a more egalitarian position vis-à-vis gender, we could expect the same resiliency there.

However, many Mormon feminists argue that any reform predicated on male authorities granting women access to priesthood ignores the actuality that women do not need men’s permission to exercise their priesthood power. While the theological grounds on which they make these claims vary, the arguments share several practical problems. Of primary importance is the fact that one of Mormonism’s distinguishing features, and one of its primary appeals, is its system of conferring authority. Individuals drawn to the LDS church typically find this feature an attractive alternative to the claims to religious authority encountered elsewhere.

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450 See for example Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?”
Even if women already have priesthood—from God’s perspective—through their endowments, the Relief Society, or their personal relationship with deity, the church—and therefore most members—does not acknowledge it. More importantly, women have not participated in the formal and public rituals conferring authorization to hold and exercise priesthood power. That is, it has not been passed down to them from someone acknowledged to already have it.\(^{452}\) These public rituals act within the community to legitimize personal claims to power.\(^{453}\) Even if individual women are able to effectively exercise priesthood power privately, in order to exercise it publicly, and thereby use it to serve the community (which is, after all, the point) the community must acknowledge and affirm an individual’s priesthood. Without the public rituals of legitimacy, attempting to exercise priesthood power publicly would not only incur community sanction, it would be completely ineffective. In the end, there is little point to administering a sacred ordinance if the individual receiving the ordinance does not accept it as such. Whatever the source of priesthood power, maintaining the privilege of participating in a priestly order is dependent on community acknowledgement.

Given the prominence of ongoing revelation in the Mormon theological framework, whatever system LDS feminists propose, they typically arrive at it through, and present it in terms of, divine inspiration.\(^{454}\) Almost without exception feminist arguments draw on personal revelation and spiritual experience. Their convictions and arguments are not just

\(^{452}\) Some feminists claim that temple endowment rituals play the role of conferring priesthood on women and legitimizing their authority to exercise priesthood power. However, the church—and therefore most members—does not affirm this argument. Therefore it cannot serve the function of legitimizing a woman’s priesthood authority to her community.

\(^{453}\) Toscano also talks about this, arguing that any self-defined authority not connected with the restoration event would be seen as suspect and thus not be seen as legitimate, a necessary perception in order to function authoritatively within the community. See Toscano, “Put On Your Strength O Daughters of Zion.”

\(^{454}\) Toscano also talks about this, arguing that any self defined authority not connected with the restoration event would be seen as suspect and thus not be seen as legitimate, a necessary perception in order to function authoritatively within the community. See Ibid.
rational and logical. Their rhetorical methods do not just employ psychological, sociological, economic, organizational, developmental, deconstructionist, and postmodern feminist theory. They speak from the deep convictions of experiences with the sacred, divine calls to right what is wrong. Their telling of the revelatory experiences that shape their beliefs and their activism encompass the entire lexicon of Mormon revelatory expression, from subtle to dramatic. Here I’ve included just a few examples which capture the range depicted in Mormon feminist writing, but there are countless others.

Sonia Johnson tells this story in her book *From Housewife to Heretic*:

When I had nearly finished the writing of the [Senate] testimony, I felt a great desire to end it well… I knelt by the couch in my library, shut my eyes, and said simply, “Dear parents, help me.” Hearing rustling, I opened my eyes, and there around the three sides of the room, with their heads about six inches from the ceiling, stood a throng of women in old-fashioned dress. Not like a photograph or a tableau, but moving slightly.

I knew at once who they were. They were the women whose words I had been reading all week with gratitude and love—my foremothers. They did not speak to me so that my ears heard their voice, but I heard their message clearly and ringingly in my mind: “Don’t be afraid. This work has to be done. It is hard, but it is our work too, and we are helping you all we can… we are with you…”

I felt surrounded and lifted up by loving arms. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before. I am not a visionary person or the least bit psychic… There must be a dozen ways to explain this phenomenon. My Mormon background encouraged me to think of these women in… brown dresses as real personages of the spirit…

Whatever it is and however it happened, I learned later that I was not alone in having experienced it. A week after the Senate hearing, I told this story to Jan Tyler in Salt Lake and she said, ‘I’ve seen those women, too, Sonia. One day in 1974, during the heat of the Utah Legislature’s debate of the ERA… I gave a pro-ERA speech to the wives of Utah legislators at the Utah Historical Society…

“As I was speaking, I looked out and saw women in old-fashioned dresses standing all around the sides of the room. Like you, I knew who they were, and I also felt their love and encouragement. The legislators’ wives … afterwards … crowded around me … distressed about the church’s new anti-ERA posture. I turned to one woman … and said, 'There were other women besides us present here today.' She replied, ‘I know. I felt them.’”

…nearly a year and half later, two months after the excommunication, I told this story to some sympathetic Utahns at Marilee Latta’s home in Salt Lake City and as I was telling it, Marilee turned to Jan and said, “Isn’t it surprising how many of us have had that same experience!”

In this essay, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s shares an experience that follows a common format for powerful revelatory experience in the LDS tradition. She describes hearing the

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“voice of the Lord,” not a literal voice but an “infusion of the Spirit, a kind of Pentecost that for a moment dissolved the boundaries between heaven and earth and between present and past.” She described it as,

a voice of gladness, telling me that the gospel had indeed been restored. It was a voice of truth, assuring me that my concerns were just, that much was still amiss in the Church. It was a voice of mercy, giving me the courage to continue my uneasy dialogue between doubt and faith.

The literature is also rife with examples of men and women receiving spiritual confirmation of their feminist positions in the form of a peaceful feeling, a burning in their bosom, or being overcome with the spirit—all common Mormon expressions of divine confirmation or personal revelation.

Of course, many LDS women do not feel oppressed by the gendered priesthood system, and/or, their feelings about changing it are complicated by an ambiguity about the desirability of power. When confronted with feminist critiques of their traditions, Mormon women must sometimes feel like third world women accosted by white, Western, liberal feminists come to free them from their oppressive traditions. As Toscano points out,

Third world feminism provides a model for critiquing power structures while honoring women’s agency and self-descriptions… 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.

Like in other religious denominations, many LDS women feel their role in the church structure is indispensable and valued by the community. Indeed, many religious women of every persuasion point out that just because women’s religious roles are predominantly private, does not make them of lesser importance. The heart of virtually every religious tradition’s praxis is performed, maintained, and transmitted by women (particularly mothers). Due to the priesthood’s roles of giving blessing and presiding over the home, in the LDS tradition women often play a lesser role in the performance and maintenance of home based

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458 Ibid., 24.
459 Burn, Women Across Cultures, 218.
rituals than in other traditions. Still, I doubt any LDS member would question the importance of the function women play in maintaining and transmitting LDS traditions. As Williams describes: “kneeling next to my Grandmother, Mimi, I felt her strength and the generational history of belief Mormon ritual holds.”

Burns explains this phenomenon more generally, stating:

…one benefit of the sex-segregated nature of religion is that it provides women with a common life, or womanspaces, where power and integrity come from their shared experiences and visions as women…Many of us have done this ourselves and can recall the special times spent with other women as we shared intimacies while we worked to prepare for elaborate meals and rituals (and then cleaned up afterward.)

Looked at this way, women’s differing role in religion does not seem quite so bad. After all, the practice of religion would grind to a halt without the work of women, and women do have some special time with other women as a result…However, as Plaskow cautions, perhaps these womanspaces are simply preserving an unjust system by rendering it bearable and providing shared self validation.”

Many LDS women also see advantages to the gendered system. Predominate among these is that it creates conditions requiring men to step-up, to pick up their share of the community’s work and engage in service and caregiving activities otherwise not widely expected of men by many cultures. In addition to attributing these benefits to it, Boyd Petersen also defends the gendered priesthood system by arguing that “[p]atriarchal domination in the Church arises not because men hold the priesthood but because certain men abuse the priesthood.” Petersen’s assertion is problematic because it presents patriarchal domination as an individual rather than systematic problem. Domination takes place when the priesthood is used as intended by the church, not just when abused.

We cannot ignore the structures in which priesthood exists. Because it has been linked to power from God, priesthood puts its holders in positions of great influence and

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460 Ibid.
461 This is based on anecdotal evidence from my informal interviews and discussions with LDS women. This theme comes up nearly every time questions of gender or priesthood structures are raised in conversations. In addition, nearly every Mormon feminist article which addresses the question of why some women do not support changing the gender or priesthood structure of the church repeat these observations.
control of church members’ lives. Priesthood is necessary to attain top administrative and ecclesiastical positions. Those holding the priesthood are placed in a position of authority over those without it. Priesthood holders are to “preside over their families” and church meetings. This type of patriarchal domination is not the result of “abuse,” but is deliberately created by, and is the intended outcome of, the gendered priesthood system that elicits feminist criticism.

The church’s restriction of priesthood, and with it administrative power, to men sends a message that no amount of reassurance from general authorities can divert. The following story humorously illustrates the consequences (intended or not) of such a system. As an experiment Betina Lindsey queried her son and his friends:

While slapping a few more pancakes on their plates, I asked, “Why don’t women hold the priesthood?” Their answers were as follows:

DAVID: (age 12) “Men have better looks.”
ROBERT: (age 13) “Some women have their priorities wrong and men are more distinguished.”
STRYDER: (age 11) “My sister’s Sunday School teacher said giving women the priesthood would be like giving them an open-ended credit card.”
RICKY: (age 11) “My grandpa says maybe they’ll get it in heaven.”
ROBERT: “Women aren’t strong enough because it would fatigue them like when Jesus blessed people he would get weak.”
DAVID: “Yeah, if women had the priesthood they might beat the men up.”
ROBERT: “And women have their times when they aren’t cooperative and I give you my permission to quote me.” (He’s a lawyer’s son.)
ERIC: (age 8—interrupting impatiently) “Hey, you guys, let’s go play Power Lords.”
RICKY: (Hurriedly stuffing the last bit of pancake into his mouth) “Well, I think (long pause with a shake of his head) I don’t know why.”


Structures send messages. The formation and reinforcement of such perceptions early in life not only shapes the views of boys—future male leaders—but the self-image and

463 The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”
464 Lindsey, “Letter to the Editor.”
aspirations of young girls. However vehemently church authorities protest, they can’t simultaneously maintain the current gender system and avoid sending this message.

Linda Jones’ daughter articulated it poignantly when meeting with their bishop about an upcoming baptism:

…the bishop wanted to make sure we would have proper witnesses. “Oh, we’ll all be there,” said one daughter, not realizing that he meant priesthood holders. He at least had the grace to fumble for words and then to blush when she finally caught on and said, “Oh, I keep forgetting we aren’t people at church.”

Darron T. Smith offers an explanation of how cultural norms of niceness and decorum—rationalized as a means of avoiding conflict—act to preserve the hegemony of white discourse. The same processes are in place in LDS communities preventing challenges to dominant gender ideologies and preserving the hegemony of male discourse—making Jones’ story an anomaly only in that her daughter actually voiced the implication.

According to Meg Wheatley, organizational structure communicates value. Or put more plainly,

What people learn about themselves and their value to the organization is not what the organization says to them or about them but what they experience while members of the organization.

Her analysis explains the dissonance that plagues so many faithful LDS sisters. Members of an organization sense when its espoused philosophy and its structures are out of synch. “[M]essages communicated by structure are far more powerful than any statement issued by a corporate communications office or an employee relations function.” LDS women are told constantly—from every pulpit—of their infinite worth as individuals, as daughters of God, and as essential members of the church community. And they feel the weight of the church’s dependence on them. They do not lack for work to do. The prospect of adding

465 Jones, “Letter to the Editor.”
466 Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 149.
467 Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?”
468 Ibid., 152.
469 Ibid., 153.
priesthood responsibilities to their load often sounds far more daunting than liberating.

However as Wheatley points out, “busyness is not the issue.”

What is key is the value publicly assigned to the task, the status and recognition it commands. Although we are told that all callings are of equal value, certainly this is true only in the sight of God. Among ourselves we attribute greater value or personal worthiness to one calling over another. Again we need to ask what messages are being communicated to women because of such differences in the opportunities available to them in the church. And we must wonder whether an organization which believes in the perfectibility of its members and teaches that we are all equal in the sight of God should feel content with a structure which communicates such disparate messages to men and women.

Wheatley further asserts that people are shaped by organizational structures. As constantly changing and responding individuals “it is our organizational lives which are effective predictors of whether we will be energetic, motivated individuals or less ambitious” (emphasis in the original). With half of its membership less ambitious, energetic, and motivated than they would otherwise be, the church, not just individuals, suffers by sending these disempowering messages to women. Wheatley goes on to explain:

As an observer of women in management in all types of organizations both large and small for nearly twenty years, I have seldom seen women having more titles and less real power than in contemporary LDS women’s auxiliaries. The higher a woman rises in the church organization, the less power she obtains, so that organizationally, the presidents of the women’s auxiliaries are among the most powerless women in the church. They oversee large organizations devoted to women’s activities yet cannot make any decisions regarding those women…

From a structural perspective the messages this structure communicates to women are problematic. Without authority to make independent decisions, even over matters of concern only to them, without access to the major decision-making forums of the church, with fewer role choices available, and with far fewer opportunities for contributing within the church hierarchy, women’s experience in the church is substantially different from and less empowering than that of men.

Beyond the question of messages sent by intertwining a gendered priesthood organization with the administrative structure of the church, lies the issue of ritual work within the community. Many of these rituals (baptism, conferral of the Holy Ghost, priesthood ordination, etc.) demarcate an individual’s passage from one status to another within the church. Priesthood administrative authorities carefully oversee such rituals. Other

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470 Ibid., 156.
471 Ibid., 153.
472 Ibid., 155-6.
rituals, particularly blessings, are private matters between the performer of the ritual, its recipient, and God. Currently, formal ritualized blessings are defined as priesthood functions requiring priesthood power. As such, women are only allowed to receive—never perform—them. However, as we have already seen, historically women have participated in the performance of ritualized blessings, particularly healing blessings.

Betina Lindsey cataloged stories of modern women taking upon themselves the authority to act as healers. These women express a variety of reasons why they engaged in these ritual acts and a variety of feelings about their authority to do so. Some dared to learn about blessing rituals and exercise authority to perform ordinances in all their formality while others tentatively developed their own, private versions.

Online discussion forums are also rife with stories and lively debate about women engaging in ritual healing. Many women believe they not only have priesthood power, but a right and responsibility to exercise it, despite church authorities’ denials. Others are less confident of the legitimacy of their actions, expressing personal confusion between a sense of the goodness of their healing activities and having been taught that experiences not emanating from the male priesthood are evil. Whatever their rationale, their behavior represents forms of resistance, a usurping of male power through the unauthorized enactment of priesthood rituals.

473 Lindsey, “Women as Healers in the Modern Church.”
474 Ibid., 452-4.
475 Interestingly, a query using the search engine Google on 12/16/2009 for “lds mother’s blessing” produced the search engine question “Did you mean: lds father’s blessing?” The entries found for the original query where all blogs or discussion forums. fMHLisa, “Blessing Sick Children” included a story by the post author of her one experience giving her child a blessing and lively debate in the form of comments on her post regarding the appropriateness, meaning, and implication of her actions and those of others who told their stories in response to her post. Wright, “Anointing Motherhood: A glimpse” represents a more scholarly and less personal discussion on the topic, but still included several personal narratives of giving or receiving blessings by and from women. “Mother’s Blessings” is a very conservative LDS forum, yet it still contained a debate on this topic.
476 Lindsey, “Women as Healers in the Modern Church,” 450; also “Mother’s Blessings”; Wright, “Anointing Motherhood: A glimpse.”
Between the original publication of her paper “The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood” in 1985 and its reprinting in 1992, Linda King Newel was informed by about ten women of their experiences exercising spiritual gifts. Her note on these stories highlights the sad consequence of an institutionalized silencing of expressions of spiritual experiences not consistent with prescribed forms.\(^{477}\)

One woman gathered her sister’s frail cancer-ridden body in her arms and blessed her with one pain-free day. Two other women, in separate instances, each blessed and healed a child in her care. Neither of these women had ever discussed the blessing with anyone before for fear it would be considered “inappropriate.” And several women together blessed a close friend just prior to her having a hysterectomy. Others asked that their experiences not be mentioned—again fearing that what had been personal and sacred to them would be misunderstood and viewed as inappropriate by others. *Of course the same kinds of blessings, when performed by priesthood holders, are commonly told in church meetings as faith-promoting experiences and are accepted by members of the church in that spirit*\(^{478}\) (emphasis mine).

As Newel points out, general authorities do not claim that women’s faith is insufficient to heal or that women’s prayers for healing are inappropriate. So, it is not that women are forbidden to heal in the contemporary church; rather, “they are forbidden to engage in the rituals of healing.”\(^{479}\) In the late 1980s LDS headquarters received numerous reports of mothers requesting to participate in the naming and blessing ritual for their newborns.\(^{480}\) The church’s response to this encroachment by women into the male territory of ritual ordinance work was decisive. One mother tells of her letter to the authority who had informed her bishop that she would not be allowed to hold her child while the elders blessed and named it.

> Quickly we wrote to said authority, begging for an explanation of the discrimination against women because male non-priesthood holders can hold their babies and female non-priesthood holders cannot.\(^{481}\)

\(^{477}\) Lindsey also talks about this consequence. See Lindsey, “Women as Healers in the Modern Church,” 440-5.

\(^{478}\) Newell, “Mormon Women and Priesthood,” 46.

\(^{479}\) Lindsey, “Women as Healers in the Modern Church,” 444.

\(^{480}\) Hanks, “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts,” 137. These rituals are typically performed during Sacrament meeting before the entire congregation.

\(^{481}\) Boruchowitz, “Sisters Help.” I have heard of other such stories. One member of the Ames 1\(^{st}\) ward informed me that in a previous ward he attended women were routinely allowed to hold their children during the blessing.
The response to her argument permitted her to hold the child during its naming blessing. Such incidences seem to have precipitated official policy on the matter. Today, the *Family Guidebook* instructs: “only worthy men who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood may participate in naming and blessing children.” It goes on to specify: “The ordinance of naming and blessing children requires authorization from the presiding authority.” And: “When blessing a baby, men who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood gather in a circle and hold the baby in their hands.”

Ritual has an ability to bind us to a past and a people, to create a link as powerful and invisible as wind. It is no small thing to forbid women the rituals of priesthood power, offering instead only prayer and faith to heal. Ritual is a powerful shaping force in the lives of humans. Denying women the rituals of formal authority shapes how women see themselves, how men see women, and how women relate to the world and to God.

The issues feminists raise cut to the core of the LDS church’s administrative structure. Honestly addressing them requires a reevaluation of current theological claims that powerfully influence every aspect of church governance as well as individual identity formation. For this reason, feminism is indeed a revolutionary force, in even its least radical forms. Its enormous spiritual and pragmatic value is also the reason it is so relevant to Mormon women, even those most accepting of their subordinate position. And while the individual cost of the LDS church’s gendered doctrine, policies, and practices are compelling, the cost to the organization is perhaps more acute.

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He believes that word of the practice must have reached someone in a higher leadership position, because when last this member visited his old ward the practice had been stopped.

482 “Family Guidebook: Priesthood Ordinances and Blessings.”

483 Toscano, “Put On Your Strength O Daughters of Zion,” 411.
CHAPTER 4 – PROCESS OF AND PROSPECTS FOR DOCTRINAL CHANGE

4.a. A precedent for change

The scriptures urge us: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (James 1:5). As we ask and seek, speak and knock, God will listen, eventually God's church will listen, and doors will open to God's daughters.

Dorice Williams Elliott

Taking a step back from the myriad tensions between the church and feminists, let us look at the process of major doctrinal change as it takes place in the LDS church. Our historical precedent for this is the change in racial policy, doctrine, and practice. Considering the process for this previous change, we can ask what this history tells us about the potential for future change in the church’s gendered priesthood system.

Writing in 1972, O. Kendall White Jr. considered the prospect for change in the doctrine that barred priesthood from black males. He identified two options: 1) a revelation overriding the doctrine or 2) defining the practice as a policy that needed only an administrative decision to change. He preferred the second option because this would “enable the Mormon community to accept its prejudices and redirect community energies to their elimination.” White also acknowledged the possibility of using revelation to bring about change as was done to end polygyny. However, he expressed concern that change through revelation would lead to

[a] tendency not to acknowledge the errors of the past…unwilling[ness] to condemn the racism involved in their history…[and an] argument that Mormons in earlier period were under a different mandate. This obviously implies that the church is never wrong. Thus…the racist aspects of Mormon history will not necessarily be condemned.”

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486 Ibid., 58.
When the policy was changed by revelation, each of White’s predictions played out.\textsuperscript{487} Church leaders took, and continue to take, a “concentrate on the present” attitude.\textsuperscript{488} They neither explain, justify, condemn, nor apologize for the pre-1978 restriction. Edward L. Kimball quoted his father, Spencer W. Kimball, as asking those involved “not to publicize or argue or explain the new doctrine, ‘let it stand on its own.’”\textsuperscript{489} Though the church doesn’t hide the change in doctrine, it downplays the event and never portrays the ban as a mistake or previous error.\textsuperscript{490}

Given the considerable advantages outlined by White for defining the restriction as a policy and making an administrative decision to change it, when change finally came, why did it come through revelation? I would argue that the answer to this question resides in the combination of the LDS Church’s centralized, hierarchical system of authority and their prophetic tradition. Despite White’s claim that the church had two options, the LDS understanding of continuous revelation combined with its history of official pronouncements regarding the ban made the option of defining the restriction as a policy, changing the policy, and admitting to error, nearly impossible. Because the prophet is understood to guide the church through revelation, as a mouthpiece of God on earth, once the Presidency in 1947 had publicly defined the ban as an authoritative doctrine received from God, later presidencies could not declare it mistaken. Retreating from this position became even more difficult when the 1947 position was supplemented with repetitions of it in subsequent authoritative statements. In 1949 the First Presidency stated, “It is not a matter of the declaration of policy but of direct commandment from the Lord.”\textsuperscript{491} Then the First Presidency of 1969 made the

\textsuperscript{487} Bringhurst and Smith, “Black and Mormon: Introduction,” 4-5.
\textsuperscript{488} White and White, “Integrating Religious and Racial Identities.”
\textsuperscript{489} Quoted in Bringhurst and Smith, “Black and Mormon: Introduction,” 3.
\textsuperscript{490} Ibid., 4-5. My personal experience of growing up in the church, largely after 1978, confirms Bringhurst and Smith’s portrayal of the church’s treatment of the subject.
\textsuperscript{491} Statement from The First Presidency on August 17, 1949. Reprinted in Mauss and Bush, Neither White Nor Black, 221. To read the statement in its entirety, see the Appendix of this thesis.
statement, “The seeming discrimination by the Church toward the Negro is not something which originated with Man; but goes back into the beginning with God…”\textsuperscript{492}

What all of these statements had in common is the divine source they assigned the doctrine. But they differed in rationale. While Church leaders maintained that the restriction itself originated with God, they exhibit a clear pattern of distancing themselves and the policy from the folklore surrounding it. In 1949 the First Presidency alluded to both the Curse of Cain and premortal events as explanation for the ban, quoting Brigham Young and later president Wilfred Woodruff as support.\textsuperscript{493} But by 1969, church leaders had distanced themselves from this folklore replacing such references with “for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man”\textsuperscript{494} as explanation for the restriction. While they distanced the policy from popular racist folklore, they did not openly refute any statements made by previous leaders. To do so would have amounted to open criticism of previous prophets and apostles who had espoused the folklore, speaking, at the time, as prophets of God. Lester E. Bush explains that

an accelerating tradition of leadership infallibility had been allowed to develop which largely dictated how any change might take place. No portion of the general tradition formally sanctioned by the First Presidency could be comfortably, affirmatively renounced. Thus, portions of the 1949 statement on blacks and the priesthood were simply omitted from the 1969 statement, thereby defining the new limits of the church belief implicitly but without explicitly dealing with the discarded material. Similarly, the final First Presidency statement announcing the end of the priesthood ban in 1978 made no comment about the substance and legitimacy of any previous statement on belief.\textsuperscript{495}

However, in 1969 church leaders did clearly articulate how change could come about, if such was God’s will.

Until God reveals His will in this matter, to him whom we sustain as a prophet, we are bound by that same will… Were we the leaders of an enterprise created by ourselves and operated only according to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[492] Quoted in a letter from The First Presidency to General Authorities, Regional Representatives of the Twelve, Stake Presidents, Mission Presidents, and Bishops. Reprinted in Ibid., 223. To read the statement in its entirety, see the Appendix of this thesis.
\item[493] Statement by The First Presidency on August 17, 1949. Reprinted in Ibid., 221. To read the statement in its entirety, see the Appendix of this thesis.
\item[494] Quoted in Mauss, \textit{All Abraham’s Children}, 234.
\item[495] Bush, “Whence the Negro Doctrine?,” 212-3.
\end{footnotes}
our own earthly wisdom, it would be a simple thing to act according to popular will. But we believe that this work is directed by God and that the conferring of the priesthood must await His revelation. To do otherwise would be to deny the very premise on which the church is established.

One of the primary appeals of the LDS tradition is the comfort and moral strength its members derive from believing that their doctrine and practice originate with direct revelation from God to a modern representative, not the moral reasoning or theology of fallible humans. If current prophets appear to receive revelation in response to the negative judgment of the American people or in order to align the church with the dominant stream of modern religious and social thought, their claim to being a “peculiar people” having a distinct relationship with God is undermined. Without this distinction the church loses an essential quality that sets it apart from most other Christian denominations.

The LDS belief system allows for prophets to make human error. But once established as official policy and vehemently defended by past prophets as originating from God, it would be difficult to simply change. Challenging the legitimacy of the racial priesthood restriction would not only undercut the authority of past prophets, but would also challenge the legitimacy of the entire institution of priesthood-based prophetic power—the very institution upon which the church is built. Furthermore, if the Prophet and apostles truly believed the ban originated with God, they had no authority to change it. That authority resided with God alone. Their only available option was to pray for guidance and hope for a revelation that would resolve the issue. Unlike Protestants whose belief in sola scriptura allowed them to contribute to the civil rights movement through reinterpretations of scripture and constructions of progressive theologies, the LDS belief in continuing prophesy combined

496 Letter from The First Presidency to General Authorities, Regional Representatives of the Twelve, Stake Presidents, Mission Presidents, and Bishops. Reprinted in Mauss and Bush, Neither White Nor Black, 223. To read the statement in its entirety, see the Appendix of this thesis.

497 LDS members are fond of this designation and church authorities use it frequently in explaining that one can recognize the True church because its peoples will not conform to the expectations of the world.

498 See Mauss, “Mormonism and the Negro,” 16, for further discussion.
with the hierarchical structure of priesthood authority effectively tied their hands. The process of change available to Mainstream Protestants was not available to the LDS church.

Nevertheless, continuing revelation did provide an avenue for the change. LDS historian Leonard J. Arrington collected firsthand reports of the revelatory event describing it in ethereal terms. The experience transported those present into a “cestial atmosphere” including visions of a “divine presence” and “figures of former presidents.” Those in attendance described it as a “day of Pentecost,” “incredible and without compare,” and “the greatest single event of their lives.” They wept at the memory, certain they had witnessed a revelation from God.\footnote{Arrington, \textit{Adventures of a Church Historian}, 176.} Clearly they shared a profound, collective spiritual experience capable of overcoming “life-long predispositions.” Mauss argues:

\begin{quote}
This experience was apparently a necessity if the priesthood ban ever were to be dropped, if for no other reason than that all earlier attempts to resolve the problem at the \textit{policy} level had bogged down in controversy among the brethren. Only a full-fledged revelation defined as such by the president himself would neutralize that controversy and bring the required unanimity among the First Presidency and the Twelve.\footnote{Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 171.}

Revelation immediately removed all formal barriers against men of African descent from attaining every level of priesthood authority.\footnote{Mauss, “Casting off the ‘Curse of Cain,’” 83.} While individual members might require some convincing to internalize the new doctrine, the LDS church did not have to spend years or decades of persuasion and coercion to entice its congregations to enact the new policy. Change was immediate and nearly universal\footnote{Bringhurst and Smith, “Introduction”; Corbitt, “The Changing Face of Mormonism.”} with avenues of enforcement if necessary.\footnote{White, “Mormonism’s Anti-Black Policy and Prospects for Change.”}

Does the LDS church have the ability, the potential, to change its doctrine on gender as it did on race? In theory, I believe it does. However, just as was the case in changing the church’s racial policy, revelation is currently the only real option for genuine change in the
church’s gender doctrine. Given the articulation of clear policies excluding women from
priesthood, the depth to which gendered roles are entrenched in nearly every aspect of
doctrine and practice, and the history of official pronouncements on gender roles, only a
“full-fledged revelation” could bring about the unanimity necessary to make such a
fundamental change. No amount of reexamining roles women played in the church’s past, no
illuminating exegeses on Joseph Smith’s words, no demonstration of the Relief Society’s
previous autonomy or authority, nor any sympathy current or future priesthood leaders may
have with feminist arguments will produce anything more than tinkering around the edges.504
Indeed, such tinkering has already taken place. The situation of women has improved in
many ways, and there is room for it to improve still further without a revelation. But an
authentic, fundamental change in the roles women play will require revelation through the
prophet, and that change will have to involve a structural change in the priesthood. This leads
us to the question posed at the outset: Is there reason to believe that such change is likely in
the near future? To find the beginning of an answer to this question we can examine the years
leading up to the 1978 revelation extending the priesthood to black men and compare the
circumstances of these years to current circumstances surrounding gender.

504 Toscano recognizes the situation she and other Mormon feminists are in, stating “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.” However she disagrees with me on the solution. In her paper “Are Boys More Important Than
Girls?,” she argues that, given the fallibility of church leaders, it must be possible for change to originate at the
bottom of the institution, and that it is a fallacy to believe our generation is the only generation of God’s people
who have not sinned collectively. She sites biblical examples of how every other generation has sinned as well
as biblical and historical example which she believes illustrates doctrinal correction originating at the bottom of
the hierarchy. Toscano’s argument illustrates that there are veins within the church advocating for a different
change process. However, until these sources of dissent gain sway (and I see no evidence of that at present),
change will have to come by revelation. On the other hand, should revelation come, I’m quite certain that many
will take the legitimate stance that its impetus was the persuasive arguments of feminists, or the sharp elbows of
wives, and therefore originated with the membership of the church as much as its leadership. For more details of
4.b. Process of change

One reason the 1978 revelation appeared so sudden to onlookers was that church leaders remained unfazed and unrelenting throughout the 1960s and 70s when confronted with the racism inherent in their priesthood policy. Many past leaders claimed the ban would never be removed in this life, or only after the priesthood was made available to all Abel’s descendents (a prospect equivalent to the first position, from a practical perspective). Even as late as the mid 1970s, the church was disciplining, even excommunicating, individuals who openly defied the policy. However as LDS scholar Armand L. Mauss points out; “The durability of that position…was to prove more apparent than real.”\(^{505}\) Church leader’s stance on the gendered priesthood system could easily be described in similar language. Perhaps then, there is reason for feminists to hope the durability of the church’s position on gender is also more apparent than real.

In 1981, just three years after the revelation extending the priesthood to black men, Mauss provided a detailed analysis of the years leading up to the revelation.\(^{506}\) He documented a series of developments, some unavoidable changes in condition and some steps taken by the church, which anticipated the 1978 revelation and prepared church members and leaders to accept and implement it. He makes a convincing argument that however sudden the church’s about-face may have appeared to onlookers, it was, in fact, neither sudden nor very surprising, and that internal LDS developments and conditions were far more important in precipitating the change than external pressure. If he is right, then we should be able to look for the presence or absence of parallel developments, steps, and conditions regarding the gendered priesthood system.

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\(^{505}\) Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 150.

\(^{506}\) Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse.”
According to Mauss, the “stage had clearly been set.”\textsuperscript{507} Many “trends had merged into a common strain toward greater parsimony and ever greater limitation on the impact and implications of the traditional priesthood ban.”\textsuperscript{508} This “setting of the stage” prepared both the leaders and the membership of the church to accept and implement the coming revelation.

So what constituted this setting of the stage? Mauss identified three major steps. First,

- there was the gradual constriction of the scope of the ban within the Church… Whole categories of people were moved out from under the ban… The burden of proof in the case of dubious lineage was shifted from the questionable family or individual to the priesthood leaders…[and] A certain looseness at the boundaries of the ban was also apparent in the decentralization and delegation of the decision-making about priesthood eligibility…Another way of seeing this trend would be to say that by the time Spencer W. Kimball became president [December 1973], there were far more categories and situations among mankind eligible for the priesthood than had been the case when David O. Mckay had assumed the presidency [1951] (emphasis in the original).\textsuperscript{509}

If “constriction of the scope” of the racial ban represents a major step that anticipated the revelation changing racial policy, what would such a step look like in preparing the Saints for expanded access to authority, particularly priesthood authority, for women? Since it cannot mean removing ethnic or racial categories of people from beneath the ban,\textsuperscript{510} it seems that constricting the scope would mean decreasing the ways in which denying women priesthood limits their access to authority. Additionally, a constriction of scope could present itself as a “looseness at the boundaries.” That is, when it is unclear whether holding the priesthood is necessary in order to participate in a ritual or practice, looseness at the boundaries might involve allowing women to participate, or at least leaving such cases to the judgments of local leaders in order to decentralize and delegate decision-making.

Do we see these things happening? The answer seems rather mixed. Recent changes in church practice have clearly intended to give women more access to authoritative speech

\textsuperscript{507} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{508} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{509} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{510} For the black priesthood ban this happened in the 1950s and 60s by clarifying that it was not dark skin, but black, African ancestry (Hamitic lineage) to which the ban applied, categorically removing Polynesians, Australian aborigines, native Americans, Middle Easterners, and other dark skinned peoples from suspect lineage.
and influence within local congregations. The practice of having general presidencies of the women’s auxiliaries speak regularly in General Conference, increases the probability of local leaders and members referencing authoritative *women* in Sacrament meeting\(^{511}\) talks and Sunday-school lessons. Counsel to local leaders to seek women’s input on a variety of local issues also constitutes an attempt to limit the impact of priesthood denial.

While these moves appear as promising evidence for a “constriction of scope,” on balance, I think a better case can be made for an expansion of scope. The priesthood correlation program greatly expanded the power and control priesthood holders have at every level of the church. While recent changes have had a mitigating effect, over the long view, women currently have considerably less authority than they did before the correlation program. Correlation is an active process to this day. Many of the primary moves to implement the program took place in the midst of the second wave of the women’s movement.

To evaluate whether a constriction or expansion of scope is occurring, we should also consider the many conflicts that have arisen over the past few decades, which provided the church opportunities to “loosen the boundaries.” The most obvious case is women’s performance of healing and blessing rituals. Historically women had some access to the priesthood, at least through the right to perform healing rituals now defined as a priesthood function and limited to men. The controversy over these activities clearly represents an opportunity to loosen the boundaries by making no official pronouncement on their appropriateness, or by pointing to the historical precedent for such activities and delegating decisions about their scope to local leaders. Instead the church issued restrictive statements, increasingly denied that historic activities represented an exercise of priesthood power,

\(^{511}\) Sacrament meeting is the term used in the LDS church for the hour on Sunday in which they engage in the ritual of “passing of the Sacrament” (Communion). This meeting, like Sunday religious services in most Christian denominations, also includes singing of hymns, making announcements, sermons, sharing of testimonies, and religious performances.
omitted records validating the practice from official histories, and eventually forbad female blessings all together. Over the last century, the church has used progressively limiting language to describe women’s access to the priesthood. Language changed from identifying women as receiving the priesthood through their temple endowments, to holding the priesthood with their husbands, to receiving the blessings of the priesthood, which their husbands hold. Temple ceremonies have also changed, removing any language suggesting that female temple workers act with the authority of the Melchizedek priesthood. While considerable variation exists among LDS members in their beliefs about what these language changes mean for women’s relationship to the priesthood, the general trend of official pronouncements is clearly in the direction of increasing not constricting the scope of women’s exclusion.

Two additional, vivid examples of lost opportunities to constrict the scope of women’s exclusion include the requests by many LDS women to participate in the naming and blessing ceremonies for their children and the increasing popularity in the 1970s and 1980s of calling on Mother in Heaven or Heavenly Parents in Mormon worship. Rather than loosening the boundaries, in the 1980s the church moved to clarify its policies, forbidding non-priesthood holders from participating in naming and blessing rituals. And in the 1990s it moved to eliminate Mother in Heaven from Mormon worship, also reducing women’s access to divine authority.

The church’s response to such cases supports the position that it is not constricting the scope of women’s exclusion from priesthood authority. These moves represent a buttoning down rather than loosening of the boundaries. Instead of using such opportunities to underscore women’s authority in the home or congregation or leave jurisdictions over such

512 I have no personal experience with temple ceremonies. This statement is based on conversations with current, active LDS members who participated in temple rites both before and after this change. This change is also alluded to in several Mormon feminist writings.
matters in the hands of local leaders, the church has consistently used these opportunities to limit women’s sphere. Each response further demarcates the boundaries between the priesthood authority of men and the role of non-priesthood holding women. Jurisdiction over such matters increasingly moves from the hands of local leaders to church headquarters. Distilling these developments produces the conclusion that all formal ritualized activities within the church must be done by the authority of the priesthood, which women do not hold. The message is that women in the church have no access to any special authority or power not available to every believing individual who calls upon God in the name of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{513}

The second step Mauss cites as anticipating the change in racial policy is a corresponding trend toward reducing the implications, or damage, as it were, deriving from the priesthood ban… in the \textit{external} relationships of the Church with the world. First, starting in the early 1960s, the Church increasingly attempted to strip the priesthood policy of any social or civic implications, embracing the civil rights doctrines of the nation and eventually putting the church behind progressive legislation in Utah… At least equally important was the deliberate and rapid public redefinition during the 1970s of blacks, Mormon or otherwise, as acceptable and desirable associates and equals (emphasis in the original).\textsuperscript{514}

In order to use Mauss’ second step in analyzing events with respect to gender, it helps to address the two statements separately. The first statement—that the church attempted to strip the priesthood policy of social and civic implications—does not appear mirrored for women. The ERA battle illustrates that the church justifies opposing women’s civil rights on theological grounds, citing women’s essential difference and sacred maternal role. In the thirty years since the height of the ERA controversy, there has been no equivalent domestic legal battle on which to evaluate the church’s stance. However, while the First Presidency has made no official statement, church representatives’ involvement in activist measures

\textsuperscript{513} Every member of the church is called into service positions referred to as “callings.” Whether this position is a priesthood position or not, the individual is given a blessing or “set apart” by a member of the priesthood. In this blessing they are often told they will receive special wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit in the performance of the duties required of that position. This might be presented as an argument for why women do have access to special authority or power. But note that blessings are given, always, by a priesthood member because the authority to impart these blessings flows through the priesthood.

\textsuperscript{514} Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 167.
opposing international attempts (such as CEDAW)\textsuperscript{515} to reduce discrimination against women, suggests the church’s stance on women’s civil rights remains the same.\textsuperscript{516}

Nonetheless, in the last two decades the church has taken a more conciliatory stance toward women entering the work force and it actively discourages members from judging women for their choices. It has done so by placing less emphasis on stay-at-home-mothering, and shifting its focus to the definition of women’s primary responsibility as the rearing of their children. How women are to go about fulfilling that responsibility is less prescribed. While a strong culture emphasizing marrying young, having large families, and women with children remaining at home still exists in the church, it is no longer common for general authorities to give explicit instructions on these matters. Women’s enrichment activities focus less on homemaking and craftiness and more on service and fulfilling the missions of the LDS church. Such moves reduce, to some extent, the implications and consequences of the church’s motherhood-priesthood dichotomy.

The second portion of Mauss’ statement does appear mirrored in the church’s outreach to women. According to Mauss, in the 1970s the church “launched a deliberate and sustained campaign to build bridges with blacks, both inside and outside the Church.”\textsuperscript{517} The most visible attempt, within the church, was probably the Genesis project. This group provided networking and social support to black members and interracial families as well as important educational services on racial issues to LDS congregations.\textsuperscript{518} The church has taken parallel conciliatory actions toward women. One of the first and most visible was the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{515} “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.” Adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, it is often described as an international bill of rights for women.
\item\textsuperscript{516} Garrard, “Mormons and women’s rights at the UN - Divine Discrimination.” The most vocal LDS activists come from the World Family Policy Center (WFPC) headquartered at BYU and funded largely by the LDS church.
\item\textsuperscript{517} Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 162.
\item\textsuperscript{518} For more details on the project, its origins and outcomes see Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 163-5; Embry, \textit{Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African American Mormons}, 181-189; Young, Gray, and Gerald, \textit{Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
creation at BYU of the Women’s Research Institute (WRI) in 1978, shortly after the ERA controversy had come to a head. Its first director Ida Smith explained:

This was a volatile time—many Mormon women had split into different ‘camps’ and a lot of healing needed to be done. The church wanted visible evidence that it cared about women, and they wanted someone who was ‘neutral’ to create the institute (emphasis mine).519

Smith attempted to open dialogue between these “camps” of women. She conducted interviews and compiled files and research on topics that were sources of tension. According to Smith, “There was no money to do empirical research, in fact, I was prohibited from doing empirical research.”520 Clearly, much like the Genesis project, while the effort may have been sincere and resulted in positive change and healing, church authorities maintained tight control over what the project produced.

With respect to redefining the relationship between men and women, in the last thirty years authoritative church rhetoric has clearly moved toward increasing insistence on women’s equality with men. Church representatives claim that the theological definition of gendered roles within the church makes no statement on the worth or value of different categories of human being. Men and women have different roles, but neither role is better, more important, or more valuable than the other. Men are not naturally superior to women, if anything the opposite is the case, women being endowed with spiritual gifts to facilitate their sacred roles as mothers. From anecdotal evidence, this public campaign to redefine women as equal and valuable seems fairly successful, as Toscano’s description matches my own experience.

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


520 From a 1991 interview, “BYU Through the Eyes of Feminist Faculty” published in Student Review. Reprinted in Ibid.
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.521

The brethren repeat incessantly that men’s position as presiders over the family and the church in no way relegates women to second class, and can never justify domination of wives, nor usurpation of the family decision making process. One might argue with all these claims, of course, but the fact remains that the church, its leaders, and its public relations arm consistently and increasingly reiterate the mantra that women are to be valued as individuals, respected as a class, and are absolutely equal in the eyes of the church and God. Such changes in the church’s attitude toward women give one feminist hope that deeper change is on the horizon.

As the church rhetoric on race has evolved with social and political changes, so has comparative progress been made in response to women’s equality. Most encouraging is the recognition that the [change in rhetoric] on civil rights appeared fifteen years before the ban on the black priesthood was lifted, indicating a change in message and tone within rhetoric could precede a revelation resulting in similar institutional changes.522

Mauss identifies the third important trend toward parsimony as the gradual discarding of the traditional theological justifications for priesthood denial. This evolution is obvious from the systematic comparison of official church statements across time: the First Presidency letters of the 1940s (so reminiscent of the nineteenth century lore distilled by Joseph Fielding Smith in 1931); their counterparts in the 1960s, either avoiding theology altogether or espousing only “reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man”; and finally the stark declaration by the Public Communications director of the Church (presumably on behalf of the First Presidency), on the eve of the new revelation that “any reason given…[for priesthood denial]…except that it comes from God, is supposition, not doctrine.

With the doctrinal scaffolding thus removed, the priesthood ban itself reduced in scope to the bare minimum, and a new visibility and identity created for blacks in the Mormon Milieu, all that was left of the residue of racism was the restrictive policy of priesthood eligibility under increasing strain.523

The Black priesthood ban sets a certain precedent for discarding theological justification for priesthood restrictions. The gender roles defined by the church with regard to the priesthood seem doctrinal, but then so did the justification for the black priesthood ban. And yet, the church slowly backed off these claims. While church leaders never go so far as

522 Cowley, “Church Evolution.”
523 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 168.
to condemn statements by Brigham Young, Joseph F. Smith, or other early church leaders, it is certainly implied that they were, at least to some degree, mistaken. That is, claiming that God has forbidden the priesthood to blacks for reasons “known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man” suggests that earlier presidents’ explanations for the ban were personal opinion or conjecture holding no doctrinal weight (although these men certainly did not present the information in that light themselves). It seems the same process could take place with regard to women. The church could slowly back away from the vehemence with which it insists on the male only priesthood. It could present gendered roles as a condition of the times or an order from God that cannot be changed without revelation, no matter how expedient or commonsensical such a change may appear. The church could begin to soften, to smudge, or omit past statements by prophets and church publications, blurring the lines between doctrine, wisdom, culturally contextualized understanding, and recommendation. In so doing it would prepare the way for revelation to be understood as the fulfillment of a promise or the reinstatement of an original “fullness” of revelation.

Is the church engaged in such a process? Has the “doctrinal scaffolding” been removed from segregated gender roles? Here the church’s response to gender issues clearly departs from its response to racial issues. In both cases the church used omission, but to very different purposes. As Mauss pointed out in the quote above, the church employed omission as a means of discarding the folklore historically used to support the priesthood ban. The church also employs omission in dealing with the gendered priesthood system, but not in an effort to discard folklore used to support it. Instead it has omitted from official histories and authoritative statements that folklore that might oppose the gendered priesthood structure. By systematically eliminating from the public consciousness any reference to female ordination or the Relief Society as a priesthood organization, and by suppressing historical records of

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524 This possibility is also implied by arguments such as found in Newell, “Gifts of the Spirit” in which she argues that Mormon women’s exclusion does not reflect LDS theology, but rather, evolving church policy.
revered Mormon women engaging in activities now reserved for male priesthood holders, the church has actually created a net increase in the doctrinal scaffolding supporting the gendered priesthood system.

The church adds to this scaffolding by reiterating doctrine that supports the gendered system. Rather than dispensing with justifications for separate gender roles, the church published the *Proclamation* identifying these justifications as divinely ordained and eternal. While their articulation has become increasingly sophisticated, accommodating culturally acceptable speech in politically correct circles, church authorities clearly maintain not only gendered ecclesiastic roles but insist that men and women have separate divinely ordained spheres of action in society and innate characteristics and aptitudes suited to those spheres. If we should expect to see a removal of doctrinal scaffolding in preparation for a revelation, then little or no preparation has taken place at this point. Much of the “residue” of sexism seems firmly in place. The church defends, even claims as central, the distinction it makes between genders and the roles it prescribes to them. Unlike with racism, which it renounced, church authorities do not renounce sexism. They may reject the use of that word to describe their attitudes, but they do not reject the attitudes. LDS leaders do not lament the ban on women holding the priesthood or apologize for the role they ascribe to women, nor do they express regret at their inability to do anything about it—all of which was common in the 1970s with respect to the black priesthood ban. Quite the opposite, they hold women’s role up as equal or even greater than that ordained for men, placing women squarely on a Victorian pedestal.

In order for the steps the LDS church took in preparing its leaders and members for a revelation extending the priesthood to blacks to result in an actual change in doctrine, there also needed to be sufficient motivation and conditions to precipitate it. A great deal of external pressure and internal advocacy by members certainly weighed heavily on church leaders, especially in the 1960s. It was a source of much discomfort, sometimes
embarrassment, and frequent public relations problems. However, this pressure more likely acted as a deterrent. Had the revelation come a decade before it did, at the height of controversy, there would have been little room for anything other than a cynical interpretation of the prophetic process. As Mauss puts it:

Damage to the public image of the Church could probably have been averted altogether only by dropping the priesthood ban before it became a public issue. One viable chance for that, and maybe the last one, was lost when the First Presidency failed to reach consensus in 1954. Once the NAACP and other civil rights partisans took up the issue in the early 1960s, the Church could not have changed the Negro policy without resurrecting from polygamy days the specter of a pressure-induced “revelation on demand.” Even with the pressure off in the late 1970s, critics of the church made cynical comments in the vein but with much less credibility.

The legitimacy of the President’s prophetic voice underpins the very premise on which the LDS church is built. For most members and certainly for LDS leaders, neither social respectability nor alleviation of guilt over racial inequality would be worth risking the integrity and charisma of the office of the prophet. It seems only reasonable then that revelation would come well after the climax of the civil rights movement.

In this consideration, perhaps the timing is right for a gender related revelation. The second wave of feminism peaked in the 1970s with a great deal of visible controversy surrounding the ERA, placing intense pressure on the church. After the 1970s many of the visible, organized feminist efforts either accomplished their goals or fizzled out. While there is undoubtedly a current, active, and vibrant feminist movement, and certainly many of its advocates would like to usher in an equally influential third wave; at present these efforts have none of the visibility or media attention that existed when the second wave exploded on the public scene. While there is no shortage of Mormon feminists agitating for change, most of the vocal, influential ones have been silenced or delegitimized through excommunication,
and there are simply no coordinated efforts by outside social women’s organizations to demand changes from the LDS church.

Looked at from this perspective, with the worst of the pressure removed, perhaps the way is open for a revelation altering gender roles. While church authorities may appear impervious to feminist arguments, they seemed equally unresponsive in the 1960s and 70s to the civil rights movement. Just as little dissent is tolerated from Mormon feminist activists, little dissent was tolerated over race, even as late as 1976 and 1977 when revelation waited in the wings.\textsuperscript{528} Yet, as Mauss demonstrated, much was happening behind the scenes to lay groundwork for the coming revelation. So, church authorities’ lack of engagement in the debate or willingness to budge on the issue of women receiving the priesthood does not necessarily mean no groundwork is being laid for future change.

One could also make an argument that a change in collective perception played a significant, if subtle, role in providing the necessary conditions to motivate change. As the 1960s and 1970s progressed, many of the traditional racial ideas and justifications for the ban were rendered untenable and even ridiculous by the combination of biological, sociological, psychological, and historical evidence contradicting these justifications. As older authorities died off, and the ranks of the brethren became increasingly filled with men who had—as a result, in part, of an increasingly integrated workforce—broader experience with blacks and with the science and attitudes that supported integration policies, it seems likely that leaders became less confident reiterating traditional justifications and more inclined to take their uneasiness to God in prayer for resolution. This is speculation of course, but what is clear is that general authorities stopped defending the policy on racist grounds and retreated to the stance that their hands were tied.

\textsuperscript{528} Loyal priesthood leaders were excommunicated in 1976 and 1977 for openly defying the priesthood policy. Ibid., 184.
Can we expect changing ambient cultural beliefs and attitudes about gender to have a similar effect in predisposing the brethren to seek change in the gendered priesthood system? While I don’t think we should dismiss the influence of changing cultural attitudes completely, I also don’t think we can expect the same results. One reason is that the scientific evidence isn’t nearly as clear-cut. The evidence that dark skin and African ancestry do not denote a propensity for servitude, a lower intelligence, an immoral nature, a degradation of humanity, or even a genealogical tie to any particular biblical figure is so overwhelming as to render any claim to the contrary ridiculous. People certainly do make contrary claims, but such individuals are not members of the generally respected academic and scientific communities. The same cannot be said for gender. The evidence is not overwhelming, and the conclusions not unanimous. Essentialist gender rhetoric and the ascription of appropriate social roles to these perceived differences are common among academics. Even among feminists there is far from a unanimous stance on whether biological, social, and psychological differences, whatever they are, represent appropriate reasons for assigning gendered roles. The conclusions become even murkier when considering the general public’s attitudes about these questions.

While it has become generally socially unacceptable to espouse blatantly misogynistic attitudes, subtler forms of discrimination, are not only accepted, but are rarely even recognized as sexism. There is a general disdain for political correctness on gender issues, which is not usually the case for racism. While racist attitudes and discrimination certainly persist in even the most educated circles, it is simply not socially acceptable to voice such opinions. In the end, the ideas that women should have access to all the opportunities men have or that they are equally capable or equally called to leadership roles, or that it is a form of discrimination and disempowerment to hold them primarily responsible for domestic activities, simply do not have the social traction that equivalent statements about black men have.
At the same time it would be a mistake to dismiss the progress we as a culture have made and the potential effects this progress may have on the men composing the LDS church’s leadership. The women’s movement has had a profound effect on our attitudes about women, gender, and the roles men and women are capable of fulfilling. In the second half of the twentieth century attitudes shifted immensely, providing individuals with experiences of women in leadership roles and men in caregiving roles uncommon a generation ago. Still, without the ability to make clear-cut statements based on a preponderance of conclusive scientific findings, and without a societal consensus on desirable attitudes, I think the time scale for these changes to bear fruit is on the order of generations not decades.

While feminist pressure and changing attitudes in the ambient culture may be contributing—to a greater or lesser degree—to the creation of conditions favorable for change in the LDS church, external conditions may not be the most important indicating factor. Many scholars argue that internal conditions, more than external pressure provided the necessary impetus for change in the church’s racial policies.529

What were these internal conditions that predisposed the church to change its policy on race, and how did they provide LDS leaders with the necessary motivation to take their concerns to God in search of revelatory answers?

Considering the history of the black priesthood ban, Lester E. Bush claims that the primacy in Mormon doctrine of two concepts assured that the ban would come to an end. First was the “central and essential role assigned to the temple in Mormon theology”530 and the necessity for men of having the priesthood in order to enter the temple. This made black membership in the church without priesthood necessarily partial. The second was the “notion

of the universality of the gospel.” To be a truly universal church, an entire segment of the earth’s population could not be excluded from either proselytizing or full participation. The untenable nature of these conditions was exacerbated by an administrative structure inextricably dependent on the lay priesthood. The resulting lack of qualified leadership in predominately black communities made it impossible for congregations so located to function. As things stood, even if the church followed its mission and preached the gospel to “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,” it could not organize congregations among them. Given the primacy of these concepts within LDS doctrine, it was inevitable, according to Bush, that the church would have to remove the ban on black men holding the priesthood. If he is right about this, then we can ask whether similar forces are at work making it inevitable that women must some day receive access to the priesthood.

Unfortunately, the two forces that made the ban untenable for blacks do not do so for women. As all populations have both men and women in them, no population is excluded from either proselytizing or full participation, and congregations are capable of functioning within the current gendered priesthood system. Neither are temple rituals denied to women because they do not have the priesthood. Innovations in temple rituals have even allowed women to participate in them when not married to a priesthood holding man. In fact, it was on these grounds that many black women petitioned for access to temple rites before the lifting of the racial ban. (This argument, however logical, made no progress with church authorities.)

If primacy of the temple ceremony and the universality of the gospel do not provide the necessary impetus to change the gendered priesthood system, could some other important LDS doctrine be at work eroding the barriers to women’s ordination? I do not see a

531 Ibid.
533 Embry, Black Saints in a White Church.
compelling alternative. One possible candidate is the prominence given to Moses 1:39 “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” Assuming that “man” refers to all human beings, one could claim that herein lays the necessary mandate. Feminists have argued that if the church’s purpose is to support the personal progression toward perfection of individuals, to facilitate their achievement of immortality and eternal life, then denying them the opportunities for growth provided by priesthood service equates to failing in this essential mission. However, even if these feminists are right, they face a serious challenge in selling their argument. What motivation is there for a group of elite men with a monopoly on power to concede this point, especially when they believe motherhood offers equivalent or even richer growth opportunities for women?

The unspoken issue, of course, is membership, and its attending benefits to the church as an institution. If the “implications of the traditional racial restrictions in a church increasingly committed to worldwide expansion” was an essential predisposing factor behind the change in racial policy, there may be no equivalent for women, particularly since growth and expansion does not seem to be a problem at this time.

Along with these two features of Mormon doctrine, Bush identified several other factors that predisposed or precipitated the revelation. The church’s ability to position the revelation in such a way that it did not damage the integrity of the prophetic office was one predisposing factor of which the significance cannot be overstated. A condition that contributed to this positioning is the existence of statements by past church authorities predicting future removal of the restriction. The official declaration referenced “promises by prophets and presidents of the Church” and triumphed that, at last, the “long-promised day” had arrived. This wording makes the existence of previous predictions sound almost

534 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 151.
535 D&C, Official Declaration 2. For full text see the Appendix of this thesis.
essential in bringing about the revelation. It provided a precedent and legitimacy, avoiding the appearance of whim or sudden reversal. The same must be true for any revelation on gender. Stated another way, if a revelation from God is coming in the future, we can expect current or past prophets to have predicted it. Of course, many authorities had indicated that a lifting of the black priesthood ban would never come. Given the existence of such negative predictions, a mixed history of pronouncements on the topic doesn’t seem to prohibit revelation.

At the least, this history indicates that a record of promises would greatly facilitate the process of changing the gendered priesthood system. However, the record of official pronouncements seems less optimistic for women than it did for black men in 1978. In a 1998 interview on *Larry King Live* president Gordon B. Hinckley responded to a caller’s question about the chances of women receiving the priesthood by saying: “Well, they don’t hold the priesthood at the present time. It would take another revelation to bring that about.”\(^{536}\) Such a pronouncement predicts the mechanism by which change could come about, but doesn’t constitute a prediction that it will. While other general authorities have occasionally made statements such as Hinckley’s indicating that change is possible through revelation, I know of no statement by a general authority that constitutes a positive prediction of such a revelation.

Negative predictions abound. For example, in a 1978 interview with *Deseret News* regarding the recent revelation removing the racial priesthood restriction, President Kimball stated, “The priesthood is something sacred…and was established by the Lord for the men in his Kingdom…We pray for God to reveal his mind and we always will, but we don’t expect any revelation regarding women and the priesthood.”\(^{537}\) His claim in a different interview shortly thereafter that “Unlike blacks…it is impossible that women would ever attain the

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\(^{536}\) Interview of Hinckley on “Larry King Live.”

\(^{537}\) Spencer W. Kimball as quoted in “Not For Women.”
priesthood”\textsuperscript{538} seems in direct contradiction to his claim of openness to God’s inspiration. In Hinckley’s 1998 interview with Larry King he followed his prediction that “It would take another revelation” with the statement “I don't anticipate it.”

Of course, in his 1974 interview on the \textit{Today Show} President Kimball indicated that he did not think change in the racial policy imminent.\textsuperscript{539} Just four years later the ban was removed. And, based on the writings and speeches by Brigham Young and Joseph F. Smith, it is nearly certain that they were as confident in their time that it was impossible that blacks should ever attain the priesthood as Kimball and Hinckley were about women. So Kimball’s, Hinckley’s, and other’s negative predictions don’t preclude a revelation extending the priesthood to women. Still, the lack of positive predictions in the mix does not bode well.

This lack of positive predictions brings us to another important condition that anticipated the 1978 revelation—the disposition of the man in position to receive the revelation. The role played by the sympathies of the men at the top of the LDS hierarchy in producing change is rather more complicated than it might appear. For example, considerable evidence exists both in public statements made by David O. McKay and in personal testaments made by his close friends that he was largely free of the traditional prejudices and notions that plagued Mormons and other Christians alike of his generation.\textsuperscript{540} He is also on record claiming the ban a “practice,” not “doctrine,” which would some day be changed. Yet, even though McKay presided over the most contentious two decades of the Mormon-black controversy (1951-1970) he neither made an administrative change in the policy nor received a revelation that would change it. Clearly, a sympathetic prophet is insufficient to bring about change.

\textsuperscript{538} Spencer W. Kimball as quoted in “Mormonism Enters a New Era,” 56.
\textsuperscript{539} Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 165.
\textsuperscript{540} Ibid., 150.
To make sense of this it is important to recognize the influence of other individuals composing the top tier of the church hierarchy, the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles. Mauss provides evidence that all three members of the First Presidency were revisiting the priesthood restriction in the early 1960s, with President Brown, second counselor to McKay, advocating for extending at least the Aaronic priesthood to blacks. However, these three men alone could not make an administrative change, and it seems unlikely that members of the Twelve were unanimously supportive. The most senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve, Joseph Fielding Smith, would have been a powerful voice in church leadership during the 1950s and 60s. Smith’s position on race is well documented in his publications. Additionally, Apostle Benson and President Brown’s conflicting public statements on the priesthood ban in 1965 suggest there were multiple sources of resistance to change among the Twelve.

Whatever the internal negotiations that took place during McKay’s presidency, no resolution emerged, despite his apparent predisposition to removing the ban. However, while the disposition of the prophet does not seem capable of bringing about resolution on its own, support for change among the First Presidency and Twelve appears to be a vital component.

When President Kimball took office he was presented with very different circumstances than when McKay took office. McKay and Kimball may have been equally sympathetic on racial issues, but by the time Kimball ascended to the presidency, Joseph Fielding Smith, along with several other older members of the twelve, had died, church expansion was being severely curtailed by the priesthood policy, and sorting out lineage

541 From the stake level up, all three members of quorum presidencies are referred to by the title “President.”
542 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 159.
543 See for example, Smith, *Answers to gospel questions*, in which Smith presents as authoritative doctrine many of the traditional rationales for why black men were cursed with respect to the priesthood.
544 While the composition of the Twelve had changed considerably, there were still some very conservative members—Benson and McConkie, for example.
issues in the church’s increasingly successful overseas missions were threatening to cause embarrassing scandal.  

In Official Declaration 2, the First Presidency stated:

…witnessing the faithfulness of those from whom the priesthood has been withheld, we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance. He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come when every faithful, worthy man in the Church may receive the holy priesthood…(emphasis mine).

Kimball was clearly very concerned about the situation and was praying about it to an extent and in a manner that Apostle McConkie suggested went beyond efforts by past presidents. As previously discussed, the LDS prophet, like every other member, is expected to grapple with the challenges his calling presents, study problems out in his mind, deliberate possible solutions with his colleagues, then take tentative decisions to the Lord for confirmation. In the LDS tradition, the Lord rarely takes the initiative in revelation.

This “relatively restrained” role of deity in the revelatory process makes it essential that a leader both identifies the gendered priesthood system as a problem and devises a possible solution before we can expect the Lord to provide any special revelation concerning it. This suggests a need to look at the attitudes of individuals at the top of the hierarchy to determine whether those in a position to pray for guidance on gender issues are predisposed to doing so. Writing about the late 1970s and the ERA controversy, Linda Sillitoe explained that,

…a number of women had tried earnestly to reach President Kimball, believing he would support their cause if only he could hear their viewpoint…Whatever the reason, he would not hear women as he had

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547 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 165. Bruce R. McConkie (1915-1985) was a well-known and controversial member of the Twelve Apostles who was present during the 1978 revelation. His most famous work Mormon Doctrine is often cited and frequently criticized due to its authoritative tone and presentation of Mormon folklore as doctrine, including several extremely racist passages related to the Hamitic lineage.
548 See chapter two of this thesis
549 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 171.
loved Indians or prayed in behalf of black men. He would not act and no one more sympathetic waited in the wings.\footnote{Sillitoe, “Off the Record.”}

If the prophet does not interpret the gendered priesthood system as a serious problem we cannot expect him to agonize or pray over it.

Given his dismissal of the issue and denial of the existence of a women’s movement agitating for change in the priesthood system on the \textit{Larry King Live} show, it does not appear that President Hinckley (1995-2008) even considered the gendered priesthood system a source for concern:

Well, they don't hold the priesthood at the present time. It would take another revelation to bring that about. I don't anticipate it. The women of the church are not complaining about it. They have their own organization, a very strong organization, 4 million plus members. I don't know of another women's organization in the world which does so much for women as does that, as this church has. They're happy. They sit on boards and governance in the church. I don't hear any complaints about it.\footnote{“Larry King Live.”}

While I know of no study investigating the attitudes of current members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles, a cursory look at the situation is not promising. Current president, Thomas S. Monson played a significant role in advocating and justifying the correlation program\footnote{Monson, “Correlation brings blessings.”} that stripped women of what authority they had within the church. He has strongly criticized the feminist movement, and repeatedly encouraged women to maintain for themselves their sacred roles as mothers,\footnote{Monson, “The Women’s Movement: Liberation or Deception?”} reducing, not expanding women’s roles within church, family, and society. He was a member of the First Presidency when the \textit{Proclamation} was issued,\footnote{The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”} and he is relatively young for an LDS president, making it likely he will strongly influence church positions for many years to come.\footnote{Not only will his influence likely to be long lasting because he is likely to be the prophet for a long time, but also because a long presidency will allow him to produce a large body of authoritative discourse while in that position.} As president of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles and next in line for the presidency, Boyd K. Packer’s record on
women’s issues seems no more promising. Just as when Kimball was in office, it seems there is no one more sympathetic waiting in the wings.

4.c. Consequences of change

Changing gender roles within the LDS church would require a massive reworking of both the administrative structure of the institution and the ritualistic patterns of the community. Because humans carry the initiative in revelatory change, and perceptions effect the motivation to seek change, we need to consider the potential and perceived consequences of enacting such dramatic change. Thought experiments like this are perhaps a bit dubious, but we are not without guides. The extension of the priesthood to black men, while not a perfect analogy, does provide a useful model of how the membership responded to a past revealed change in priesthood. The Community of Christ also provides a model, having extended the priesthood to women in 1984. And given the organized and hierarchical structure of the LDS institution, evaluating the consequences of future change in light of similar changes in secular institutions also represents a viable way of exploring these questions.

Feminists who advocate for expanding women’s roles argue that both individual women and the community suffer from the current arrangement and that both would benefit from a more egalitarian arrangement. Betina Lindsey provides an example of this position when she claims that the church and women suffer when the spiritual gifts of women are suppressed, and therefore, both would be enriched by not denying the community the benefits of women’s spiritual gifts, ministrations, and ecclesiastical work. Another

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557 Previously the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.
558 For a more detailed discussion of these arguments see chapter three of this thesis.
559 Lindsey, “Women as Healers in the Modern Church.”
example is Vella Neil Evans’ argument that access to authoritative speech, recognition, and community respect empowers individuals, increasing self-esteem and mental health. Hence, changing the gendered priesthood structure so that women have access to authoritative discourse, recognition, and respect should empower individuals and increase their contributions to the community. And a third example is found in Meg Wheatley’s assertion that organizational structures extending to individuals opportunities to make meaningful contributions—thereby sending a message of trust and value—increases those individuals’ engagement, initiative, and leadership skills. Therefore, if the church changes its gender structure so that women as well as men are in real decision making positions we can expect an increase in women’s leadership skills and in their investment, commitment, and contributions to the church.

LDS feminists also raise the prospect of increasing women’s sense of personal validation and spiritual growth, as well as reducing incidences of depression and low self-esteem related to the limited sphere in which LDS women feel valued. Detailed arguments for why change would bring about improvements in women’s condition and the church as an organization are presented in a preponderance of articles and testimonials published in the multitude of Mormon periodicals, newspapers, magazines, and online forums contributed to by Mormon feminists. Accepting that such positive outcomes for women and the community are reasonable potential consequences of change, I will not repeat these arguments here. Instead I want to consider other potential and perceived consequences of changing the gendered priesthood structure, which may affect the motivation of members and leaders to seek such change.

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560 Evans, “Mormon Women’s Publications.”
561 Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?”
562 See chapter three for citations of many examples.
One potential consequence of changing the current priesthood structure is a backlash from the membership. Fear of an outcry and reactionary defection seems logical. But is it likely? In 1984 the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints’ (RLDS) general conference approved a revelation received by their prophet opening the priesthood to women. The revelation was preceded by at least 14 years of conflict over proposals to eliminate priesthood discrimination on the basis of gender. RLDS scholar William D. Russell explains:

> When the 1984 conference approved Section 156...it became clear that the largest “schism”—separation from the unity of the Church—in the history of the RLDS Church was in the making. In the six years following the approval of Section 156, at least one-fourth of the active RLDS members terminated their involvement in the Church. Many of these people formed separate splinter groups in their local areas. Others simply grew tired of the bickering and stopped attending church.

While this raises a concerning prospect for the LDS church, Russell also explains:

> The ordination of women was merely the last straw for many Old School Saints who had been concerned about the Church’s deemphasis of many beliefs that had been central tenets of the RLDS faith for more than a century.

These included questioning the historicity of many sacred stories, the literal interpretation of sacred texts, and the exclusivity of many RLDS truth claims. Given the complicated dynamics of internal conflict that came to a head around the female priesthood issue, I do not think this analogy a particularly good one for our question. We can find a better comparison in the LDS church’s own experience with the extension of priesthood to black men.

Mauss believes that:

> If one can accept the proposition that Mormon public opinion had been well prepared for changes in the status and image of blacks, then widespread acquiescence in the new policy would be expected, the more so in a religion stressing the principle of modern revelation.

And acquiescence was the primary response. There was no outcry from the ranks, no mass exodus of the die-hard traditionalists. A sigh of relief seems to have been the predominate

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564 Ibid., 76.
565 Ibid., 79.
566 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 169.
reaction. A surge of priesthood ordinations and extensions of temple-recommends marked the year following the revelation, with only minimal and isolated instances of local leaders failing to follow the directive to immediately ordain their worthy black brothers. This precedent indicates that resistance and defection of LDS members might be very low if the church were to do as thorough a job laying the groundwork for a change in gender roles as it did for the change in racial policies—particularly if the change comes through revelation.

While a revelation might not spur a defection, neither would it likely herald the triumphant return of the church’s disaffected and marginalized liberals. Mauss points out that no such return to the fold took place after the 1978 revelation. The liberals, he noted, “scarcely had time to notice that their favorite target had been removed before they were handed a new one in the form of the ERA controversy.” It seems equally unlikely that a revelation expanding roles for women would appease the church’s disaffected feminist critics. More likely, their primary target would simply shift to a different issue (perhaps the church’s stance on homosexuality).

For those members inclined to weather the shifting policies and remain loyal to the LDS church, what reaction might we expect to a revelation changing gender roles and access to priesthood? LDS members who interpret examples of doctrinal change in church history as evidence that the modern church did not arrive fully formed, but is instead maturing, characterize one possibility. For these members, God reveals doctrine appropriate to the church’s maturity level. Just as one teaches one’s children more complex lessons as they

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567 Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 324; Corbitt, “The Changing Face of Mormonism.” Neither Arrington and Bitton nor Corbitt offer empirical evidence for their claims. However, their claims do match my own experience and that of LDS members I have spoken with. Given the general lack of any large-scale exodus or even a vocal opposition in the literature, it seems fairly safe to accept their descriptions of how the membership reacted to the revelation.

568 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 169; Bringham and Smith, “Introduction.”

569 Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 170.
reach a level able to comprehend them, so God deals with the church. It seems likely individuals with this mindset would find it relatively easy to interpret a change in the gendered priesthood system as evidence that the church and its people had reached a maturity level capable of accepting true gender equity. In the mean time, such individuals are able to accept ambiguity, counseling patience: If it is meant to be, God will reveal it when the Saints are ready.

While the formal ordination of black men following the revelation may have proceeded fairly smoothly, there is considerable debate regarding the degree of change the revelation precipitated. Mauss as well as Bringhurst and Smith acknowledge this problem with respect to the racial doctrine. According to Mauss,

the divestment of the relatively recent traditions [is] sometimes more difficult than overturning those established centuries ago. One need point only to the struggle in Utah even now over plural marriage. Despite the long arm of the law and the strenuous repudiation by the church of polygamous practices, the traditional doctrines underlying plural marriage still survive even in mainstream Mormonism. Why should traditional racial doctrine be any easier to set aside? (Emphasis in the original).

Church leaders trumpet both the success of implementing the change in doctrine, and the successful transition to a truly universal and inclusive church structure. As is always

570 A member of the Ames 1st ward Relief Society presidency shared this explanation with me. Variations on this theme emerge frequently in conversations with both male and female LDS members. While the pervasiveness of this attitude is impossible to know, I think it a significant perspective consistent with the way continuous revelation is frequently characterized in LDS teachings.

571 See Embry, Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African American Mormons. She does not address gender issues in her discussion of how African American Mormons cope with the history of the black priesthood ban. However I believe her discussion of tolerance for ambiguity and spiritual as apposed to social or intellectual motivation for church commitment go a long way in explaining the continued loyalty to the LDS church of many progressive and independent women.

572 Mauss, “Casting off the ‘Curse of Cain’”; Bringhurst and Smith, “Introduction.”

573 Mauss, “Casting off the ‘Curse of Cain’,” 106.

574 See Corbitt, “The Changing Face of Mormonism.” As discussed previously in this thesis, the church takes a ‘focus on the present’ stance trusting that problems caused by the historical ban will work themselves out. Corbitt’s “The Rock of Our Redeemer and the Stumbling Stone of Our Generation” is an excellent example of this approach. My own experience suggests that to some extent, this approach works. Raised in almost exclusively white communities and LDS congregations, neither the previous ban nor the folklore surrounding it was brought up in my presence. I was not aware the ban had existed until well into adolescence and then my discovery was do to independent research. There were no black men in our congregation, and the only black woman was one of my mother’s closest friends and the Relief Society President (highest position of authority a
the case in complex human social systems however, what actually happened is less clear. In 1994 Jessie Embry distilled the results of the LDS Afro-American Oral History Project interviews and survey responses into a book of which one theme is the question of exactly how African Americans experienced this transition. Participants in the Oral History Project clearly had mixed experiences, reporting a range—from feelings of isolation, estrangement, and resentment by their white brothers and sisters, to feeling accepted, embraced, and perceiving in white members a sense of relief at the pronouncement. Continued mixed messages from church authorities on issues such as interracial marriage also acted to confuse, frustrate, and offend many black members. In the literature there is considerable debate regarding the level of overt and subtle discrimination experienced by black men within the authority structure of the priesthood. What is clear, however, is that thirty years after the extension of the priesthood to black men there have only been two men of black African descent called as general authorities, and none to the Quorum of Twelve Apostles.

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576 Embry presents examples of these reactions throughout her book particularly in the section headed “Effects of the 1978 Priesthood Announcement.” Ibid., 124-30.
579 See Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion.”
580 General authorities are members of the priesthood hierarchy responsible for administering the affairs of the church on a global as opposed to a local level. This includes the First Presidency, Quorum of Twelve apostles, and the 1st and 2nd Quorums of the Seventy. In 1990, Helvécio Martins, a Brazilian man of African descent was called to the 2nd Quorum of the Seventy in which he served for five years. In 2009, Joseph W. Sitati of Kenya was called to the 1st Quorum of the Seventy in which he currently serves. There are also several black regional authorities outside the United States. While there no African American men have been called to general
If, despite this, the process of identifying worthy men for advancement to positions of leadership is truly color blind, as church leaders claim, then the process itself resists integration and change. This seems likely regardless of the presence or lack of discrimination. A process of hierarchical authority, which always requires those already in positions of power to identify individuals to join their ranks, lends itself, inevitably, to supporting the status quo. Those with a particular background, attitude, and experience are more likely to have among their acquaintances others with similar backgrounds and attitudes. They are more likely to consider people like them as worthy of and competent to fill similar positions of authority. The revelatory process bolsters this tendency. Even priesthood leaders in a position to call men to highly visible and important positions rarely claim to have visions or pronouncements from God with regard to whom they should call. Revelation is most commonly described as a still small voice, promptings in the heart, or a powerful feeling of confirmation or rightness of a conclusion already reached by individual study and group deliberation. Therefore, the priesthood leader with the authority to call someone into his ranks must first consider that person in order to receive revelatory confirmation. Such a process of revelation combined with a system of hierarchical authority supports the status quo and resists change in the make-up of its leadership bodies. Yet having a resistance to

authority positions, many have been called to various other locally and regionally influential positions both within and outside the U.S.

582 See chapter one of this thesis.
583 See Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 157-8 for a discussion of this. My personal experience in conversations with multiple ward bishops, stake presidents, and their counselors confirm his description.
584 There are, of course, examples of leaders claiming to receive inspiration to call someone who, at first glance, would seem an unlikely candidate. See Packer, “The Stake Patriarch,” 43. Despite such examples, I believe the general observation still valid.
585 We should note, however, that there are other aspects to the church’s organizational structure that provide avenues for diversity to infiltrate the leadership structure. In the LDS church, members do not self-associate into worship congregations. Regional authorities draw ward boundaries, organizing them on a geographical basis. According to local leaders I have spoken with, considerations such as increasing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity within single congregations are taken into account when drawing these lines. The fact that there are no black congregations within the LDS Church increases the potential for individuals who attain
change is not the same as being impervious to it. Non-white men are slowly infiltrating the church’s leadership structure. Despite the fact that thirty years after the 1978 revelation, the church hierarchy is still dominated by white men of European American descent, I expect that the imbalance will continue to steadily right itself.

This discussion raises the question: If women were granted the priesthood by revelation, what would follow? A rapid change in members’ perceptions of women’s roles, and official acknowledgement of past sexism would certainly be desired by many and demanded by some. But this seems unlikely. As Allred pointed out with respect to the church’s history on race, “people tend to cling to their perceptions, and the church rarely offers official explanations for policies or doctrine.” The precedent set by the removal of the racial restriction suggests that, even should the prophet receive revelation changing the gendered priesthood system, church authorities will not directly address the “doctrinal scaffolding” supporting the current system. Both the tradition of infallibility—making it untenable to directly criticize the views of past prophets—and the presentation of current policies as ordained by God would put the church in a similar situation as they were in four decades ago with respect to race. In the event of a revelation changing gender roles, we can expect the First Presidency to neither explain, justify, nor apologize for the previous (current) policies. Nor should we expect them to directly address the folklore that supports the current system.

Whether individual members would find a revelation devoid of explanation or apology satisfactory depends largely upon how much they care about unresolved historical and ecclesiastical issues. Bringhurst and Smith claim that African American attrition is particularly high and that the church has a problem both attracting and retaining African positions of authority to have worked with, served under, and befriended individuals with very different backgrounds than themselves.

Allred, “The Traditions of Their Fathers,” 34.
Americans. They attribute this problem to the church’s failure to officially denounce the racist folklore that underpinned the previous policy.587 While Corbitt disputes their claims regarding conversion and retention rates,588 he acknowledges the problem residual folklore poses for many members.589 The church’s failure to repudiate the folklore espoused by past leaders has left many LDS members, white and black, with the impression that such explanations for the ban represent church doctrine, and that the only thing that has changed is whether black males can hold the priesthood despite them.590 According to Bringhurst and Smith, without an official repudiation, real progress faces impenetrable obstacles.591

These same demons would surely plague the church after a revelation about gender. Many vexing questions would remain unresolved: Were past (current) policies ordained by God (singular or plural?) or simply the reflection of sexism in the culture and upper ranks of church leadership? Were the leaders of the church previously under a different mandate, or was it sexism and a grab for power and control by male authorities that conspired to restrict

587 Bringhurst and Smith, Black and Mormon, 7. Because the church’s membership records do not indicate race, Bringhurst and Smith cannot numerically substantiate their claim.
588 Corbitt, “The Changing Face of Mormonism.” For the same reason, Corbitt is also unable to numerically substantiate his position.
590 Bringhurst and Smith, “Black and Mormon: Introduction”; Mauss, “Casting off the ‘Curse of Cain’”; Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion”; While these scholars may be right about the continued friction and estrangement caused by the circulation of such beliefs, these beliefs certainly do not dominate among the white LDS members I have met. I have discovered many younger members (even missionaries) unaware of either the previous ban or any of the folklore supporting it. Of those familiar with the historical ban, rather than pointing to the abandoned folklore to explain it, they cited a different explanation: Upon reviewing the interview transcripts form the African American Oral History Project, sociologists White and White, “Integrating Religious and Racial Identities” identified five methods utilized by blacks to cope with or explain the ban. Of these, the fifth was to transfer responsibility for the former ban to whites by arguing that God had denied the priesthood to blacks because He knew that whites were not morally or spiritually ready to accept blacks into full fellowship. From discussions I have had with many white members of the LDS church, particularly those younger than 50, it is this fifth explanation—placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the white membership—which the majority of them cite as an explanation for the ban. Perhaps this is because it acquits God of racism while not indicting these particular members personally. Because these members where not adults before 1978, they represent the generation of whites deemed by God ready to accept blacks into full fellowship.
591 Mauss, “Casting off the ‘Curse of Cain’,” 82-108.
women’s roles throughout the twentieth century? If revelation ushers in changes in gender roles, must we assume that the current policies were institutionalized by revelation? Do men and women have a different role in eternity? Is eternity polygynous? Are women still primarily responsible for the rearing of children? Is Mother in Heaven as important and involved in this world as Father in Heaven? If so why has her role been suppressed? If God isn’t sexist why did he/she/them allow sexist policies to dominate for so long? Why did the revelation take so long in coming? Why the suffering and estrangement of so many good LDS women and men in a fight that was just? And so the list of unresolved questions would go on.

Just as with the history of the black priesthood restriction, church leaders would likely avoid directly addressing any of these questions. LDS members and academics, on the other hand, would surely invest a great deal of time and energy attempting to explain and resolve (at least for themselves) doctrinal and historical contradictions.592

Just as historical and ecclesiastical questions would likely remain unresolved, revelation formally changing the gendered priesthood system may not actually produce the results feminists desire. With the revelation extending the priesthood to “all worthy male members” all formal barriers to black men attaining every level of the church hierarchy disappeared. However, as Smith points out, whatever the strengths of the LDS advancement

592 This attempt in Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaohs’ Curse,” 173, to resolve contradictions raised by the removal of the black priesthood ban illustrates the type of reasoning we might expect to see. Mauss proposes an answer to the questions of whether one is obligated to believe that a doctrine originated with God because revelation was required to change it. He points out that “There is an especially relevant biblical precedent suggesting that ecclesiastical policies requiring revelation for their removal do not necessarily originate by revelation” The example he uses is the requirement for gentiles to be circumcised in order to join the early Christian church. There is no record of this policy being institutionalized by revelation, and Peter’s revelation about unclean meat (Acts 10:10-48) could certainly have been interpreted to indicate that gentiles could join the church “as they were.” But it was not, and the requirement to circumcise gentiles was a widespread practice until Paul received a revelation explicitly indicating that this was not necessary. Mauss goes on to argue that this biblical president also demonstrates that, rather than interfering at the outset, God allows discrimination in the church until leaders approach Him asking for solutions to the problems caused by it. By this same logic, one could argue that God is not sexist but simply won’t interfere until the leaders of His/Their church ask Him/Them to: the restrained role of deity at play once again.
system, it is a system impossible to evaluate objectively. Surely if women were granted access to the same positions of leadership as men, we would face the same problem—there would be few options for objectively evaluating whether formal access to authority equated to real access to authority.

Meg Wheatley points out several realities of secular institutions that would probably be reflected in the LDS church should they extend the priesthood to women. While opening a career to women frequently results in women flooding the entry-level positions, it rarely produces significant changes in the composition of high-level positions. The only time women make up significant numbers of the top ranking positions in a profession is when men effectively vacate the profession and it becomes female dominated. Even in these cases, men usually are disproportionately represented in the top tier of the profession when compared to their numbers in the profession as a whole. Research demonstrates that professions lose status, power, and salary levels when women dominate.

Given this reality in other professions, Wheatley predicts that if the priesthood were extended to women one of two systems would result. (1) A two tiered system where elders (both male and female) would perform ordinances while high priest status would be extended only to men, and this level of priesthood would be the only route for important administrative roles (as it is now). Or (2) priesthood and administrative functions would be separated from one another. Priesthood holders would perform the spiritual work of the church, bless, anoint, baptize, confirm, heal, and administer other sacred ordinances, while leadership or administrative callings would be separate. Assignment to these roles would be based on skills.

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593 Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 159.
594 Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?”
595 Ibid., 161.
596 Elder is an office of the Melchizedek priesthood typically conferred on men upon reaching adulthood. The Melchizedek office of high priest is required for nearly all priesthood administrative positions. High priest status is typically conferred on men as they approach middle age or before they receive their first administrative position in which this status is required.
and experience. Women might be called to some of these positions, but Wheatley believes it unlikely they would be called in large numbers.597

I would offer a third option as equally likely. The church has a reason for combining priesthood with administration. Arguably the church’s success is in large part due to members’ perception that a prophet of God administers it. By combining priesthood and administrative functions, the church becomes run by prophets; by individuals called of God not only to perform sacred ordinances, but also to administer the activities of the church. Separating these functions would create a system where those with the closest connection to God do not have direct decision making power, and those with the decision making power may not be the most spiritually worthy individuals. Tension would almost certainly develop between the religious leaders—those called to perform spiritual work, prophet being the highest such calling—and administrative leaders. I cannot see the church giving up this structure so central to its authoritative claims. In the end, for the prophet to direct the church through revelation he must have administrative as well as spiritual power.

For these reasons, it seems more likely that an extension of priesthood to women would result in some system providing men and women equal theoretical access to administrative and ministerial priesthood positions. However, given the church’s natural resistance to change, and the organizational trends we see in the larger society, it seems likely that advancement opportunities would only, or primarily, be offered to men. Just as being a high priest now does not guarantee a man will ever receive even a local leadership role, having twice as many high priests would make it that much easier for many high priests to never advance to leadership positions. Women would be given priesthood roles with stereotypically feminine responsibilities such as clerk and secretary. These would have a lower status than they have in the current system. We would see a replication in the church of

the workplace dynamics outside it. Positions with prestige, status, and decision-making power would be dominated by men, support positions by women: a stained glass ceiling.

And what would become of the role ascribed to the priesthood in propelling men toward service and caregiving activities if the gendered priesthood system were changed? In considering this, I think it important to acknowledge that, for good or bad, the priesthood actually derives much of its mundane (non-sacred) appeal and value from its position in a binary opposition of privilege. It is exclusive. It provides necessary functions that only its holders can fill. So it calls upon men, requires them to serve. Through priesthood, men become absolutely essential, to the family, to the community, to the church. Without a non-priesthood, what is the priesthood worth? If there is no out-group, no people who cannot hold the priesthood and thus need those who can to perform certain services for them and to preside over them, then suddenly the priesthood loses its “special” status. Men and women alike may lose their drive to perform priesthood functions. In other words, without a second class—women—as a binary opposite to the priesthood, will its meaning and purpose dissolve? Non-believers would still constitute an out-group of course. However, because much of the work priesthood holders do provides services to the community, non-believers simply do not fill the same out-group role as LDS women.

Looking at the patterns of our society, there is a strong argument to be made that if women could hold the priesthood, priesthood would lose its exclusiveness and, with it, its prestige. The roles and responsibilities, the work of running family, community, and church would shift to women. As Wheatley pointed out, we see this pattern in every other institution of our culture. As soon as women successfully invade a discipline, the salaries drop, the prestige drops, men and boys become less interested in the field. Whatever “it” is becomes women’s work, and as such, it no longer holds the draw to men—as a group—it

598 Similar questions are posed by Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 21.
599 Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?”
once did. LDS men’s commitment to the church, surely the envy of many organized religions, is arguably dependent on the exclusivity of the priesthood’s place in a binary opposition of privilege—giving its holders importance, power, and significance. If it were men who were auxiliary—an important, beloved, and beneficial addition, but not essential, not the core—would their commitment, their activity, their contributions fall off? Such a result would be a loss to everyone. It would be an immense loss to the church and the family; a loss for the men themselves and their progression toward becoming Christ-like; and a loss to women who would inevitably end up picking up the slack.

In 1992, Mormon Feminist Maxine Hanks posed the question: “What was the result of [19th century] Mormon Liberal and cultural feminism?” She suggested the following answer:

Mormon women outperformed men in nearly every area of church activity. Near the turn of the century Joseph F. Smith admitted ‘The priesthood quorums…have become lax in their work and let loose their hold. While the auxiliary organizations have taken the right of way, the priesthood quorums stand by looking on awe-struck.’ As a result, the Priesthood Correlation Program was conceived in 1908 to bolster male involvement in all aspects of the Church as well as to organize and streamline Church structure in preparation for expansion.

If we accept her claim, it would suggest that women reclaiming their authority might indeed result in men receding into the background—retaining only the power of high positions. I know many Mormon women convinced that exclusive male priesthood functions to prevent this outcome, keeping men invested. They prefer the current situation to the prospect of losing this support. If both those who think that extending priesthood authority to women would increase women’s investment in and commitment to the church and those who think that without an exclusive, “special” role for their gender linked to organizational power, men as a group would become lazy, unengaged, and uncommitted are right—then a

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600 “The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.”
602 Ibid.
revelation reforming the gendered priesthood system might make the lived experience of average LDS women less equal, not more.

However, even if this gloomy prospect plays out, it may not constitute a valid reason to deny half the population of the church access to priesthood authority. As Arthur Bassett argues:

We all like to be thought of as being special and exclusive. It sets us apart as distinct. It does nice things for our ego. We enjoy owning and driving exclusive cars, living in exclusive neighborhoods, joining exclusive clubs, wearing exclusive clothes. The word itself has’ a nice "yuppie" ring about it. It carries with it a sense of being better than others. It says important. But at its roots it simply says exclusion, the omission of others. And this connotation somehow seems out of sync with the cherished American ideal of democracy and the Christian concept of brotherhood.

Certainly it seems out of sync with the message which the Savior brought of love and concern for others. One of the things that his disciples and enemies alike had a difficult time understanding was his inclusiveness: publicans, harlots, and wine-drinkers, Samaritan women, lepers, women taken in adultery, troublesome parents pressing for a blessing for their children, calloused soldiers nailing him to a cross—and many others that the orthodox Pharisaic leaders of the Jewish sects (and often even his own disciples) excluded from their fellowship. The Savior reached out with concern to all of them and included them as much as they would allow him. Inclusion was at the core of his good news; exclusion was opposed to his concept of love.603

The fear some LDS women express at the prospect of change is matched by a rhetoric pervasive in (but certainly not unique to) LDS male authoritative speech that holds women, abandoning their gendered roles in the private sphere to participate in public life, responsible for all that ails society—from divorce and depression to juvenile delinquency and violent crime. These fears collaborate to counterbalance any impetus for change. Yet Doric Williams Elliott thinks that if women had a voice, what they would say would likely not be so threatening. Most of it would reinforce what the male leaders already say, or ask primarily for superficial changes to church practices, not fundamental changes to the gospel. The real change, according to Elliott, would be in the women themselves, their sense of empowerment and importance as daughters of God.604

Of course, an undercurrent of fear regarding what would happen should the priesthood restriction be removed also plagued debate about removing the black priesthood ban. A fear of facilitating interracial marriage was a dominant concern. Today the prospect of interracial marriage seems benign at worst and down right racist to even be concerned with at best. Yet the feared consequences did come to pass. Whether race inclusive priesthood contributed or not, racial and ethnic mixing within the LDS church is common, and today some individuals in interracial marriages hold high positions in the church hierarchy. This series of events begs the question: Are many of the fears related to changing the gender system of the LDS church a product of our time? Even if the fears bear fruit, will church members and leaders find them as frightening in thirty years as they do today?

In “A History Lesson” Laurel Thatcher Ulrich points out how both the arguments made by suffragists and anti-suffragists sound terribly familiar to Mormon feminists today. They parallel exactly the arguments for and against women being ordained to the priesthood. Just like we now look at the anti-suffragists claims and think them ridiculous, pointing out that the doom they predicted should women win the right to vote never came to pass, the same is probably true of the arguments presented by those who oppose changing the priesthood structure. We can identify reasons not to extend priesthood to women and fear what will happen if the church does. But just like suffrage, one day our progeny may look back at our flailing and fear mongering and ask how we could so terrify ourselves with our own imagined boogeymen.

605 Excerpts from the exchange of correspondence between Nelson and the First Presidency are reproduced in John J. Stewart, Mormonism and the Negro, 33, 46, 47, 54.
4.d. Prospects for change

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, that he died, was buried and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven. All other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.

The Prophet Joseph Smith Jr. 608

Perhaps the most hopeful knowledge devout LDS feminists have is that Joseph Smith made this statement. All else, including the gendered structure of the priesthood, are appendages, not central. President Hugh B. Brown, second counselor to church president David O. McKay, addressed a convocation at Brigham Young University in 1969 with another statement that provides many feminists a sense of legitimacy in their continued struggle and insistence that the LDS leadership is overlooking certain truths, truths feminists can help bring to light:

We have been blessed with much knowledge by revelation from God which, in some part, the world lacks. But there is an incomprehensibly great truth which we must yet discover. Our revealed truth should leave us stricken with the knowledge of how little we really know. It should never lead us to an emotional arrogance based upon a false assumption that we somehow have all the answers—that we in fact have a corner on the truth. For we do not. 609

As the LDS tradition has evolved from a small charismatic movement to a highly organized, worldwide institution, leaders have frequently engaged in defining its core, essential elements, much as Joseph Smith did in the above quote. President Gordon B. Hinckley offered one of the most explicit recent attempts at this in his February 2004 First Presidency address. According to Hinckley, four essential cornerstones prop up the church as a faith and as an organization. Of this foundation he claims: “Without it...we have nothing. With it, we have everything.” 610 His metaphor frames what is essential to the church and by extension, what is not.

I mention first the chief cornerstone, whom we recognize and honor as the Lord Jesus Christ. The second is the vision given the Prophet Joseph Smith when the Father and the Son appeared to him. The third is the Book of Mormon, which speaks as a voice from the dust with the words of ancient prophets

608 Smith, Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 121.
609 Brown, Church News 24 May 1969.
610 Hinckley, “Four Cornerstones of Faith.”
declaring the divinity and reality of the Savior of mankind. The fourth is the priesthood with all of its powers and authority, whereby men act in the name of God in administering the affairs of His kingdom.611

It bodes well that none of these require the current doctrine on gender to stay in place. He has not predicated the truth of the church on any of the doctrine or practices with which Mormon feminists take issue. Even his discussion of priesthood makes no requirement that it be for men only. He discusses the power and purpose of it, and where it and its holders derive their authority; he refers to such holders as men of course, but in this context it is descriptive not prescriptive. Essentially, one can accept this position in its entirety and still accept a change in doctrine regarding gender roles. Here Mauss’ warning not to “‘canonize in our own hearts’ any doctrine not explicitly included there” seems particularly pertinent.

Not only is change possible, the church would also benefit immensely from the contributions of women.612 As Edwin Brown Firmage points out,

While less profound than our similarities, our differences are the source of enrichment and fulfillment to each other. Insofar as female spirituality conforms at all to the stereotype, insofar as women possess an intuitive sensitivity to God and to the cosmos, insofar as women are more inclined toward peace and not war, insofar as women naturally seek conciliation and not battle or competition, then God knows we need the influence of female spirituality in every quorum and council of the church and in every office in the land.613

Even if female spirituality conforms to none of these stereotypes, in a tradition where humans carry the initiative in communication with deity and in the revelatory process, diversity in leadership brings easily identifiable, tangible benefits. A limited, white, male perspective, like all perspectives, distorts and obscures the image it seeks to view—however enlightened those white males may be, however good and genuine their intentions. The lived experience, the perspective of women (and people of different colors, ethnicities, abilities, classes, sexualities and so forth), is unequivocally different than that of the dominant class.

611 Ibid.
612 For examples of arguments for this position see Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 17-8; Firmage, “Reconciliation,” 343-4; Yeates, “Why Shouldn’t Mormon Women Want This Priesthood?,” 357.
So long as this remains the case, barring women from positions in which they can receive revelation for and guide the community limits Mormon theology, “both in its methodology and its fruits.” The church is heavily dependent on the perspective and creativity of the individuals in leadership positions to identify which concerns justify time, energy, deliberation, and prayer, and to come up with alternative ways of addressing those concerns. The church’s ability to perceive God’s truth is therefore seriously limited by a policy excluding women—and thereby the concerns particular and powerful to them—from the priesthood. The “world-making” or “knowledge-constructing” activities of influential people are inevitably contextualized by their positionality and social history.

But the question here is not whether the LDS church can change the gendered structure of its priesthood system, or even whether it should, but what are the prospects that it will. And to this I think the conclusion has to be that it is unlikely to do so in the near future. This is not so much because the obstacles are overwhelming, but because the church lacks sufficient sources of motivation. In addition, given the precedent set by its recent change in racial doctrine, if change were imminent, we would expect the church to have begun laying the groundwork to prepare both its members and their leaders to accept and implement such change. I see very little evidence of such preparation.

There are limits to comparing change in LDS racial doctrine with change in gender doctrine. Perhaps the most significant of those limitations is one of magnitude. Extending the priesthood to black males was no small feat, but it left the church’s family construction and administrative structures intact. Inclusive racial policy simply enlarged the scope of those within that construction and structure. Changing the gendered priesthood system would require a dramatic shift in both the construction of family and the administration of the

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614 Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?,” 17-8.
church as an organization. Again, this is not an overwhelming obstacle, but it is certainly more daunting than the obstacles to removing the black priesthood ban. One would expect such a move to require a source of motivation equivalent in magnitude, and at least as thorough of preparations.

An entrenched and articulate internal resistance movement and an ambient cultural milieu critical of gender discrimination (although lacking a clear social mandate) certainly provide some motivation for reexamining the current priesthood structure. However, neither of these conditions presents anything approaching the motivational power of the problems created by the black priesthood ban for an institution desiring the designation of a universal church. Put plainly, women are not voting with their feet. While the church certainly suffers a loss in the form of both male and female members disappointed with its unresponsiveness to feminist critiques and the disconnect between its inclusive gospel message and exclusive institutional practices, on the whole, the church has no trouble attracting and retaining female (or male) members.616

Increasingly, I suspect, the church’s eyes and prayers reside with the concerns of its mission presidents in distant lands. While clearly valuing its social respectability in the United States (evidenced by the resources poured into its public relations arm) I expect the persuasive philosophies of contemporary academics are less able to sway it than the success of its policies in attracting the world’s multitudes to its worship services. As long as the church maintains the perception (accurately or not) that its message of family salvation through male priesthood authority appeals to and provides spiritual sustenance for the

616 McConkie provides statistics (which he gives no citation for, but which I nevertheless expect were fairly accurate in 1979 and probably still today) that 65% of converts were female and 35% male, and that those statistics are representative of membership numbers as well. McConkie, She Shall Be Called Woman, 5; “The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life” confirms that a membership-imbalance favoring women (if not his exact numbers) persists.
populations of its expanding missions—and bears fruit in the form of ever increasing conversion rates—it is hard to imagine whence sufficient motivation for change will arise.

One Mormon woman expressed the dilemma by sharing this experience: While praying privately she called out

‘Mother in Heaven, I believe you may exist. Are you there? We know the Father and the Son, but why have you not revealed yourself?’ And a wondrous voice clearly answered, ‘Good daughter, until this time, no one asked. The men have not thought to ask.’

Whether or not the men have “thought to ask” for more equitable gender roles, it seems unlikely that they would do so with the earnestness and urgency that President Kimball sought revelation to resolve the church’s racial dilemma. The individuals who experience the imbalance most acutely—and who would therefore be most inclined to grapple with the theology and take potential solutions to God—have no access to the ranks of the influential. Individuals with access to those ranks have very little personal or institutional motivation to grapple seriously with these questions.

Another way of understanding the church’s response to the feminist movement is in terms of its progression on the “church-sect continuum.” Laura Vance explains that definition of gender, especially definition of ideals for women, serves as an important point for the mediation of a religious movement’s response to the world… in their formative years, [diverse] religious movements… allowed women access to authority and leadership. These movements in turn are appealing to women, especially if they are denied leadership opportunities in the dominant culture. As emphasis on charismatic leadership wanes, and as religious movements become increasingly institutionalized, women’s participation in leadership is concomitantly defined as inappropriate and women are removed from leadership.

In 1994 Mauss traced Mormonism’s historical progression along this continuum. Typical of new religious movements, the early history of the church is marked by high tension with the surrounding culture and offered greater opportunities for women. This helps explain Mormon women’s heritage of empowerment and feminist activism. As the church

618 Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”
619 Ibid.
620 Mauss, “Refuge and Retrenchment.”
matured and expanded out of its mountain stronghold it followed a typical pattern of accommodation, shedding some of its more heterodox quasi-magical practices and beliefs, abandoning polygyny, and re-expressing Mormon spiritual experiences in more culturally acceptable language. During this time women’s roles were narrowly redefined in terms consistent with the dominant cultural discourse.

There are several possible ways of interpreting how the LDS church currently positions itself with respect to the world. Mauss argues that it is in a phase of retrenchment resulting, among other things, in an antagonistic posture with respect to current cultural norms, including increased opportunities for women. Alternatively, the church’s position may be an attempt to “strike a balance” between maintaining for itself the distinction of “a peculiar people” (and thus its claim to a special relationship with deity), while not exacting an excessive social price from its members. In this case it appears to be staging this “distinction,” at least in part, on gender roles. Or perhaps it has progressed to the third stage of development on the sect-church continuum defined by attempts to “instigate social change rather than maintain a hostile relationship with the world or adapt to prevailing social customs.” If this is the case, it would appear that at least one of the social changes the church would like to instigate equates to the “religious right’s” constructions of “family values.” Whichever of these explanations one finds most convincing, a dominant “point of mediation” for the LDS church’s response to the world is its definition of gender and ideals for women.

Whether or not this process is contributing significantly to the other conditions we’ve explored, there are very few indications that the LDS church is in the process of laying the groundwork necessary to prepare the membership and the leadership to accept genuine

622 Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999.”
623 Ibid.
change in the gendered priesthood system. With most indications pointing in the opposite
direction, it appears very unlikely that the church will make more than superficial changes, at
least in the foreseeable future, to the roles it prescribes to women or the authority they have
access to.

4.e. Concluding thoughts
As a feminist I know that structures matter, that formal authority makes a difference in the way people
think as well as behave, that institutional arrangements can lock in prejudice, yet I also know that legal
protection is hollow without spiritual transformation and that the right spirit can transform a seemingly
repressive system.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

LDS women are heavily invested in the church, including the gendered priesthood
system. They feel deep love for and commitment to both the gospel as it is expounded in the
LDS tradition and the church institution that provides social, emotional, spiritual, and
sometimes financial support for themselves and their families. There are womanspaces in this
sex-segregated tradition characterized by bonds of love and friendship between women,
which is valued by those who partake of it. In a culture of transient residence and uncertain
futures, the church provides a community, a consistent dependable safety net, the “extended
family” our contemporary American lifestyle has forsaken. In light of both the tangible
benefits and the power of tradition, it doesn’t seem terribly surprising that so many women
remain complicit in their own subordinate status by lending their support to the institution
and transmitting the attitudes, beliefs, and sacred stories which support it.

Still, it’s sometimes shocking—given both the history of the church and the current
condition of gender roles within it—that many strong, successful, intelligent, educated and
even self-identified feminist women and men would maintain their membership and
participation. A thorough investigation of how Mormon feminists negotiate their identities
and how successful they are maintaining this dual status, despite the cognitive dissonance,

would be very interesting. I know of no such study. But until there is one, we can find a beginning of understanding by looking to spiritual experiences. One woman fitting the description above told me that when her husband was bishop she could be in a different part of the house and yet “feel” when he was praying. Such witness acts as confirmation for her that God is intimately involved in the church and that priesthood power and callings are real. Whatever the church is or is not doing wrong with regard to women, that much she knows to be true. Millions of such stories circulate through conversations and testimony meetings fortifying the convictions of members and their willingness to work within the system and accept its limitations.

Laura Thatcher Ulrich tells a story of visiting Nauvoo to attend a conference for which the “ostensible purpose was to celebrate the founding of the Relief Society, but the real agenda was to come to terms with the position of women in the contemporary Church.” At the end of the conference, she took her frustration to God on the banks of the Mississippi river and begged for guidance. She received an answer. It confirmed both her faith and her doubt, fortifying her with the courage to continue her struggle from within the church. Terry Tempest Williams tells a story from her childhood at a time when doctors had given her mother very little chance of surviving her recently diagnosed breast cancer. Williams’ father was informed by Apostle Monson (now president of the church) that he felt compelled to tell brother Tempest his wife would be well for many years to come. Monson then invited brother Tempest to have his family gather to pray in the privacy of their own home at a given time. At that same time the Brethren planned to pray in the holy chambers of

625 Personal conversation with a member of the Ames 1st ward.
627 Ibid., 171.
628 Williams, Refuge, 196-7.
the Salt Lake Temple, where they would submit Tempest’s name among those to be healed. Williams relates:

…it my brothers and I came home from school to pray. We knelt in the living room together as a family. No words were uttered. But in the quiet of that room, I felt the presence of angels.”

Her mother’s cancer went into remission and she lived for many more years. Surely such experiences combine with family traditions and Mormon ethnic identity to bind these individuals to the church and its people.

In her 1992 paper, Meg Wheatley offered the church a list of both specific actions they could take and guiding principles they could apply to mitigate the disempowering consequences of male-only priesthood on women, without making dramatic change to the system. Many of her recommendations, such as increased female representation on governance boards and increased visibility for female leaders, have clearly been implemented. Both male leaders and LDS women point to these changes in defending the church as responsive to criticism and providing women plenty of opportunities and influential positions (more than they want sometimes, given their busy schedules). Whether in response to Wheatley’s suggestions or some other impetus, the church has been taking an increasingly conciliatory stance toward women. As noted previously, the rhetoric is consistent and insistent in advocating for women’s value, and men’s responsibility to treat women as respected equals. These measures collaborate with the self-validating function of LDS womanspaces to act as a steam-release valve, reducing the pressure and making the less palatable aspects of the gendered system tolerable.

Elouise M. Bell uses Shakespeare’s dramas to illustrate the value of a loyal opposition, an insight she hopes the LDS church will come to appreciate.

As you remember, the fools in Shakespeare’s dramas are anything but fools. Often the greatest wisdom of a play comes from that quarter. The clown in Twelfth Night is no exception. In Act V, scene 1, Orsino, the duke of Illyria, says to the clown by way of greeting, “How dost thou, my good fellow?”

References:
629 Ibid., 197.
630 Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood?”
The clown replies, “Truly, sir, the better for my foes and the worse for my friends.”

The duke tries to correct him: “Just the contrary—the better for thy friends.”

“No sir, the worse.”

“How can that be?”

“Marry, sir, they praise me and make an ass of me. Now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass, so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself, and by my friends I am abused. So that … the worse for my friends, and the better for my foes.”

…The same insight came to King Lear after he had been so reduced in circumstances that he was literally naked and homeless upon the moor in a raging storm. Speaking in anger and bitterness about the many lackeys and paid flatterers who had clustered around him in his former days of glory, he said, “They told me I was ague-proof.” That is, they flattered him so outrageously that he believed he was immune even from the common afflictions such as ague or flu, which are the lot of humankind.

Thus Lear is pointing out that sometimes those who agree easily and quickly with us do us a disservice. And the clown is explaining that those whom we may consider our foes can actually be our greatest benefactors.631

The allure of power is strong, and when one has it, hard to relinquish, however wise doing so might be. But the church is not without many eager to assist in exploring more inclusive means of seeking wisdom and God’s guidance. The LDS church has many feminists who would play the role of loyal opposition if the church would but take advantage of the service they offer.

APPENDIX

The First Presidency Statement on the Negro Question
August 17, 1949

The attitude of the Church with reference to Negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord, on which is founded the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization, to the effect that Negroes may become members of the Church but that they are not entitled to the priesthood at the present time. The prophets of the Lord have made several statements as to the operation of the principle. President Brigham Young said: “Why are so many of the inhabitants of the earth cursed with a skin of blackness? It comes in consequence of their fathers rejecting the power of the holy priesthood, and the law of God. They will go down to death. And when all the rest of the children have received their blessings in the holy priesthood, then that curse will be removed from the seed of Cain, and they will then come up and possess the priesthood, and receive all the blessings which we now are entitled to.”

President Wilford Woodruff made the following statement: “The day will come when all that race will be redeemed and possess all the blessings which we now have.”

The position of the Church regarding the Negro may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind, namely, that the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality and that while the details of this principle have not been made known, the mortality is a privilege that is given to those who maintain their first estate; and that the worth of the privilege is so great that spirits are willing to come to earth and take on bodies no matter what the handicap may be as to the kind of bodies they are to secure; and that among the handicaps, failure of the right to enjoy in mortality the blessings of the priesthood is a handicap which spirits are willing to assume in order that they might come to
earth. Under this principle there is no injustice whatsoever involved in this deprivation as to the holding of the priesthood by the Negroes.

The First Presidency on the Rights of the Negro
December 15, 1969
To General Authorities, Regional Representatives of the Twelve, Stake Presidents, Mission Presidents, and Bishops.

Dear Brethren:

In view of confusion that has arisen, it was decided at a meeting of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve to restate the position of the Church with regard to the Negro both in society and in the Church.

First, may we say that we know something of the sufferings of those who are discriminated against in a denial of their civil rights and Constitutional privileges. Our early history as a church is a tragic story of persecution and oppression. Our people repeatedly were denied the protection of the law. They were driven and plundered, robbed and murdered by mobs, who in many instances were aided and abetted by those sworn to uphold the law. We as a people have experienced the bitter fruits of civil discrimination and mob violence.

We believe that the Constitution of the United States was divinely inspired, that it was produced by “wise men” whom God raised up for this “very purpose,” and that the principles embodied in the Constitution are so fundamental and important that, if possible, they should be extended “for the rights and protection” of all mankind.

In revelations received by the first prophet of the Church in this dispensation, Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the Lord made it clear that it is “not right that any man should be in bondage one to another.” These words were spoken prior to the Civil War. From these and other revelations have sprung the Church’s deep and historic concern with man’s free agency and our commitment to the sacred principles of the Constitution.
It follows, therefore, that we believe the Negro, as well as those of other races, should have his full Constitutional privileges as a member of society, and we hope that members of the Church everywhere will do their part as citizens to see that these rights are held inviolate. Each citizen must have equal opportunities and protection under the law with reference to civil rights.

However, matters of faith, conscience, and theology are not within the purview of the civil law. The first amendment to the Constitution specifically provides that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints affecting those of the Negro race who choose to join the Church falls wholly within the category of religion. It has no bearing upon matters of civil rights. In no case or degree does it deny to the Negro his full privileges as a citizen of the nation.

This position has no relevancy whatever to those who do not wish to join the Church. Those individuals, we suppose, do not believe in the divine origin and nature of the church, nor that we have the priesthood of God. Therefore, if they feel we have no priesthood, they should have no concern with any aspect of our theology on priesthood so long as that theology does not deny any man his Constitutional privileges.

A word of explanation concerning the position of the Church.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints owes its origin, its existence, and its hope for the future to the principle of continuous revelation. “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”

From the beginning of this dispensation, Joseph Smith and all succeeding presidents of the Church have taught that Negroes, while spirit children of a common Father, and the progeny of our earthly parents Adam and Eve, were not yet to receive the priesthood, for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man.
Our living prophet, President David O. McKay, has said, “The seeming
discrimination by the Church toward the Negro is not something which originated with man;
but goes back into the beginning with God....

“Revelation assures us that this plan antedates man's mortal existence, extending back
to man's pre-existent state.”

President McKay has also said, “Sometime in God's eternal plan, the Negro will be
given the right to hold the priesthood.”

Until God reveals His will in this matter, to him whom we sustain as a prophet, we
are bound by that same will. Priesthood, when it is conferred on any man comes as a blessing
from God, not of men.

We feel nothing but love, compassion, and the deepest appreciation for the rich
talents, endowments, and the earnest strivings of our Negro brothers and sisters. We are
eager to share with men of all races the blessings of the Gospel. We have no racially-
segregated congregations.

Were we the leaders of an enterprise created by ourselves and operated only
according to our own earthly wisdom, it would be a simple thing to act according to popular
will. But we believe that this work is directed by God and that the conferring of the
priesthood must await His revelation. To do otherwise would be to deny the very premise on
which the Church is established.

We recognize that those who do not accept the principle of modern revelation may
oppose our point of view. We repeat that such would not wish for membership in the Church,
and therefore the question of priesthood should hold no interest for them. Without prejudice
they should grant us the privilege afforded under the Constitution to exercise our chosen
form of religion just as we must grant all others a similar privilege. They must recognize that
the question of bestowing or withholding priesthood in the Church is a matter of religion and
not a matter of Constitutional right.
We extend the hand of friendship to men everywhere and the hand of fellowship to all who wish to join the Church and partake of the many rewarding opportunities to be found therein.

We join with those throughout the world who pray that all of the blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ may in due time of the Lord become available to men of faith everywhere. Until that time comes we must trust in God, in His wisdom and in His tender mercy.

Meanwhile we must strive harder to emulate His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose new commandment it was that we should love one another. In developing that love and concern for one another, while awaiting revelations yet to come, let us hope that with respect to these religious differences, we may gain reinforcement for understanding and appreciation for such differences. They challenge our common similarities, as children of one Father, to enlarge the out-reaching of our divine souls.

Faithfully your brethren,
The First Presidency

By Hugh B. Brown

N. Eldon Tanner

Official Declaration 2

June 8, 1978

To All General and Local Priesthood Officers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Throughout the World

Dear Brethren:

As we have witnessed the expansion of the work of the Lord over the earth, we have been grateful that people of many nations have responded to the message of the restored gospel, and have joined the Church in ever-increasing numbers. This, in turn, has inspired us
with a desire to extend to every worthy member of the Church all of the privileges and
blessings which the gospel affords.

Aware of the promises made by the prophets and presidents of the Church who have
preceded us that at some time, in God's eternal plan, all of our brethren who are worthy may
receive the priesthood, and witnessing the faithfulness of those from whom the priesthood
has been withheld, we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful
brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for
divine guidance.

He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day
has come when every faithful, worthy man in the Church may receive the holy priesthood,
with power to exercise its divine authority, and enjoy with his loved ones every blessing that
flows therefrom, including the blessings of the temple. Accordingly, all worthy male
members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color.
Priesthood leaders are instructed to follow the policy of carefully interviewing all candidates
for ordination to either the Aaronic or the Melchizedek Priesthood to insure that they meet
the established standards for worthiness.

We declare with soberness that the Lord has now made known His will for the
blessing of all His children throughout the earth who will hearken to the voice of His
authorized servants, and prepare themselves to receive every blessing of the gospel.

Sincerely yours,
The First Presidency

Spencer W. Kimball

N. Eldon Tanner

Marion G. Romney
The Family: A Proclamation to the World
September 23, 1995

The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children.

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshiped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize his or her divine destiny as an heir of eternal life. The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally.

The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed. We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God's eternal plan.
Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. "Children are an heritage of the Lord" (Psalms 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations.

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities. 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. Disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation. Extended families should lend support when needed.

We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.

We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.

This proclamation was read by President Gordon B. Hinckley as part of his message at the General Relief Society Meeting held September 23, 1995, in Salt Lake City, Utah.


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