

**Mormon *and* Feminist?:
Feminist Reactions to LDS Scripture, Doctrine, and Practices**

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[Abstract](#)
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Key Words: LDS, Mormon Feminism.

Palabras Clave: Santos del Último Día, Feminismo Mormón.

Place in Society:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints places a large emphasis on the concept of “separate but equal.” This is most evident through the roles of priesthood verses the roles of motherhood. Only men are allowed to possess the societal power and authority that derives from the priesthood of the Church. Women may be involved in societies that promote community service and caring; however, all leadership roles in the Church are possessed by males. These societies are organized “under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood,” following the belief that the “Church was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized.”¹ While men worry themselves about the workings of the Church, women are expected to care and nurture within the home. Each gender has its own sphere of influence and does not technically encroach upon the other’s area. Women should no more enter the priesthood and leadership of the Church than men should enter the role of motherhood. Sonja Farnsworth quotes Boyd K Packer as saying:

The well-being of the mother, the child, the family, the Church... of all
humanity rests upon protecting motherhood... The addition of such

duties as would attend ordination to the priesthood would constitute an interruption to, perhaps avoidance of, that crucial contribution which only a mother can provide.²

This has been an essential argument to keep women out of politics and deny them work outside of the home and family environment.

Motherhood is best understood through the influence of marriage and the expectations therein. For the full implications, it is necessary to examine what is termed as “Celestial Marriage.” Official Mormon doctrine teaches that God, the Heavenly Father, rules in conjunction with the Heavenly Mother.³ The Heavenly Father was once a man himself, and because of this, Mormons believe that they have the chance to become gods themselves, but only through the following of specific ceremonies. The most important of these is marriage, for without this, a man may not obtain the highest level of Heaven.⁴ Modeled after the Heavenly Parents, marriage is eternal. In order to achieve the highest level of Heaven, the Celestial Kingdom, Mormons must marry, unless they are unable to because of circumstances beyond their control (D&C 137:5-8).

Roles within marriage are taught by the Church as eternal patterns and not secularly influenced. Mormons ideally should marry, procreate, and foster righteous living.⁵ Most of the LDS roles follow what are considered traditional familial roles.⁶ There is much emphasis on separate but equal.⁷ Mormons believe in the realization of the full potential of each person. These characteristics are not based on gender, but on the gifts and blessings that the Heavenly Father has provided each person based on their obedience. The differences between males and females in the relationship are important, however, as with the model of Celestial marriage, they should be overcome in order to

form an eternal bond to each other. Though the differences mean only separation and not inequality, marriage is also important because “LDS doctrine is... at odds with... those [people] that emphasize female sufficiency apart from men.”⁸

A main function of women in the LDS Church is “consistent attention to the needs of others.”⁹ The familial responsibilities are essential to the defining of Mormon women. According to Ezra Taft Benson, “God established that fathers are to preside in the home. Fathers are to provide, to love, to teach, and to direct... Mothers are to conceive, to bear, to nourish, to love, and to train.”¹⁰ Although women are encouraged to pursue their own goals, it is hoped that women will make motherhood and home their primary career.¹¹ Mormon women are encouraged to seek education, but the role of motherhood is the dominant concern. Thus are women strongly encouraged to remain at home to nourish and sustain the family. Due to this dualistic nature on the roles, women are expected to prepare for both a vocation and homemaking. Mormon women do not often work outside of the home. They are strongly encouraged to remain with the family, though the LDS Church “does not oppose to women working outside the home per se as long as they can do so without impairment to the home.”¹²

Feminism

According to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, an active, self-proclaimed Mormon Feminist, feminism “deplores teachings, policies, or attitudes that deny women their full stature as human beings,” and “tries to act on that conviction in personal and professional life.”¹³ The Encyclopedia of Mormonism claims that feminism is “the belief that advocates the equality of women and men and seeks to remove the inequities and to

redress injustices against women.”¹⁴ Therefore, a Mormon feminist is a person who actively believes and supports the claims of the LDS Church and who also believes in the equality of women within all aspects of life and endeavors to act upon both assertions. The question that arises is if Mormonism is oppressive to women through the enforcement of strict gender specific roles and male-power dominated theology, or if this perceived oppression is accurate. Perhaps feminism encompasses more than previously imagined and Mormonism is more flexible.¹⁵

Is Separate Equal?

Essential to the Mormon feminist is the assertion that motherhood is equal to priesthood, but operates in different areas of life. Key is that women hold the same amount of power and authority in the home and raising children as men have in society. Motherhood and priesthood are explained to be equivalent in divine nature and calling. Sonja Farnsworth describes contemporary LDS rhetoric as arguing “that motherhood is what women have instead of priesthood” and that motherhood is akin to priesthood through divine relationship with God the Father.¹⁶ Women may not commune in the same way with God the Heavenly Father in the same way that males are unable to commune with the Heavenly Mother.

Farnsworth also quotes the 1991 *Relief Society Study Guide* to explain that the Church believes that women can “share” the priesthood with men, as motherhood is an “eternal part of the priesthood.”¹⁷ This is similar to how men may share motherhood by acting as fathers. Both genders may partake in their other’s sphere and God-given area, yet they supposedly have no real power outside of their area.

Responsibilities between male and female are also divided equally. As previously stated, a father's role is to provide, preside, and teach, while women should conceive, bear, and nourish.¹⁸ Likewise, women should protect their families from secular influence and keep the sacred values strong in their home.¹⁹ The men of the house should protect women from the worries of politics in order that they may focus more intently on their familial duties.²⁰

Yet, this separation and distinction of power is not always apparent. The societal power that men hold can, and often does in practice, rule over the familial power of women in the LDS Church. Dorice Williams Elliot explains that while these two spheres of power and influence are theoretically equivalent, this is not always how the situation works. "When priesthood leaders speak to men, they speak to those who are also authorized to speak. Women, however, are in a quite different position structurally; women may be spoken to, but they do not speak authoritatively to others, men or women."²¹ This authority to speak to and instruct women can lead to the assumption that the men of the priesthood can instruct women on "what they should do, what they should think, what they should want, and how they should feel."²² Thus, Elliot concludes that since women have no voice in the church proceedings and management, their roles and responsibilities are defined and deemed equivalent by male decisions.²³ This separation and supposed division of power proves not to liberate women, but to "protect male authority and den[y] women what is properly theirs,"²⁴ equality.

The Heavenly Mother

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints believes in a Heavenly Mother that rules with the Heavenly Father over the earth. She is in all ways like him “in glory, perfection, compassion, wisdom, and holiness.”²⁵ Women are encouraged to draw strength from this image and empowerment for feminist interpretation. The Mother in Heaven, with the Heavenly Father, bears spirit children that will one day come to the earth to inhabit mortal bodies. This Mother goddess is interpreted within the Church as promoting to females because she shares the power and authority of God the Father and plays a crucial role to the existence of the spirits of humankind.²⁶ Though the Mother in Heaven is known as an equal partner with God the Father through creation and procreation, little has actually been revealed about the Heavenly Mother.

Many women look up to her and see this Heavenly Mother as a source for power within the Church settings. The Heavenly Mother is equal in power with the Heavenly Father. Indeed, the creation story supports and is cited for this claim of equality for women, according to official church doctrine. “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...’” (Gen. 1:26). Thus women and men are not only created equally, but male and female are equally represented in the Divine Entity. Through the Mother in Heaven, women in the LDS church can identify with the nurturing and gentle aspect of God, which are usually absent in the attributes of a traditional male god.²⁷

Yet, little is known about the Heavenly Mother, and she is rarely discussed. Scriptures only hint at the existence of the Mother in Heaven, though statements from the Presidents of the Church state that there is indeed a Heavenly Mother.²⁸ Though the

Heavenly Mother is equal to the Heavenly Father in power and divinity, the LDS Church discourages speaking of the Mother in Heaven and praying to Her. Even articulating Her name “is akin to profanity.”²⁹

This leads to much confusion for women of the Church. They are supposed to draw comfort and empowerment for this Mother God, but when they attempt to speak of her, they are shamed or excommunicated.³⁰ The only official doctrine that the Church pulls the authority not to speak of the Mother in Heaven is from President Gordon Hinckley’s proclamation in the 1991 LDS General conference, stating that he “regard[s] it as inappropriate for anyone in the church to pray to our Mother in Heaven.”³¹ Yet, even this has a profound effect on women’s view of equality. This hiding of the Mother can be seen as casting Her into the same position as women of the Church, which only emphasizes the actuality of inequality.³²

Martha Pierce discusses letters addressed to the Mormon Women’s Forum. She describes one women’s frustration with the patriarchy of the Church and lack of mention of the Mother in Heaven to illustrate the oppression that some Mormon women experience. This particular woman was called in for an interview with the local church authorities. She was told that if the answers to her questions ever did come, they would be enlightened through the church. Her leaders, she was told, would be sure to inform her because, they “would hate for you to miss out.”³³

God the Mother is celebrated among women of the LDS Church, but only when the Church authorities are not listening. When they do speak of Her, they are sometimes silenced and oppressed. The Heavenly Mother Herself can be a liberating figure for these women. They can draw strength and understanding from Her. However, the silence

surrounding Her and even Her image can be used to oppress women and emphasize patriarchy.

Motherhood

By having a prominent female character in an authoritarian God role, especially as the nurturing bearer of souls that will soon inhabit the earth, the importance of motherhood is also portrayed. Motherhood is seen as a calling and as a part of holiness in which almost all women can participate.³⁴ President Ezra Taft Benson stated, that “no more sacred word exists in secular or holy writ than that of mother.”³⁵ Thus, all women are called to be mothers. When Ezra Taft Benson opened his 1987 talk entitled “Mothers of Zion” to the general assembly with “I hope that what I have to say... will bless you in sacred calling as mothers,”³⁶ it only emphasized the importance of the mother’s role.

Early in the Twentieth Century, much emphasis in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was placed on “eternal motherhood.”³⁷ Soon , comparisons were drawn and much was done “to emphasize that motherhood was as ongoing and eternal as godhood.”³⁸ This promotes the holiness of motherhood and the exalted state that comes from being a mother.³⁹ President Spencer Kimball explained through saying that “mothers have a sacred role. They are partners with God.”⁴⁰ God Himself has appointed this specific and exclusive role for women. Motherhood is necessary to protect the safety and sanctity of the family, and, by freeing women from the rigors of the outside life, women may more fully concentrate on the duty to bear children, as is their calling. This argument thrives on the “separate but equal” theory. Yet, motherhood is only truly a

liberating force for Mormon women if it contains a similar power and authority as that of priesthood.⁴¹

This “sacred” appointing or eternal duty does not necessarily liberate women. Sonja Farnsworth quotes Boyd H Packer “reassuring women”⁴² by saying that “[the woman] is not just equal to man, she is his superior! She can do that which he can never do, not in all eternity can he do it.”⁴³ Farnsworth states that such statements agree with an 1870 New Haven professor when he said that “the Almighty in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus, and built up a woman around it.”⁴⁴ These comments imply that women are blessed only because of their ability to bear children and their only function is to do so.⁴⁵

Yet, then the question arises of what if the woman does not want to or cannot bear children. Does she lose some of her godly power and value? Doris Williams Elliot paraphrases the Apostle Russell M. Nelson from the 1990 *Relief Society Personal Study Guide*, when he implies that unmarried women and women without children lack companions and are extremely lonely.⁴⁶ Nelson’s implications are “that only husbands can provide companionship for women and that only bearing children will keep women from loneliness.”⁴⁷ Still supported by contemporary revelations, Joseph Fielding Smith commented in the 1916 *Relief Society Magazine* that “those who attempt to pervert the ways of the Lord, and to prevent their offspring from coming into the world...are guilty of one of the most heinous crimes in the category. There is no promise of eternal salvation and exaltation for such as they...”⁴⁸ If women choose not to have children, they can be considered to be shirking their duties and can swiftly become outcasts from LDS Society.

Scripture and Language

“This is not to say that patriarchy was not inspired; on the contrary, I believe that it was probably the best system men were capable of receiving from God.”⁴⁹ Patriarchy, while it may promote male dominance, authority, and power, does not necessarily oppress women.⁵⁰ Yet patriarchy, as with most ruling systems, has the ability to shape and form the way in which language is used. When the Mormon Scriptures and speeches are examined, the effects of patriarchy are evident. Even in the recent revelations from the Prophets, the Doctrine and Covenants, is there little hope for women. Less than four percent applies to or mentions females, and two thirds of that refers to women as objects.⁵¹ Many women of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints search the Scriptures for methods to liberate and include women.

As Lynn Matthews Anderson asks, “If our theology and doctrine are based on texts exclusive of women in the past, how can we find answers there to questions which concern or include women today?”⁵² If patriarchy and such exclusive language has become so ingrained into the LDS society, as Lavina Fielding Anderson suggests⁵³, how could patriarchy be rooted out and extinguished, or at least how could women have more societal power and authority? Reading the Scriptures and singing hymns with inclusionary language is the start of an incorporation of female equality. Yet, this is difficult without a revamping of hymns and a full time collaborating commitment to the constant changing of LDS language.⁵⁴ Likewise, the reconstructing of women’s stories for feminist interpretation and to show God’s blessing on empowered women would liberate women and assist to create the equality that many feel is lacking. Unfortunately, this is also a difficult task to accomplish.

Without the assistance and support of the higher authoritative priesthood, this is a well-nigh impossible task. Discouraging is leaders of the LDS Church appearing not to notice the lack of inclusivity, or, worse yet, to consider it a matter to be addressed. Lynn Matthews Anderson quotes Howard W. Hunter as first citing 2 Nephi 26:33, and then commenting, “From this statement it is clear that *all* men are invited to come unto him and *all* are alike unto him. Race makes no difference; color makes no difference; nationality makes no difference.” Anderson then continues to conclude that “by his very omission from his comments, apparently *gender* does make a difference. This omission is consistent throughout his talk.”⁵⁵ President Gordon Hinckley sees not reason for concern on the subject of women’s oppression because “...only the Lord, through revelation, could alter [women holding the priesthood]. He has not done so...”⁵⁶ These factors converge, creating the thought and expression of inclusion from women in the Church, but nothing being accomplished because of the apathy of the leaders and security in the present system.

Conclusion

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has the potential to be a liberating system of beliefs for women, yet there are multiple difficulties to circumvent in the beliefs and current revelations. Women are working in a variety of methods in order to allow a feminist interpretation of the teachings of the Church. By involving women in the priesthood, elevating God the Mother, the use of inclusive language, and reinterpreting of the LDS Scriptures to both include women and to tell their stories will assist the process in making Mormonism a setting of equality. How long this will take is undeterminable, yet many women are hopeful that the Church will change and become

more open and supportive of equality, not just in name and separation, but also in actuality.⁵⁷

¹ Mary Stovall Richards. “Kimball, Sarah Granger,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1992), 784.

² Sonja Farnsworth, “Mormonism’s Odd Couple,” in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 302.

³ Elaine Anderson Cannon, “Mother In Heaven,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1992), 961.

⁴ Joseph Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: Revelations to the Prophet Joseph Smith Given at Ramus, Illinois, May 16-17, 1843* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, n.d.), sec.131:2-3. All further citations will be referenced “D&C.”

When members of the LDS Church cite their sacred texts, they use a format equivalent to a standard in-text biblical citation, for example, (D&C 131:2-3) following the quoted material. I will follow this practice from this point on

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Darwin L. Thomas, “Family Life,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1992), 489.

⁷ Mark W. Cannon, “Civic Duties,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1992), 285.

⁸ Mary Stovall Richards, “Feminism,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1992), 506.

⁹ Martha Nibley Beck, “Women, Roles of,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1992), 1575.

¹⁰ Ezra Taft Benson. *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1988), 2.

¹¹ Beck, 1576.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. "Border Crossings," *Dialogue: A Journal for Mormon Thought* 27, (Summer 1994): 1.

¹⁴ Richards, 506.

¹⁵ Ulrich, 5.

¹⁶ Farnsworth, 300.

¹⁷ Ibid, 299.

¹⁸ Benson, 2.

¹⁹ Farnsworth, 309.

²⁰ Ibid, 302.

²¹ Dorice Williams Elliott. "Let Women No Longer Keep Silent in Our Churches: Women's Voices in Mormonism" in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 202.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 205.

²⁴ Farnsworth, 311.

²⁵ Elaine Anderson Cannon, 962.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Linda P. Wilcox. "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 8.

²⁸ Elaine Anderson Cannon, 961.

²⁹ Martha Pierce. "Personal Discourse on God the Mother," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 249.

³⁰ Peggy Fletcher Stack, "BYU Professor Fired, But Not Discredited," *Salt Lake City Tribune*. 8 June, 1996. <<http://bioag.byu.edu/Botany/Rushforth/www/AAUP/aaupga2.htm>>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Pierce, 251.

³³ Pierce, 249.

³⁴ Farnsworth, 305.

³⁵ Benson, 1.

³⁶ Farnsworth, 301

³⁷ Wilcox, 9

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Spencer W. Kimball. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1982), 326-327.

⁴¹ Farnsworth, 301.

⁴² Ibid, 305.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 302.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 304-5

⁴⁶ Elliott, 203.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Joseph Fielding Smith. "Birth Control," *Relief Society Magazine* 3, (July 1916), 367-8.

⁴⁹ Lynn Matthews Anderson. "Toward a Feminist Interpretation of Latter-Day Scripture." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, (Summer 1994), 200.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 188

⁵² Lynn Matthews Anderson, 192.

⁵³ Ibid, 218.

⁵⁴ Lavina Fielding Anderson. "The Grammar of Inequity," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 226.

⁵⁵ Lynn Matthews Anderson, 202

⁵⁶ Gordon B. Hinckley. "Ten Gifts from the Lord," *Ensign* 15, (November 1985), 86.

⁵⁷ Pierce, 255.

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