

Latter-day Saint Women in Today's Changing World

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It is always a great pleasure and a strengthening experience for me to speak to a group of Brigham Young University students. I enjoyed the chorus this morning, and I also appreciated being referred to as a young woman. I was called the other day by the National Council of Women and asked if I would accept an appointment as a delegate to an international meeting in Paris. I thought, "Before I accept this, I should refer it to one of the members of the First Presidency." So I called President Tanner and said, "I have an invitation to serve as a delegate, and I don't think I should accept it because and because and because—" I had a number of very good reasons, I thought.

He listened attentively, and then he said to me, "You know, I should think you'd take advantage of your opportunities while you're still young."

I'm particularly honored this morning to be invited by the chairman of the Women's Week program committee to speak at this devotional assembly. Since this is Women's Week, it seems appropriate that I address myself, in the main, to the role of the Latter-day Saint woman in today's changing world. I'm sensitive to the fact that this group consists of men as well as women. In the governing structure of the Church, men play an important role in relation

to the women's activities as they relate to the work of the Church. At early meetings of the Relief Society in Nauvoo, the Prophet Joseph Smith clearly defined this relationship. At the founding meeting, a presidency consisting of three women—a president, a first counselor, and a second counselor—was appointed to preside over the organization. Later in the meeting the Prophet Joseph said, "Let this presidency serve as a Constitution—all their decisions be considered law, and acted upon as such. If any officers are wanted to carry out the design of the institution, let them be appointed and set apart. . . . The minutes of your meetings will be precedent for you to act upon—your Constitution and law" ("A Centenary of Relief Society," p. 15). Nonetheless, at the third meeting of the society the Prophet gave this enduring directive: "You will receive instructions through the order of the Priesthood which God has established, through the medium of those appointed to lead, guide, and direct the affairs of the Church in this last dis-

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pensation" ("A Centenary of Relief Society," p. 16).

Because of these mandates it seems imperative that not only the women but also the brethren of the priesthood should be knowledgeable regarding the role of women. The brethren will want to be familiar with the problems confronting women so that through an understanding of these and the duties and the responsibilities of the sisters they will be in a position to counsel and direct them in harmony with the design of the Lord. The advancement of the work of the Church is a joint responsibility of the men and the women of the Church, each working in his assigned sphere. The deeper understanding each has of the role of the other, the greater the total success of the work of the Church is bound to be. Understanding is built primarily upon knowledge. Therefore, it does not seem inappropriate for me to speak about woman's role in today's changing world to this group, consisting as it does of men and women.

National Gains of Women

With the advent of this new year, 1975, our nation found itself and still finds itself struggling with many unusual and difficult circumstances. It was of interest to me to listen to a radio broadcast during which outstanding news broadcasters discussed what they considered to be the most significant news events of 1974 affecting the nation. Their conclusions, as I recall, were as follows: "inflation and the recession, the energy crisis, the resignation of the president of the United States, the Watergate trials, the pardon of the president, the growing wealth and power of the oil-producing nations, and the world food shortages."

In my opinion the broadcasters bypassed one happening more significant, perhaps, in its long-range impact on home, community, and national life than any of those mentioned. I refer to the advancement made by women in their efforts toward emancipation from what

they regarded as existing restraints that encumbered their full development and usefulness. Women have been active in working toward specific goals in relation to this for years, but 1974 was different. It was a year of intensified effort in a vast scope of diversifies areas, and gains were pronounced. As an example of one gain, I cite those made in the field of political life. A record number of experienced, qualified, dedicated women ran for public office, and many won. The National Women's Political Caucus issued the following figures: 18 women representatives were elected to Congress, an unprecedented number; 599 women were elected to state legislature; one woman was elected governor of one of our sovereign states; another woman was elected a lieutenant governor. "All across the country," declares the Women's Caucus, "it was a banner year for women."

In some areas, however, gains were made which, in the opinion of some persons, raise questions as to the effect upon national life. While we rejoice in the correction of injustices, we must not lose sight of the need for sober evaluation of action that brings about change in the status of women—change which breaks with the traditional, time-tested patterns of life that have proved good and have contributed to the happiness and the well-being of families and of nations. We must not lose sight of the basic natures of women and their divinely ordained roles in life. James Kilpatrick, a prominent columnist, has pointed out that "we look to the Judeo-Christian ethic." He declares that we live by a body of rules or laws drawn from generations past; that they cannot be treated as if they do not exist. People care about these things because they have found them to be good and satisfying ("The Case Against the ERA," *Nation's Business*, January 1975, pp. 9–10).

Current Trends in Relation to Traditional Values

There are some present viewpoints and trends that give concern because they seem to run counter to traditional values. The Latter-day Saint woman finds herself in an ideal position to evaluate changes in the status of women and to intelligently and properly appraise trends and viewpoints because she has at her command unfailing measuring rods. These infallible calculators, if you will, are the divinely inspired guidelines in the revealed truths as set forth by the scriptures and in the words of our modern prophets. Yet some of us fail to use these unerring measuring rods because we are not sufficiently familiar with them. We do not know them. We may have failed to take advantage of the opportunities to learn them, to understand their full meaning, and to apply them in our individual and collective lives. Or we may be like Saul, the son of Kish, who loved the Lord and would do his will, but he lacked the courage to go against popular opinion.

In the Bible we are told, “Now there was a man of Benjamin, whose name was Kish. . . . And he had a son, whose name was Saul, a choice young man, and a goodly: and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he: from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people. And the asses of Kish, Saul’s father, were lost” (Samuel 9:1–3). Saul was sent to find the animals, but he could not. He and his servant then went to inquire of God through God’s servant Samuel, who was a prophet. (At that time he was called a seer, according to the scriptural account.) Samuel had been forewarned of Saul’s coming and the Lord had revealed to Samuel that it was his will that Saul should reign over his people as their captain. Samuel showed unto Saul the works of God. Then he took a vial of oil and anointed Saul to be captain over his inheritance. He then counseled

him as to the will of the Lord and how to proceed (see 1 Samuel 10).

The people, however, were not happy with this. They wanted a king, and Saul yielded to the will of the people. Then Samuel, learning of Saul’s decision, went unto Saul, a Benjamite, and said:

Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandments of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the Lord have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever.

But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the Lord hast sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord hath commanded him to be captain over this people. [1 Samuel 13:13–14]

And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words: because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice. [1 Samuel 15:24]

Too many of us today fear the voice of the people. Counseling on the desirability of representative government, King Mosiah made this significant statement: “It is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right” (Mosiah 29:26). Now, having this warning from a great Book of Mormon prophet, Latter-day Saints would do well to be particularly careful to weigh the voices of the people in the light of the teachings of our modern-day prophets. Even though the voices may be few, they are usually loud and convincing.

Possessing revealed truth and the words of the prophets as they relate to the responsibility of the Latter-day Saint woman and her role in life, we have an unwavering duty to uphold these teachings in our speech and actions, and to direct our lives in harmony with them. But I ask, “Do we have any further responsibility? Do we have a responsibility to share these teachings with those who may not have the light of truth?” In Matthew, our duty is made clear on this point. We read, “Ye are the light of

the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify you father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14–16).

Relief Society Prophecy Fulfilled

I am reminded of an address given to Relief Society women by President George Albert Smith in the October 1945 general conference. This was the first conference he addressed as President of the Church and the first conference I conducted as president of Relief Society. For several years we had been denied conferences due to the restrictions of war. The women gathered to that Relief Society conference with eager and receptive spirits to hear the message of their new Prophet-President. The Spirit of the Lord rested mightily upon President Smith, and the spirit of prophecy prevailed as he spoke of the future of the women of the Church. He made very clear the responsibilities we had to all womankind. An excerpt from his address is worthy of reading at this time. Said President Smith:

I feel that I am standing on sacred ground, for in this pulpit have appeared some of the great men and women of the world, those who were anxious to do what the Lord would have them do. Here they bore testimony of the divine mission of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

You are more blessed than any other women in all the world. You were the first women to have the franchise; the first women to have a voice in the work of a church. It was God who gave it to you, and it came as a result of revelation to a Prophet of the Lord. Since that time think what benefits the women of this world have enjoyed. Not only you who belong to the Church have enjoyed the blessings of equality, but when the Prophet Joseph Smith turned the key for the emancipation of womankind, it was turned for all the women of the world, and

from generation to generation the number of women who can enjoy the blessings of religious liberty and civil liberty has been increasing.

*Do you realize that you have opened this Tabernacle to the first general conference we have had in years? . . . Now the sky is the limit, and I am not so sure that by the time we have two or three more general conferences here we may have visitors from Australia, New Zealand, Africa, China, Japan, and elsewhere. They may leave their homes in airplanes and in about twenty-four hours be right here. It is marvelous what the Lord has given to us in this age. [“Address to the Members of Relief Society,” 4 October 1945, *Relief Society Magazine* 32 (1945): 716, 717, 719]*

I was deeply moved by the remarks of that great President, and following the session I thanked him and poured forth the feelings of my heart. I inquired, “Would any of this take place during my administration?” Then I asked, “When and how will our message be carried to the women of the world?” While his reply is not recorded in the conference proceedings, it is recorded in my little notebook where I’ve kept notes of the various general conferences, and it is also recorded in my mind and in my heart.

The prophet replied, “It could easily happen during your administration. The message of Mormon women will reach the women of the world when there is a special need for it. You don’t need to worry about how,” said he. “The Lord will see to that.”

By way of showing prophecy fulfilled, a few years after President Smith’s address my counselors and I noted a rather large number of women in attendance at our conference from overseas and foreign-language countries. We decided to hold a special meeting for them following the regular session of our two-day conference. We asked for a verbal roll call that morning. Each sister was to give her name, the country from which she came, and her method of transportation. Most of them had come by

plane. Every country mentioned by President Smith in his 1945 address was represented except China. I noted that there was a woman there from Taiwan. I commented on this, adding that we did have a sister from Taiwan even though we did not have one from China. The sister from Taiwan then quietly arose and in perfect English said, “China is my homeland.” Prophecy was fulfilled.

Importance of Relief Society Today

Today the message of Mormon women is being carried to the world in a number of ways—through the great missionary program of the Church, through Relief Society’s affiliation with the National and International Councils of Women, through radio, television, the press, and other means of communication. I assure you that the message of Mormon women is needed by women of the world today. Countless women are troubled as to the course they should pursue. Many are confused by new philosophies and new points of view. Relief Society holds a position of respect and influence among organized women of the world. While they may not always agree with our position on issues which to us are important, we are usually given ample opportunity to express ourselves, and our influence is felt. Often our position prevails.

The names of over 900,000 women are now on the Relief Society roles. These include young women, many of them college women. Also, there are middle-aged women and those who are experienced and who have grown old in dedication to the work. It is our duty as Mormon women, regardless of our age or circumstances, to stand united and firm in support of Church teachings. It was not a coincidence or a whim when Relief Societies were established on this campus and on other college campuses. Nor was it a coincidence when President Harold B. Lee brought the young adult women and the special interest women under the auspices of Relief Society. It

was the will of the Lord. It was in fulfillment of prophecy by an earlier Prophet-President, Joseph F. Smith. These are his prophetic words recorded in his book *Gospel Doctrine*:

I will speak of the Relief Society as one great organization in the Church, organized by the Prophet Joseph Smith, whose duty it is to look after the interests of all women of Zion and of all the women who may come under their supervision and care, irrespective of religion, color, or condition. I expect to see the day when this organization will be one of the most perfect, most efficient and effective organizations for good in the Church but that day will be when we shall have women who are not only imbued with the spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and with the testimony of Christ in their hearts, but also with youth, vigor and intelligence to enable them to discharge the great duties and responsibilities that rest upon them. . . . We want the young women, the intelligent women, women of faith, of courage and of purity to be associated with the Relief Societies in the various stakes and wards of Zion. We want them to take hold of this work with vigor, with intelligence and unitedly, for the building up of Zion and the instruction of women in their duties—domestic duties, public duties, and every duty that may devolve upon them. [Gospel Doctrine, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1919), p. 484]

Choice young Latter-day Saint women are augmenting the strength of Relief Society today because they are needed. The times demand their training, their leadership skills, their testimonies—coupled with the strength of the sisters long experienced in the work. Latter-day Saint women are concerned for the solidarity of the home and the eternal well-being of the family. They know good homes are the cornerstone of a good society and happy citizenry. Any change that adversely affects the home and the family is to be deplored. The Latter-day Saint doctrine of the eternity of the family unit was frequently referred to by the

late Elder Stephen L Richards as “the most sublime of all theological doctrines.”

The gospel teaches women how to behave toward their husbands, and it teaches men to esteem womanhood and to honor and respect their wives. The Church places no restrictions on a woman’s going into the marketplace and into community service on a paid or a volunteer basis, if she so desires, when her home and family circumstances allow her to do so without impairment to them. Women are encouraged to develop their full potential as women, and the Church affords abundant opportunity for them to do so. Well-directed compassionate service, which is according to the nature of women, is but the law of brotherhood in action. It is Latter-day Saint doctrine. These are a few of the measuring rods whereby you young women here today may evaluate change and determine your actions in life. The 900,000

women constituting the Relief Society membership can be a power for helping women the world over properly to evaluate change.

Guided by Church teachings, they can help themselves to move forward along proper lines in the development of their talents and skills and in their service to mankind. The Church can enable women of the world to determine what should receive priorities in their lives. Latter-day Saint women have at their command the firm and infallible guidelines that lead toward the full development and total usefulness of womankind. The power for good inherent in our 900,000 women guided by the inspiration of priesthood leadership is incalculable. For Latter-day Saint women, the teachings of the Church are eternal security. May we never lose sight of them I sincerely pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.