

Helping Female Students Rise to Their Spiritual Privileges

By Barbara Morgan Gardner

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Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained that in the Church, organization is hierarchical, but in the family it is patriarchal, with both husband and wife acting as "equal partners."

We Have a Problem

Recently, I asked my class of fifty Doctrine and Covenants students if they felt confident with their knowledge of the doctrines, principles, and practices associated with the priesthood. Apparently all did! I was so happy at that moment thinking that we would save several hours of class time on the topic. In the silence of my office following class, however, I began to wonder how it was that they knew everything about the priesthood when I myself, and even Church leaders, were struggling to understand and explain some of the fundamentals. During the next class, therefore, I had them answer the following on a slip of paper: How many people in this room hold priesthood keys?

I was surprised as I read aloud their diverse responses! “1,” “50,” “25,” “4,” “all of us,” “none of us,” “just the men in the room who hold the priesthood,” “all who have been through the temple,” and my favorite, most sincere answer, “I have no idea!” There were almost as many answers as there were students in that room. At least 75 percent of these students, men and women combined, were returned missionaries! I stood speechless for a moment, then realized that the hour I thought I had saved was now multiplied.

Over the last few years, I have come to recognize as never before the importance of helping our students, especially our female students, understand the priesthood and its associated privileges in their lives. We are living in a day and age when equality, power, fairness, and tolerance are touted above other virtues. Identity, authority, spirituality, and even God are topics of great confusion for many of our youth and young adults. As a female member, seminary and institute teacher, BYU religion professor, aunt, and sister, and having served in a variety of callings in the Church, including stake Young Women president, Relief Society president, and LDS higher education chaplain at large, I have come to recognize the strength and influence and power that comes as a result of knowing and understanding the doctrine of the priesthood.

Many women, not knowing what blessings they have access to, are on a mortal journey not taking full advantage of the spiritual feast available to them, thus minimizing the influence they could have on others. As a result, some are disgruntled with the Church, feeling undervalued, unappreciated, voiceless, and not validated. Many women, often our recently returned sister missionaries, have questions regarding their recent temple and mission experiences and are looking for clarification but end up confused by the variety of answers they are given, or the lack thereof. Yet the leaders of the Church are literally pleading for the sisters “to step forward! Take your rightful and needful place in your home, in your community, and in the kingdom of God—more than you ever have before.”^[1] Rather than shying away from what some may perceive as controversial topics or putting them on the back burner, the leaders of the Church, both men and women, are facing these topics (such as women and the priesthood) head on and are asking members of the Church, including—and especially—religious educators, to do the same.

How can we, therefore, as religious educators, effectively teach and lead in a way that answers President Russell M. Nelson’s plea, and help our female students take advantage of their priesthood privileges? Some possible ideas are to first, humbly seek to understand truths associated with the priesthood for ourselves, especially the most recent teachings of Church leaders. Second, recognize possible reasons why many women are living below their privileges.

Third, be aware of what we can do as religious educators to help our women more fully take advantage of their priesthood privileges and then help them act on that knowledge.

Perhaps no one has written more extensively about women in the Church than Sheri L. Dew, former counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency. In her book *Women and the Priesthood: What One Mormon Woman Believes*, she provides a disclaimer of sorts, which summarizes my sentiments on writing about this topic as well. “First,” she writes, “I am still learning.”^[2] Second, she acknowledges that there are many things regarding the priesthood she still does not understand. Third, she recognizes that she cannot please everyone and some, on both sides of whatever line they draw, will be offended. Fourth, although neither Sheri Dew nor I have felt seriously marginalized by members of the Church, we both acknowledge that many women’s experiences are far different. I would add that, fifth, I do not want to come across as a know-it-all or that I have a monopoly or consider myself a spokeswoman on this topic for the Church or CES. Rather, I have had many relevant experiences, and I feel a sense of duty to participate positively in the conversation.

What Truths Do We Know Regarding Women and the Priesthood?

In recent years, leaders have given more emphasis to the relationship of women and the priesthood. Among these are talks given by members of the Quorum of the Twelve: President Russell M. Nelson’s groundbreaking 2015 general conference address, “A Plea to My Sisters”; Elder Dallin H. Oaks’s April 2014 clarifying address, “Keys and Authority of the Priesthood”; Elder M. Russell Ballard’s Brigham Young University 2013 Education Week devotional, “Let Us Think Straight,” titled later in the *Ensigns* “Men and Women and Priesthood Power”; as well as Elder Ballard’s 2015 BYU Women’s Conference talk, “Women of Dedication, Faith, Determination, and Action.” In addition are Relief Society General President Linda K. Burton’s BYU Women’s Conference 2013 address “Priesthood Power—Available to All” (also reprinted in the *Ensign*); Julie B. Beck’s 2012 talk at BYU, “Why We Are Organized into Quorums and Relief Society”; and Young Women General President Bonnie L. Oscarson’s recent 2016 address “Rise Up in Strength, Sisters in Zion.” Clearly, there is a call for members of the Church to better understand the priesthood, especially in regard to women. The following are some truths that are vital to understand and teach correctly.

To begin, it is critical to understand that even though women are not ordained to a priesthood office in mortality, as such, they may receive priesthood authority, priesthood power, and priesthood blessings and privileges.

Both Men and Women Are Directed by Those Who Hold Priesthood Keys

Handbook 2 of the Church defines priesthood keys as “the authority God has given to priesthood [holders] to direct, control, and govern the use of His priesthood on earth.”^[3] Elder Oaks explains, “Every act or ordinance performed in the Church is done under the direct or indirect authorization of one holding the keys for that function.”^[4] Priesthood authority is directed by

those who hold priesthood keys.[5] “Those who hold priesthood keys have the right to preside over and direct the Church within a jurisdiction.”[6] All of the keys of the priesthood pertaining to his Church are held by Jesus Christ, who conferred upon all of the Apostles all the keys that pertained to the kingdom of God in each dispensation. Only the prophet is authorized to exercise all of these priesthood keys.

The senior living Apostle, the President of the Church, is the only person on earth authorized to exercise all priesthood keys.[7] These keys are bestowed on presidents of temples, missions, stakes, and districts; bishops; branch presidents; and quorum presidents. “This presiding authority is valid only for the designated responsibilities and within the geographic jurisdiction of each leader’s calling. When priesthood leaders are released from their callings, they no longer hold the associated keys.”[8] Counselors to priesthood leaders and auxiliary leaders do not hold keys. Therefore, relatively few men hold priesthood keys at any given time. For example, in any given ward, only one man holds keys for the entire congregation, including both men and women. (The deacons, teachers, and elders quorum presidents hold the keys to preside over their respective quorums, but not the ward, and clearly not over the young women of their age-group.) In any given stake, only one man holds the keys of that entire congregation.

Women, as Well as Men, May Have Priesthood Authority

Women, young or old, married or single, have authority to perform their callings, under the direction of one who holds priesthood keys, just as men do. Elder M. Russell Ballard opened the window for a wider understanding of who has priesthood authority in the Church. “Those who have priesthood keys . . . literally make it possible for all who serve faithfully under their direction to exercise priesthood authority and have access to priesthood power.”[9]

Later in his talk, he elucidated on the role of women in regard to the priesthood: “We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be? When a woman—young or old—is set apart to preach the gospel as a full-time missionary, she is given priesthood authority to perform a priesthood function. The same is true when a woman is set apart to function as an officer or teacher in a Church organization under the direction of one who holds the keys of the priesthood. Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.”[10] Therefore, if a female student is called and set apart as the institute council president, she has been given priesthood authority to perform that function. When teaching this concept to my students, I often ask, “If a stake is having a joint Young Men and Young Women presidency meeting, who presides?” “Who has more authority for that meeting, the stake Young Women president or the stake Young Men president? And why?” Because both the stake Young Women president and the stake Young Men president were called and set apart by one holding priesthood keys (the stake president), both have the same priesthood authority. Since neither of them holds keys to the calling, unless otherwise specified by the priesthood key holder, neither presides over the other. It would make sense for them to take turns in conducting or presiding in meetings.

Another insight regarding women and priesthood authority comes from Elder Ballard’s 2015 BYU Women’s Conference talk. Elder Ballard expanded the idea of priesthood authority when he reviewed several examples of women in the past and present who played or play crucial roles

in the Church. He continued, “You have been baptized into the Lord’s Church. You have received the gift of the Holy Ghost, and many of you have been endowed and some of you have been sealed in the house of the Lord. Like faithful sisters in the past, you need to learn how to use the priesthood authority with which you have been endowed to obtain every eternal blessing that will be yours.”^[11] Note here that Elder Ballard is referring to not only the priesthood authority that is received by women through their callings but priesthood authority that comes through faithfully making and keeping covenants, with a strong emphasis on temple covenants.

Both Men and Women (Single and Married) May Be Endowed with Priesthood Power in the Temple

In 1833, the Lord promised to Joseph Smith that in his house, the Saints, both men and women, would be endowed with “power from on high.”^[12] Elder D. Todd Christofferson reaffirmed this promise: “In all the ordinances, especially those of the temple, we are endowed with power from on high.”^[13] Additionally, Elder M. Russell Ballard clarified: “When men and women go to the temple, they are both endowed with the same power, which by definition is priesthood power.”^[14] He also stated, “The endowment is literally a gift of power. All who enter the house of the Lord officiate in the ordinances of the priesthood. This applies to men and women alike. Our Father in Heaven is generous with His power. All men and all women have access to this power for help in our own lives.”^[15] Therefore, whether single; married to an active, an inactive, or nonmember spouse; widowed; or divorced; all worthy members who have received their endowment have priesthood power. Thus, women, married or single, have “priesthood power” in their homes. Priesthood power and blessings may abide in the home regardless of visits from home teachers and other leaders of the Church. Therefore, a question in the recently published Doctrine and Covenants teacher manual states, “How can those who do not have faithful priesthood holders in their homes receive the blessings of the priesthood?” could perhaps be worded differently to correct this misunderstanding.

Can we, as teachers, imagine the strength this truth gives to our single sisters, living away from home, working, in school, on missions, but with no male in the home who has been ordained to a priesthood office? Can we recognize the future assurance this may give to a recently divorced young adult woman who made and continues to keep sacred temple covenants? Can we see how this may affect a young seminary student being raised by a single mother, or living in a part-member or inactive-member home?

Sister Dew affirmed, “Endowed, covenant-keeping women have direct access to priesthood power for their own lives”^[16] (and, I would add, for those within her stewardship). She then asks, “What does it mean to have access to priesthood power?” She responds, “It means that we can receive revelation, be blessed and aided by the ministering of angels, learn to part the veil that separates us from our Heavenly Father, be strengthened to resist temptation, be protected, and be enlightened, and made smarter than we are—all without any mortal intermediary.”^[17] What is the most important outcome of this power and how is it received? The Lord has revealed that “the power of godliness,” including the power to become like him, is manifested through priesthood ordinances.^[18] Thus, both men and women are able to ultimately become exalted beings like their Heavenly Parents.

Women and Men May Receive Equal Priesthood Blessings (Privileges)

Many have a narrow view of priesthood blessings thinking they are only given by the laying on of hands for healing, patriarchal blessings, and so on. In truth, the priesthood provides many blessings, perhaps better understood as privileges, that may come to all members by making and keeping covenants. Those who hold priesthood keys open the door for all Church members who make covenants with the Lord to enjoy the associated blessings. For example, many correctly assert that Aaronic Priesthood bearers may receive the “ministering of angels.” Many, however, do not understand that the Aaronic Priesthood holders are among many who also receive the ministering of angels. Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained, “Those who hold the Aaronic Priesthood open the door for all Church members who worthily partake of the sacrament to enjoy the companionship of the Spirit of the Lord and the ministering of angels.”^[19] Elder Ballard in 2013 similarly taught, “All who have made sacred covenants with the Lord and who honor those covenants are eligible to receive personal revelation, to be blessed by the ministering of angels, to commune with God, to receive the fullness of the gospel, and, ultimately, to become heirs alongside Jesus Christ of all our Father has.”^[20] Hence, wouldn’t it be wise to make sure the Beehives understand that they, too, like the deacons, are entitled to the ministering of angels? I taught this truth to over two hundred BYU students this last year, and few of them “had ever heard it before!”

Providing a broader perspective, Elder Ballard instructed, “While the authority of the priesthood is directed through priesthood keys, and priesthood keys are held only by worthy men, [with specific priesthood leadership responsibilities as stated above,] access to the power and the blessings of the priesthood is available to all of God’s children.”^[21] Quoting President Joseph Fielding Smith, Elder Ballard continued, “The blessings of the priesthood are not confined to men alone. These blessings are also poured out upon . . . all the faithful women of the Church. . . . The Lord offers to his daughters *every* spiritual gift and blessing that can be obtained by his sons.”^[22]

It appears wise then, while discussing something as important as the oath and covenant of the priesthood, found in D&C 84:33–44, that women understand that they too will be blessed to “receive all that my Father hath.” Perhaps it would be wise to point out to the women that as they go about their Father’s work, they too are recipients of the blessings in D&C 84:88, where the Lord teaches, “And whoso receiveth you, there I will be also, for I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up.”

In addition to the specific truths regarding priesthood authority, priesthood power, and priesthood blessings, helping our female students understand more regarding their divine nature as daughters of both a Heavenly Father and Mother is also critical.

There Is a Mother in Heaven!

Another truth that many women cherish is the doctrine that we have a Mother in Heaven. Still, many Church members feel uncomfortable with this topic, thinking it is speculative or fringe doctrine. I recently substituted for a teacher at BYU who taught the new Eternal Family course. Because I had never taught this class or sat in on it, I asked the students, “What have you learned

so far this semester that has impacted you most?” Instantly, a young woman’s hand shot up. “The fact that I have an eternal Heavenly Mother and I don’t have to be embarrassed, ashamed, or secretive about it,” she enthusiastically responded. “Why is that so significant to you?” I inquired. “To know that I have a Heavenly Mother gives me something so much more real to work toward, a heritage to be proud of, and a better understanding of who I am right now. We are always taught that eternal life means that we will become and live like Heavenly Father. That’s great, but I’m not a man! I get what they are saying, but it just makes so much more sense now to know that I’m trying to become like my Heavenly Mother!”

Heavenly Mother had become somewhat of a taboo topic among Latter-day Saints over the years. Some state that, among many erroneous reasons, perhaps the General Authorities and the Lord didn’t speak about her in order to protect her. In a 2011 publication, however, republished on lds.org, David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido compiled over six hundred citations (many of which are very recent) of Heavenly Mother from prophets, apostles, and other Church authorities since 1844.^[23] Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, speaking as a senior Apostle in the October 2015 general conference, not only publicly acknowledged, but even gave thanks to, our Heavenly Mother: “To Mother Eve, to Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, to Mary of Nazareth, and to a *Mother in Heaven*, I say, ‘Thank you for your crucial role in fulfilling the purposes of eternity.’”^[24]

In 2016, Elder M. Russell Ballard admonished religious educators to “look for and relish these opportunities to explain, doctrinally and spiritually, why we believe that knowledge of God’s great plan of happiness will answer most of the ‘why’ questions we may be asked.” He continued, “Expressing our belief in a premortal life where we lived as the spirit children of a Heavenly Father and a *Heavenly Mother* allows us to explain why this earth was created. One essential purpose of mortal life is that we can replicate that family experience ourselves, only this time as parents rather than just as the children.”^[25]

Additionally, in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles declared that “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.”^[26] After hearing Joseph Smith teach the truth concerning our Heavenly Mother, Eliza R. Snow penned one of our most beloved hymns:

In the heav’ns are parents single?
No, the thought makes reason stare!
Truth is reason; truth eternal
Tells me I’ve a mother there.^[27]

Can we, as teachers, possibly imagine the implications of the truth of that statement, especially to the young women sitting in our classrooms? For many, it is a critical part of the answer to the questions, who are we, why are we here, and where are we going. Hence, we should not shy away from, but rather “look for,” and even “relish,” the opportunity—especially as CES teachers—to talk about our Heavenly Mother! In so doing, let us also be wise to teach, following the pattern of Jesus Christ, that we “pray unto the Father in His name.” President Hinckley reminds us, “The fact that we do not pray to our Mother in Heaven in no way belittles or denigrates her.”^[28] For a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, LDS.org has a First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve–approved essay entitled “Mother in Heaven.”^[29]

There Are Similarities and Differences Between How Priesthood Functions in Church Administration and in the Family

“My father died when I was seven. I was the oldest of three small children our widowed mother struggled to raise,” Elder Oaks explained. “When I was ordained a deacon, she said how pleased she was to have a priesthood holder in the home. But Mother continued to direct the family, including calling on which one of us would pray when we knelt together each morning. I was puzzled. I had been taught that the priesthood presided in the family. There must be something I didn’t know about how that principle worked.” Many, like Elder Oaks was as a youth, are “puzzled” by how the priesthood functions in the Church administration and in the family, perhaps because, as acknowledged by Elder Oaks, “it is rarely explained.”[\[30\]](#)

Included in the differences between priesthood in Church administration and family are “keys,” “duration,” “boundaries,” and “calling and releases.” Perhaps the most important difference is that of “partnership.” Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained that in the Church, organization is hierarchical, but in the family it is patriarchal, with both husband and wife acting as “equal partners.”[\[31\]](#)

In the Church, the bishop presides over the ward, assisted by his counselors. Some have erroneously suggested that, similarly, the husband alone presides, while the wife is like his counselor. Elder L. Tom Perry taught:

Remember, brethren, that in your role as leader in the family, your wife is your companion. Since the beginning, God has instructed mankind that marriage should unite husband and wife together in unity. Therefore, there is not a president or a vice president in a family. The couple works together eternally for the good of the family. They are united together in word, in deed, and in action as they lead, guide, and direct their family unit. They are on equal footing. They plan and organize the affairs of the family jointly and unanimously as they move forward.[\[32\]](#)

What happens then when a spouse dies? Elder Oaks emphatically taught, “When my father died, my mother presided over our family. She had no priesthood office, but as the surviving parent in her marriage she had become the *governing officer in her family*. At the same time, she was always totally respectful of the priesthood authority of our bishop and other Church leaders. She presided over her family, but they presided over the Church.”[\[33\]](#)

Women Play an Official and Critical Role in the Church



Can we imagine the strength this truth gives to our single sisters, living away from home, working, in school, on missions, but with no male in the home who has been ordained to a priesthood office?

Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson, in the October 2016 general conference, declared, “All women need to see themselves as essential participants in the work of the priesthood. Women in this Church are presidents, counselors, teachers, members of councils, sisters, and mothers, and the kingdom of God cannot function unless we rise up and fulfill our duties with faith.”^[34] Both men and women are needed in order to labor in the Lord’s vision for the “salvation of the souls of men.”^[35] This work of salvation includes missionary work, temple and family history work, activation work, teaching the gospel, and caring for the poor and needy.^[36]

When Joseph Smith turned the key of the priesthood in the women’s meeting held in the upstairs room of the Red Brick Store in Nauvoo, he, according to Elder Oaks, “made the Relief Society an official part of the Church and kingdom of God. This opened to women new opportunities for receiving knowledge and intelligence from on high, such as through the temple ordinances that were soon to be instituted.”^[37] In fact, Joseph Smith stated that the women of the Church were organized after the organization that existed in Christ’s Church anciently.^[38] The Church was therefore not complete without the organization of the Relief Society, just as an eternal family is not complete without the union of two worthy and righteous genders.

Stumbling Blocks

Confusion by Both Men and Women Regarding the Fundamental Truths of the Priesthood

Sister Dew, after speaking with many women who were struggling with their testimonies, concluded, “Often the root cause of the confusion some have about the gospel comes from the combination of a steady diet of the philosophies of the world juxtaposed against a superficial

understanding of the gospel. The combination is spiritually deadly.”^[39] Without being disagreeable, I would simply remind that the more we know about the subject, the more we realize we do not know. If we, as teachers, are still teaching the truths regarding the priesthood as found in our old files of more than ten years ago, quoting leaders that many of our students have never heard of, we are not doing them justice. I recently went through files that I had for teaching D&C 84. I had two stacks of paper, one blue and one pink. On the blue paper it said, “What can you do to worthily use your priesthood?” On the pink it said, “How can you help the young men you know worthily uphold the priesthood?” I was sick. Not that these questions were wrong, but I clearly was perpetuating the problem and adding to the confusion. I could have simply asked both of them, “What blessings do active covenant-making and -keeping members receive, according to section 84, because of the priesthood?” Rather, I insinuated that priesthood was meant only for men, and women were simply bystanders or supporters. If I did it again, I would probably still use the two colors, but ask the same question on both, just to make the point. We are told and have been reminded over and over again that “men are not the priesthood!” If we are not up to date on the teachings of the leaders of the Church on this topic, we are doing both our students and ourselves a major disservice by instigating and perpetuating confusion.

The Erroneous Idea That Only Men Need to Know about the Priesthood

Sister Linda K. Burton, Relief Society General President, poignantly asked the sisters, “What has been your past experience or attitude when you have listened to or taught a lesson on the priesthood? Be honest. Was your first reaction something like, ‘This doesn’t apply to me. This is for the men and boys over twelve.’ Or when you have read your scriptures and come to a part that mentions priesthood, have you thought to yourself, ‘I’ll just skip this part. I don’t need to know this’?” She emphasized that women as well as men need to be interested and concerned about the topic of the priesthood. She continued, “Sisters, we cannot stand up and teach those things we do not understand and know for ourselves.”^[40] Clearly, the more the women of the Church study the priesthood, the more they will recognize how the priesthood functions in their lives. May I suggest that in our classes, we call equally on the men and the women to answer questions, explain doctrine, and participate in discussions regarding the priesthood.

Fear of Being Labeled a Feminist

For many, the label *feminist* brings to mind confrontational thoughts or actions, some of which may be in opposition to the teachings of Christ. Historically, however, feminism seeks to provide equal opportunities for women and to empower them to use their agency wisely. Since the Church’s inception, leaders of the Church have sought to bless and provide opportunities for women, using the true meaning of feminism. As was quoted in *Daughters of My Kingdom*, President Joseph F. Smith instructed the sisters, “It is not for you to be led by the women of the world; it is for you to . . . lead the women of the world in everything that is praiseworthy, everything that is God-like, everything that is uplifting and . . . purifying to the children of men.”^[41] From personal experience, LDS women have been granted opportunities in and through association with the Church. This association is unparalleled throughout the world and will yield eternal blessings beyond our imagination in the world to come.

The “All is Well in Zion,” “I Don’t Have a Problem with It,” or “False Sense of Security”

Approach

When challenged to study the priesthood, some sisters naively respond, “I don’t need to get into that topic; I don’t have a problem with it,” insinuating that only the sisters who “have a problem with it” need to study it. Nothing could be further from the truth! Those faithful sisters are the very ones who need to be prepared to teach truths regarding the priesthood. If they don’t, who will? Who will answer the questions of the young women? Who will mentor their daughters and help them through difficult times (which we have been told so many times will only get worse) if it is not the mothers, aunts, sisters, and women leaders? Who will help unify the sisters of the world with truth if the faithful and strong sisters do not know and understand true doctrine? No matter how much we think we know about the gospel, and especially the priesthood, there is obviously much more we need to learn.

Putting Limits That Aren’t Really There on Women

I remember as a young seminary student asking a leader what I needed to do to become a full-time seminary teacher. “I’m so sorry, but you can’t,” came the reply. “They don’t hire women to teach full-time.” Imagine my excitement when I was later hired as a full-time seminary teacher. I remember as a full-time seminary teacher asking if it was possible to coordinate on the east coast. “No,” came the uninformed response, “you need the priesthood to be a coordinator, especially in the East.” Again, imagine my surprise when I was asked to serve as the institute director/seminary coordinator in the Boston, Massachusetts, area. Imagine my surprise when I also learned that I would be the LDS chaplain at Harvard and MIT. I had wrongly assumed that being ordained to the priesthood was necessary for that assignment. I was not shocked that both members and nonmembers alike were surprised to have a woman serving as a chaplain. Frankly, I was too! There was no change in policy, it just simply hadn’t happened. Finally, imagine my own feeling of ignorance when, just one week after telling my postdoctoral professor at Harvard that women could not serve as LDS-university presidents, the LDS Commissioner of Education told me that the General Authorities had specifically charged the committee seeking for the next President of BYU to consider both men and women.[\[42\]](#)

It is clear that some callings in the Church require ordination to a priesthood office, but as religious leaders, we must be careful not to limit our women simply based on culture, history, false perceptions, tradition, and so forth. The General Authorities are pleading with the sisters to do more, to teach more, to lead more. Just because it hasn’t happened before doesn’t mean it can never happen in the future. I would suggest that rather than limiting, we empower!

I recall one institute instructor informing me that he did not call women to be class presidents because it taught them the wrong principle regarding their place in the family and Church. Although I believe his intentions were pure, I’m not convinced he himself understood Church and family leadership.

The Concern That by Empowering Women, We Are Somehow Demeaning Men

There is plenty of room for qualified members and leaders of both genders. Each role has specific gifts and talents given them. Rather than competing, unifying is key. The Church handbook states, “The nature of male and female spirits is such that they complete each other.”^[43] In an interview I conducted with Sheri Dew, she stated that whenever there was a major problem with a decision, she almost always knew that one gender or the other met separately without including someone of the opposite gender. Perhaps the old proverb “Thee lift me and I’ll lift thee, and we’ll ascend together” could be of great benefit to the understanding of male and female roles.

What Can We Do?

Be Up to Date on Prophetic Exhortations and Pleadings by the Brethren and the Latest Talks by Auxiliary Women Leaders

As President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, President Russell M. Nelson exclaimed, “The kingdom of God is not and cannot be complete without women who make sacred covenants and then keep them, women who can speak with the power and authority of God!” He continued, “We need women who are devoted to shepherding God’s children along the covenant path toward exaltation; women who know how to receive personal revelation, who *understand the power and peace of the temple endowment; women who know how to call upon the powers of heaven to protect and strengthen children and families; women who teach fearlessly.*” Continuing, he expounds, “We need women who know how to access the power that God makes available to covenant keepers and who express their beliefs with confidence and charity. . . . It is converted, covenant-keeping women . . . whose righteous lives will increasingly stand out in a deteriorating world and who will thus be seen as different and distinct in the *happiest* of ways.”^[44]

Teachers, President Nelson—the President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—is speaking to sisters, not in a Women’s Conference but at general conference! As religious educators, it is critical to be up to date on what the religious leaders are asking the sisters to do. As demonstrated in this paper, in the last five years, senior members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are speaking to sisters on extremely important topics and asking them to do more. Are we staying up to date and carefully listening to these talks so that we can help the young women fulfill these mandates? Quotes from decades past are simply not good enough anymore. The doctrines and principles haven’t changed, but the applications, policies, and invitations have!

Help All Members Understand the Essential Role of Women in the Work of the Priesthood

Elder Ballard reminded the women of the Relief Society that their “sphere of influence is a unique sphere—one that cannot be duplicated by men. No one can defend our Savior with any more persuasion or power than can you—the daughters of God who have such inner strength and

conviction. The power of the voice of a converted woman is immeasurable, and the Church needs your voices now more than ever.”[45]

Sister Bonnie Oscarson in the 2016 general women’s session of conference declared: “Women of the Church need to see themselves as essential participants in the priesthood-directed work of salvation and not just as onlookers and supporters.”[46]

How many times in a religious setting, especially when referring to the priesthood, have the women been asked how they can support the men in their priesthood responsibilities? Shouldn’t the men be asked the same thing regarding the women? I so appreciated a teacher I observed recently, who, following general conference, asked what was said not only in priesthood session but also in the general women’s session. He complimented both men and women for listening to all of conference. In his talk “Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” Elder Oaks reiterated the need for men and women alike to understand the priesthood. He stated, “Since these subjects are of equal concern to men and to women, I am pleased that these proceedings are broadcast and published for all members of the Church.”[47]

Create an Environment Where Your Female Students Feel Comfortable Raising Questions

Many teachers believe they have a safe environment in their classrooms, but they don’t. When the female students are charged by senior members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the Relief Society General President to better understand the priesthood, you should be concerned if the women in your classroom are not asking questions or participating in discussions on this topic. Rather than suggesting specific techniques (although I’d be more than happy to share what I do if you desire!), the principles of creating a safe environment for learning definitely apply to this situation. For example, complimenting students when they raise thoughtful questions, avoiding sarcasm or demeaning comments of any kind, and treating all students, as Elder Eyring instructs, as seekers and not doubters.[48]

Try to See Things from a Woman’s Perspective and Help the Students Do the Same.

Every semester, I struggle with students pleading for a grade raise during finals week, and reiterate my “no extra credit” policy. This year, however, after hearing Sister Burton’s invitation to “study, ponder, and come to better understand the priesthood” and “to memorize the oath and covenant of the priesthood, which can be found in [Doctrine and Covenants 84:33–44](#),” promising, “By doing so that the Holy Ghost will expand your understanding of the priesthood and inspire and uplift you in wonderful ways,”[49] I decided to change my policy.

I offered extra credit to all students who took Sister Burton’s challenge to memorize the oath and covenant of the priesthood, and I had them recite it to me in my office. I had three students take me up on it this last semester. All were women. The experience with them was very interesting. Each of these women passed off the scriptures perfectly, word for word. After they were done, I asked them what the oath meant to them. “I memorized it with my brother and it helped me to know how I can help him prepare for his mission,” the first sister enthusiastically answered. “It helps me be a more supportive wife so that I can help my husband be a better home teacher and father. We just got married last semester, so I never really paid attention, but now that I’m

married to someone that has [the priesthood], I need to be a little more responsible.” The third one quickly responded, “I don’t know but it gave me a better grade!” I love the honesty!

After listening to these sisters, I realized that as far as I could tell, the only connection they made between themselves and the oath and covenant of the priesthood was in how they could support the men in their lives who “had it.” As I listened intently, I couldn’t help but ask, “OK, but what does this have to do with you? What oaths and covenants of the priesthood have you made? What blessings has the Lord promised you?”

Teachers, I ask you the same question: What does the oath and covenant of the priesthood have to do with women? Are we clear in pointing out that the blessings promised in this oath and covenant are as applicable to the women as they are to the men? Or do the women in our classes wonder if only the men are blessed to receive “my Father’s kingdom” and “all that my Father hath”? If women, as discussed earlier, receive all of the blessings of the priesthood, aren’t these their promises as well? Do we sustain the Young Women General President, speaking under the presiding authority of President Thomas S. Monson, and teach that sisters too “can be armed with God’s power, and His name will be upon us, His glory round about us, and His angels have charge over us”?[\[50\]](#)

Are we making it clear to the women, lest they think themselves second-class citizens or perhaps not able to receive all that our Heavenly Father has? Again, is it possible that some women are living below their privileges because they don’t know what does and doesn’t apply to them, lest there be some teacher who can help?[\[51\]](#)

There are so many magnificent, innocent, and pure motives in our teaching, and it is common to teach from our perspective. Remember that with so many male teachers and curriculum writers, sometimes our women and young women rarely hear the gospel taught from a woman’s perspective, and some things that seem obvious and clear to a man may be confusing for a woman. For example, can you see why a female student would be confused by a teacher who, when trying to instruct students about the topic of women and men in the Church, wrote “power” by the man and “nurture” by the woman? In our teaching and leading, do we zero in on “preside, provide, and protect” and leave out the part about “helping one another as equal partners” and rearing their children together “in love and righteousness”? Is it clear to us, as teachers, how confusing this is, especially in light of all that our leaders are currently teaching? Can we understand how confusing it is to some women when teachers state that the Melchizedek Priesthood is a prerequisite to receiving one’s own endowment? Or when “blessings to priesthood holders” is the topic for a class, and there is no acknowledgment that all blessings given to a man are also given to a woman?

Give Credence to the Women Leaders

Over the years, and for good reason, great emphasis has been placed on the teachings of the living prophets. If the female leaders of the Church, however, have been set apart and given priesthood authority to speak to both the men and the women of the church, then it seems critical that their words, especially when spoken under one holding priesthood keys, should be given credence. I find it telling that in Elder Oaks’s talk “Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” he not only quoted Sister Linda K. Burton, but he also footnoted Sister Sheri Dew’s book *Women and the Priesthood*. Could we not follow leaders such as Elder Oaks? Would it be possible to show

more pictures of women in the curriculum we both write and use? When speaking of priesthood, do we show pictures of beehives partaking of the sacrament, or just men passing it? Do we show pictures of men and women endowed with priesthood power as they walk out of the temple? All this requires is a heightened awareness in order to break old habits.

Involve Women in Councils, Not Only by Title, but with Leadership

Give sisters, as well as brothers, the opportunity to serve in leadership positions, including class and council presidents. As a gentle reminder from Elder Ballard, “Any priesthood leader who does not involve his sister leaders with full respect and inclusion is not honoring and magnifying the keys he has been given. His power and influence will be diminished until he learns the ways of the Lord.”[\[52\]](#)

Do Not Give “Authoritative” Answers to Questions the Lord Himself Hasn’t Answered

Elder Oaks, on a number of occasions, has cautioned members of the Church to avoid answering questions the Lord has never given answers to. “Let’s don’t make the mistake that’s been made in the past . . . trying to put reasons to revelation. The reasons turn out to be man-made to a great extent. The revelations are what we sustain as the will of the Lord and that’s where safety lies.”[\[53\]](#)

Elder Ballard displayed a perfect example of this when he taught, “Why are men—and not women—ordained to priesthood offices? . . . The Lord has not revealed why He has organized His Church as He has.”[\[54\]](#) On the same note, to CES teachers, Elder Ballard also warned all of us “not to pass along faith-promoting or unsubstantiated rumors or outdated understandings and explanations of our doctrine and practices from the past. It is always wise to make it a practice to study the words of the living prophets and apostles; keep updated on current Church issues, policies, and statements through mormonnewsroom.org and lds.org; and consult the works of recognized, thoughtful, and faithful LDS scholars to ensure you do not teach things that are untrue, out of date, or odd and quirky.”[\[55\]](#) Remember that sometimes “I don’t know” really is the best answer, but in so saying, we must search diligently in the light of faith to help ourselves and students know divine truth.

Help Them Understand the Priesthood for Themselves

Helping sisters become confident in their ability to study and learn from the scriptures, especially regarding the priesthood and the temple, is critical. If we, as teachers, can be a guide by their side rather than a sage on the stage, it will help the sisters become more spiritually self-reliant. Some scriptures we can help guide our students to include, but are not limited to, Doctrine and Covenants sections 2, 13, 20, 76, 84, 95, 107, 110, 121, and 124, as well as Alma 13. Perhaps remind them of the reality that “unto whom much is given much is required,”[\[56\]](#) and a topic of such importance will require great effort and patience on their part. Attending the temple for the purpose of faithfully seeking not only for answers but especially for inspired questions regarding the topic cannot be overemphasized.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie instructed, “This doctrine of the priesthood—unknown in the world and but little known even in the Church—cannot be learned out of the scriptures alone. It is not set forth in the sermons and teachings of the prophets and Apostles, except in small measure. The doctrine of the priesthood is known only by personal revelation. It comes, line upon line and precept upon precept, by the power of the Holy Ghost to those who love and serve God with all their heart, might, mind and strength.”[\[57\]](#)

Help the Women Be Unified in Their Efforts

Recognizing that my assignment coupled with my background would place me in a unique position to work among women, especially in the Church, one of the presiding women leaders of the Church gave me some wise counsel. Among other things, she encouraged me to find ways to unify the sisters, looking for commonalities and building bridges along the way. As religion teachers, I would encourage us to do the same, especially with our female students. The world is becoming more divisive and cynical. Women, in many ways, are being pitted against each other. Opinions are strong and emotions run deep. Imagine the influence we, as teachers, could yield if we could help the sisters recognize the strength that comes through righteous united women working toward and for the cause of Christ. Imagine the great influence we, as religion teachers, could have for righteousness if we could be instruments in the hands of the Lord in unifying these righteous women, armed with power from heaven, with priesthood holders serving on the errand of the Lord.

Help Women Understand That This Is Their Time to Act

Imagine the influence for good in this world if we could help the sisters see that they, like Esther, have been reserved “for such a time as this,”[\[58\]](#) and that they, individually and as a united whole, are needed to lead, not follow, the women of the world. Indeed, we could help set the stage for immeasurable miracles!

Conclusion

On 17 March 1832, in the upper room of the Red Brick Store in Nauvoo, Illinois, after being elected president of the Female Relief Society, Emma Smith stated, “We are going to do something extraordinary. . . . We expect extraordinary occasions and pressing calls.” These pressing calls, even “pleas,” have come from the leaders of the Church to the sisters, over the last five years as never before. As religious educators better understand the truths associated with the priesthood for ourselves, recognize possible reasons why many women are living below their privileges, and are aware of and act on the knowledge we gain regarding helping our female students take full advantage of their priesthood privileges, we, like Elder M. Russell Ballard claimed, may “find the joy and the peace that comes from knowing through [our] teaching that [we] have touched a life, [we] have lifted one of Heavenly Father’s children on his or her journey to one day be embraced once again in His presence.”[\[59\]](#)

Notes

- [1] Russell M. Nelson, “A Plea to My Sisters,” *Ensign*, November 2015, 97.
- [2] Sheri L. Dew, *Women and the Priesthood: What One Mormon Woman Believes* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 7–10.
- [3] *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 2.1.1.
- [4] Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 49.
- [5] D&C 65:2; [81:2](#); [124:123](#).
- [6] *Handbook 2*, 2.1.1.
- [7] D&C 43:1–4; [81:2](#); [107:64–67, 91–92](#); [132:7](#).
- [8] *Handbook 2*, 2.1.1.
- [9] M. Russell Ballard, “Men and Women in the Work of the Lord,” *New Era*, April 2014, 4. See also *Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Work of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 138.
- [10] Ballard, “Men and Women,” 4.
- [11] M. Russell Ballard, “Women of Dedication, Faith, Determination, and Action” (speech, BYU Women’s Conference, 1 May 2015), 10, womensconference.byu.edu/transcripts.
- [12] D&C 95:8.
- [13] D. Todd Christofferson, “The Power of Covenants,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 22.
- [14] M. Russell Ballard, “Let Us Think Straight” (devotional, Brigham Young University, 20 August 2013), speeches.byu.edu.
- [15] Ballard, “Let Us Think Straight,” 7.
- [16] Dew, *Women and the Priesthood*, 125.
- [17] Dew, *Women and the Priesthood*, 125.
- [18] D&C 84:20.
- [19] Dallin H. Oaks, “The Aaronic Priesthood and the Sacrament,” *Ensign*, November 1998, 39.
- [20] Ballard, “Let Us Think Straight,” 7.
- [21] Ballard, “Let Us Think Straight,” 7.
- [22] Joseph Fielding Smith, “Magnifying Our Callings in the Priesthood,” *Improvement Era*, June 1970, 66. For a more in-depth discussion on the blessings of the priesthood, see Bruce R. McConkie, “The 10 Blessings of the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, October 1977.

- [23] David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “A Mother There: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011); emphasis added.
- [24] Jeffrey R. Holland, “Behold Thy Mother,” *Ensign*, November 2015, 50.
- [25] M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century” (evening with Elder M. Russell Ballard, 26 February 2016), [lds.org/broadcasts](https://www.lds.org/broadcasts); emphasis added.
- [26] “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 129.
- [27] Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.
- [28] Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 100.
- [29] “Mother in Heaven,” [lds.org/topics](https://www.lds.org/topics).
- [30] Dallin H. Oaks, “Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church,” *Ensign*, November 2005, 24, 25.
- [31] Oaks, “Priesthood Authority,” 26.
- [32] L. Tom Perry, “Fatherhood, an Eternal Calling,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 69.
- [33] Oaks, “Priesthood Authority,” 26.
- [34] Bonnie L. Oscarson, “Rise Up in Strength, Sisters in Zion,” *Ensign*, November 2016, 14; emphasis added.
- [35] D&C 138:56.
- [36] *Handbook 2*, page 22. See also *Handbook 2*, 4.5 and 6.1.
- [37] Dallin H. Oaks, “The Relief Society and the Church,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 35.
- [38] *Daughters in My Kingdom*, 7.
- [39] Dew, *Women and the Priesthood*, 158.
- [40] Linda K. Burton, “Priesthood: ‘A Sacred Trust to Be Used for the Benefit of Men, Women, and Children’” (BYU Women’s Conference, 3 May 2013), [womensconference.byu.edu/transcripts](https://www.womensconference.byu.edu/transcripts).
- [41] Joseph F. Smith, in Minutes of the General Board of Relief Society, 17 March 1914, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 54–55.
- [42] Barbara Morgan, “‘Lift Where You Stand’: A Conversation with Elder Paul V. Johnson,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 16, no. 3 (2016): 10–25.
- [43] *Handbook 2*, 1.3.1.
- [44] Nelson, “Plea to My Sisters,” 96–97.
- [45] M. Russell Ballard, “Men and Women and Priesthood Power,” *Ensign*, September 2014, 33.
- [46] Oscarson, “Rise Up in Strength,” 14.

- [47] Oaks, “Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” 49.
- [48] Henry B. Eyring, “And Thus We See: Helping Students in a Moment of Doubt” (evening with President Henry B. Eyring, 5 February 1993), si.lds.org.
- [49] Linda K. Burton, “Priesthood Power—Available to All,” *Ensign*, June 2014, 38, 39–40.
- [50] Oscarson, “Rise Up in Strength,” 13.
- [51] Acts 8:31.
- [52] Ballard, “Women of Dedication,” 4.
- [53] Dallin H. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 68–69.
- [54] Ballard, “Men and Women,” 31.
- [55] Ballard, “Opportunities and Responsibilities.”
- [56] D&C 82:3.
- [57] Bruce R. McConkie, “The Doctrine of the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, May 1982, 32.
- [58] Esther 4:14.
- [59] Ballard, “Opportunities and Responsibilities.”