
Mormon Women and the Struggle for Definition What Is the Church?

Discerning God's hand in the institution

Francine Bennion

TONIGHT we have been asking how the LDS church defines *woman* and her roles. Implicit in that question is another: How do both men and women define *the Church*?

I don't think we all mean the same thing. When we attribute a particular policy, style, or teaching to "the Church," we may mean the organization, departments or positions in the organization, a single individual, a group, spoken or printed communications, a body of doctrine and ritual, or all of these, or none of them. What we are thinking of when we say "the Church" may have a lot to do with how we define ourselves or each other in response to one of its pronouncements or practices.

One of our sons is on a mission in Guatemala. In a letter last July, he mentioned the possibility of baptizing nine people the next day. However, he wrote, "The family Veliz may hold off (that's 5 of the 9) because one of the dear sisters blew up last week in Relief Society and said she wouldn't teach the 'fools' any more, which may have frightened sister Veliz out of her gourd, but still, they may yet pull through." I asked about the incident, and my son wrote back a month later, "Concerning the sister who blew up in Relief Society. One must remember that these people can be awful slow and stubborn, and it could drive many a good-willed soul crazy trying to teach their best and not being supported or even really listened to sometimes. Of course people paid her more attention when she let off some steam. People love to gossip, even my silly comp gossips like a rag apple haggit, so I'm sure everyone talked about what a jerk she was that whole week. The next week she gave her testimony during the fast meeting and then burst into tears and asked everyone to forgive her and whatnot. Personally, I feel people can be pretty dang intolerant, impatient, backbiting, nasty, and all the other rotten characteristics that go into being human. I guess having a church that is designed to help overly human

people to learn a bit of control, and to be more Christ-like, is necessarily vulnerable to occasional human outbursts by the slowly repenting members. I guess it's a matter of pride, insecurity, and fear. . . ." I wonder who and what "the Church" was for Hermana Veliz as she sat in one of its meetings.

A missionary in Thailand a few years ago worked in a village with a group of baptized converts, all women. Efforts to convert men, who could hold the priesthood and establish a self-sustaining branch, were unsuccessful, partly because men feared that baptism might mean loss of employment, respect in the community, and male associates. Because no men were baptized, the missionaries were transferred and not replaced. The faithful women continued to hold meetings and study the Book of Mormon together. They wrote down questions that came up, and representatives went to a district conference in Bangkok to ask priesthood leaders their questions about the gospel and also about music in meetings. What is "the Church" to these women, willing to take such initiative?

At a BYU Relief Society meeting a couple of weeks ago, the teacher (whose name, like mine, is Francine) opened with a story about her friend, a girl who got on drugs in her teens, got off them, met a man whom even her parents liked, married him with their approval, and was brutally beaten by him before the honeymoon was over. Ashamed to tell even her parents, she kept repeated beatings hidden until one day when her parents came to see her and interrupted one of his rages. The parents took her home, and she got a divorce and went to work. "Everybody thought I was some kind of low life or something," she told Francine. "I tried killing myself, but I hoped I wouldn't succeed because I didn't think God wanted me either."

Three years ago she heard that the Church was going to have a meeting just for women and told Francine she'd

like to go but had no one to go with. Francine told us, with commendable honesty, that her first thought was, "She has a terrible spirit, and she smokes and smells like it, and what would everyone think of me if I were sitting with her?" But Francine's friendship and missionary spirit prevailed, and she and the girl went to the meeting. Afterwards the girl said, "President Kimball is pretty terrific. He *cares*, and he said the Lord cares, not only about the married women but about the single, the widowed, the *divorced!*" Learning that God loved *her*, that President Kimball (whose name she hadn't known before the meeting) cared about her, was a revelation. She is now on a mission for "the Church." Some women felt that meeting was boring—"the same old boring stuff"; some didn't like certain things that were said. And then there was Francine's friend.

We are a diverse people, as Emmeline B. Wells and Carol have said so well, and to generalize about how women or men respond to Church pronouncements or practices can in no way be accurate. Hence the Church itself is necessarily diverse, despite its singular authority from God, its authorized scriptures, and its official *Handbook of Instructions*. It is a mistake to give to "the Church" the identity of individuals in it, even very powerful individuals, or to give to an individual the assumed identity of "the Church." We all do such lumping at times—it's hard to think otherwise—but at least we should be aware of traps in it.

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Another problem for those of us who believe that the ultimate leadership of our church is divine and the delegated leadership human is the continuing struggle to distinguish God's hand in the pronouncements and productions of the institution. We sometimes want it simpler—everything divinely perfect, with justice, wisdom, and understanding (never mind whose identity gets lost in the process so long as it isn't our own), or everything only human so we can disregard what we don't like. But instead, those of us who are believing *and* observant must deal with human limitations in a divine church and divine absolutes and divinely delegated authority in a human church. As a result we are not as likely to define roles of men and women by every current "Church" practice and pronouncement as are those who see "the Church's way" as a consistently precise representation of God's ways.

One task of the Church which is both of Jesus Christ and also of the Latter-day Saints is to help us translate God's ways into our own. That is not always easy. None of us becomes God when we are called to serve in his Church: we do not lose our own identities and powers. Even as we become increasingly willing and able to serve him and as our abilities are enhanced by his help and direction, we are still us, not him. Nephi writes that God

speaks to us according to our own language, unto our own understanding (2 Nephi 31:3).

Both Lavina and Carol have given examples which illustrate such ambiguities. For example, women used to perform with Church sanction functions now either reserved exclusively for male priesthood holders or not done at all—blessing the sick, washing and anointing women about to labor in childbirth. Which are God's ways, those authorized by the Church *then* or those authorized by the Church *now*?

For some women, this question is important to their definition both of the Church and also of themselves. For others, the question is not pressing. For some women, participation in visible priesthood functions represents status in the eyes of God and men. And some men emphasize the seeming disparity. But other men and women are concerned not with status but with blessing and healing. For them, priesthood is power to serve not pride in a hierarchy. In my experience, fewer women suffer because of exclusion from priesthood functions than do because of the pride or insensitivity of a priesthood leader who failed to value or respect them. In other words from the misuse of power.

As for policy changes regarding women in Sunday School presidencies, I've heard more concern from bishops who lost women from their Sunday School than from women who wanted to be in a presidency and couldn't.

More dismaying to me than the policy change itself is the rationale for it expressed in the letter Lavina read from the executive secretary of the Sunday School. Such thinking (because a few might not prove trustworthy, none should be trusted) may indeed keep some safe from the specific temptations of a Sunday School presidency meeting. But such reasoning may also help both women and men to define themselves as more weak, helpless, and dependent on circumstance than God apparently thought them when he gave them life in this dangerous place. Warning people about specific temptations and circumstances is one thing. Basing policy on the assumption that none can or should try to handle them is another.

The other reason given for women's exclusion from Sunday School presidencies raises a host of questions: "so often a sister in such a role is called upon to give direction and instruction to priesthood leaders that she finds it difficult to do." What then are we to make of statements by Church leaders that difficulties bring strength, growth is good, and Church callings can help us to grow? Are we to learn and grow or aren't we? What might contribute to a sister's difficulties, if they occur—the priesthood leader's discomfort in taking direction or instruction from her or her own lack of experience in giving it? Should any such difficulties be perpetuated? What does *delegation* mean? Should priesthood leaders ever take counsel or direction from a woman?

It happens, officially or not, as we all know, and often for the great good of Church members. A couple of weeks ago, a stake president visited a ward to release the bishop and have a new one sustained. After the opening song and prayer, he took care of the business, and then proceeded with talks, calling first on the released bishop's wife, to be followed by her husband and others.

"But," she whispered to the stake president, "what about the sacrament? It hasn't been passed yet." The stake president had forgotten. Would it have been better for members to miss the sacrament than for them to see a woman "counsel" her priesthood leader? Apparently he was not the man to think so but rather appreciated the help.

However disconcerting such priesthood or leadership changes may be, many women I know seem even more disturbed about the way they see themselves described in Church curriculum and the talks of leaders. For many members, any material drawn from these sources becomes "the Church" viewpoint, not just the opinion of individual Church members.

At one time Church lessons were written by identified individuals who expressed faith and understanding which quite clearly came of their own work, thought, and prayer. Earlier still, as Carol mentioned, there was no uniform Church curriculum, no one to regulate before the fact what people would hear in any Church meeting. The Church survived the lack, leaders trusting members to seek their own help from God in speaking or teaching and in determining what was true or wasn't in others' pronouncements.

But today, in our larger and more diverse Church, the prime way of building the kingdom for both members and non-members seems to be formal instruction from relatively uniform curriculum materials. The primary Church activity for many of us is meetings and some home visiting, and the purpose of meetings and visits these days is often the message from the manual.

Lavina has briefly outlined how a series of committees produces what comes out as "the Church" manual. One person, approved by others, may be primarily responsible for what some will see as "the Church" policy, namely that a girl should give her brother the bathroom on Sunday mornings. Curriculum materials are still the products of persons, but today they remain unidentified and unaddressable. As a result many people take individual statements as "Church" statements and attribute divinity to them without weighing them.

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In fact the *format* of Church curriculum often makes a stronger statement to members than does any *content*, partly because the format has remained consistent over months and years even though topics vary somewhat. Lessons rarely encourage the open-ended sharing of experience and understanding which leads to the "spiritual bonding" of which Carol spoke. On the contrary what some women learn best from Church classes is sweet passivity and thoughtless superficial repetition because that is what the *format* seems to expect of them, whatever the topic, if the teacher is following the manuals.



Francine Russell Bennion

Even a lesson intended to help women be better can make them feel worse or one intended to help them feel protected can make many feel attacked, especially if a woman finds her own challenges too different from what the speaker assumes. For many reasons, those who write these lessons usually hear little feedback. Thus they know much about what they intended to say but little about what their listeners actually heard.

Possible misunderstandings are further compounded by the fact that many teachers, whatever official manuals and leaders may say, continue to do a lot of their own thinking and presenting. Is that fortunate or unfortunate? The answer is *yes*. I didn't like it much the day I heard a Relief Society teacher tell us that we wouldn't get cancer if we ate the right things, and if we did get cancer we shouldn't go to physicians because they have a conspiracy to keep people from the marvelous cures available. But I did like personal initiative last Sunday, when a young teacher, instead of telling us we could grow from adversity, introduced us to her friend. The palsied friend walked with hip-wrenching effort to the front, turned, and consciously formed her mouth into words to say, with occasional great breaths, "Do you mind if I sit? It takes such effort to talk." A chair was provided, and she told us about her life, with intelligence, humor, vigor, and pain. Her words at times required our concentration for understanding, but her meaning was clear and powerful. We weren't just hearing about adversity and growth. We were seeing adversity and growing ourselves with recognition of our capacities for courage and richness because we saw hers.

Thus instruction in one Church meeting, whether

because of the materials or in spite of them, can occasionally do as much for members as all they see and hear and experience the rest of the week. This happens when speaker and hearer are touched by the Spirit and when the lesson provokes more than thoughtless head-nodding of one kind or another. Just this month I heard one young woman, thus moved, bear her testimony at the end of a lesson on forgiveness: "Before, every lesson I've ever heard on forgiveness really turned me off. I knew I wasn't mad at anyone—I had no one to forgive, and I didn't want to hear about the four steps, or five, or whatever. But today, as you were all talking about how not forgiving damaged *you* when you didn't, I started thinking. As long as I can remember, I've felt there was something wrong with me, some reason people wouldn't like me. Today I remembered the second grade. I was the teacher's pet, and I didn't think I could do any wrong either. Other kids in the class got together and decided to teach me a lesson, and they continued to teach me every day for several years. I couldn't figure out what I'd done wrong, why I was so awful that no one liked me. Until today, I've felt bad about myself, like something was wrong with me, that someone might not like me. I'd forgotten those kids. I don't have to feel bad any more. They hurt me, and I can forgive them and be free. I don't have to keep hurting. I can change it."

PRACTICES AND PRONOUNCEMENTS ARE GIVEN AND RECEIVED BY MEMBERS WHO EACH HAVE UNIQUE FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING AND EXPRESSION.

This experience reminded me again that practices and pronouncements are both given and received by members who each have unique frameworks for understanding and expression. Though Christ discussed the difficulties of putting new wine in old bottles, even he made his new wine in existing waterpots at Cana. Drops of truth we hear in Church do not fall on empty reservoirs. Neither are curriculum assignments or leadership positions in the Church given to empty puppets. This often accounts for problems which may surface, especially regarding women. For example, some men are considered for Church positions partly because of ability and success in such fields as business and administration, where they know women primarily as subordinates. The only other women they may consistently associate with are their wives, mothers, or daughters. How do men without richer experience learn to work with or understand women in roles other than those with which they already feel comfortable and competent? How do such men learn humility to see and hear and understand *anything* with which they are not already comfortable and competent? How do they put the new wine in old bottles, the ways of God with the experience of man? How do any of us in "the Church" do it? How much help can we use, and from whom?

I know that God gives help to us and our leaders, but I don't believe he gives more than he can without destroying agency. I believe he trusts us to make mistakes and to hurt from each others' mistakes and to help each other as we try to build his kingdom. I believe that he trusts us to learn to define ourselves, with his

help if we will take it.

In this process of self definition, Church messages about what it is to be a woman, perhaps *because* they are ambiguous and conflicting, have not been as central for me as scriptural messages about being a *person*, human in the middle of eternity. These messages have helped me make sense of myself as a single woman, a wife, mother, daughter, a friend, an old lady, hurting or happy in a complex world.

In our scriptures we rarely find teachings specifically for men or for women. Occasionally there are exceptions, like Alma's sermon from which the following verse is taken: "And now I would that ye should be humble, and be submissive and gentle; easy to be entreated; full of patience and long-suffering; being temperate in all things; being diligent in keeping the commandments of God at all times; asking for whatsoever things ye stand in need, both spiritual and temporal; always returning thanks unto God for whatsoever things ye do receive" (Alma 7:23). Today these words sound like something from a Relief Society meeting, and indeed would be appropriate there, but in the preceding verse Alma specifically addressed them to "my beloved *brethren*."

But in general I think all of us in the Church have the same roles in this life: to learn who we want to be and to become more like God if that is our choice, following the example of his Son who is model for us all. We are all alike in some ways and different in others, but the principles Christ taught are equally valuable to us all. Our specific tasks differ and our circumstances differ, and thus some of what we need from the Church and give to the Church differs.

"The Church," in various manifestations and many ways, has led me to the scriptures and has provoked my going to God, thereby knowing him to a degree and wanting to be like him. The Church has provoked my discovering that I'm no captive of my past or present limitations, because Christ's gifts make me free to change. The Church has led me to care about what is real and what is good, in relationships and in being. The Church has been a means of finding sisters and brothers whom I love. Priesthood power has saved me from ill health. The Church, for me, is knowledge and power from God given to human souls who can live better with his continuing help than they can without it.

The last question asked by those who arranged for this discussion is, "Ultimately, how should brothers and sisters in the gospel relate to one another?" The answer of course is with love, but love means different things to different people, and it is a life-long task for most of us to learn how to give and take love. I think we should not assume that we know each other nor assume that any gift makes one of us less to be valued than another nor assume that any of us has no need of another. I think it well to *learn* to be humble, easy to be entreated, and full of patience, eager to discover and learn and understand and enjoy, able to deal with our own and others' pain with increasing largeness of soul. I'm glad we have life for it.



FRANCINE RUSSELL BENNION received an MA in English from Ohio State. As project head of the Utah State Board of Education program, "Help Yourself," she organized and conducted workshops state wide. She has served on the YWMA General Board and is presently a stake Relief Society president.