

The Lord as a Role Model for Men and Women

By Ida Smith

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One hundred and fifty years ago, the Lord restored the gospel of Jesus Christ to the earth through the boy prophet, Joseph Smith. Through this young man, knowledge and information which had been lost, forgotten, changed, and, in some cases, denied, for nineteen centuries were once again made available to the children of God.

In most cases the inhabitants of the earth were no more ready to receive the gospel in 1830 than they had been to receive it from the Savior himself nineteen hundred years before. As the Prophet described it, the vision and understanding of the people suffered because of the traditions of their fathers—and I would add—because of their mothers as well.

The people cried "blasphemy" when the Prophet declared that not only could God still talk to man (revelation had *not* ceased), but that He had talked to him. Joseph Smith was denounced when he claimed that God and Christ had corporeal bodies—separate, distinct, and tangible.

But this was only the beginning of new, revealed truths to come to the world through this young prophet chosen to usher in the last dispensation. And history shows that the world at large was still not ready, able, or willing to receive most of what he taught.

One newly restored truth that the Prophet taught—hard for the world to swallow in his day, and still misinterpreted by many in our own time—was the Lord's view of women. The Prophet taught that men and women are of equal value and of equal importance in the sight of God. He preached that in order for a man to achieve his highest potential (the celestial kingdom and godhood) he must have a woman—equally exalted—by his side and sealed to him forever! (See [D&C 131:1–4](#).) A just God would not require the yoking of two unequal beings for eternity. Building upon the foundation laid by Joseph Smith, subsequent prophets taught that God was not single, but married; that there is a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother; and that we were made in their image: male and female children. (See James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75, 4:203, 205.)

As temples were built and temple ordinances restored, our understanding of the male/female relationship has increased: Both men and women are conditionally sealed to become kings and queens, priests and priestesses. Both share the blessings of the priesthood. Both share the gifts of the spirit (i.e., to heal, to be healed, to speak in tongues, to prophesy, etc.).

As Paul stated, "neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" ([1 Cor. 11:11](#)). This is true even though marriage may or may not happen during our stay in the second estate. President Kimball stated in his talk to women in September 1979:

"Sometimes to be tested and proved requires that we be temporarily deprived—but righteous women and men will one day receive *all*—think of it, sisters—*all* that our Father has! It is not only worth waiting for; it is worth living for!

"Meanwhile, one does not need to be married or a mother in order to keep the first and second great commandments—those of loving God and our fellowmen—on which Jesus said hang all the law and all the prophets!" (*Ensign*, Nov. 1979, p. 103).

It is important for a woman to learn in this life her eternal role so that when she is sealed she will be prepared and

ready—with all her heart—to function in and glorify that role. That means being ready and prepared to function as a full partner in a celestial team—without having to look *up* because of any feeling of inferiority, or look *down* because of any feeling of superiority, but look *across* into the eyes of an equally prepared, equally magnificent eternal mate.

Such an exalted role for women was mind-boggling for nineteenth-century America. Here, as elsewhere, society was male dominated, and men were generally regarded as being superior. Men were not only to be protectors of women, but were responsible for their salvation as well.

When the Prophet Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society after the pattern of the priesthood in 1842, he told the women that they were responsible for their own sins. For some this was a radical thought in those days. He taught them they were responsible for their own salvation, that they had access to every needed blessing the priesthood gives, that they also had direct access to the Holy Ghost and to spiritual gifts and they also had direct access to the Savior—to model him, become like him, be heirs in his kingdom. (See *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1938, pp. 223–229.)

The Prophet removed some of the excuses afforded woman in her passive, dependent role, and made her responsible for herself! Many of the early Mormon sisters caught his vision for women, got in the game, and ran with the ball. Women in Utah and Wyoming had the vote fifty years before women in the country received it generally. And as we read and ponder the writings of many nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint women, we know that they knew who they were.

But, as is true with most good things, Satan has devised a counterfeit to God's plan for women. And as we have watched the growth of the "women's movement" in the hands of the world, we have been aghast at some of the excesses and directions it has taken. Whereas God wants us to know that men and women are of equal value and importance, the devil—subtly changing the truth—would have us believe we are *not different*, but *the same*. The Lord's way is for men and women to become "like" each other only as we each take upon ourselves the Savior's universal traits; the devil's way would be for us to become a unisex society. We must be careful not to confuse the phony with the real thing.

Some women complain that they have no strong role models in the scriptures. That is not true. We have many models there. And our main one is the Savior, himself. Nowhere is it written that he is a model for men only; and nowhere is it written that men and women should each be allowed only half of his traits! The world has divided up personality traits that should be characteristic of both men and women, and has labeled some of them "masculine" and some of them "feminine." Latter-day prophets *do* teach that men and women have biological, emotional, and other differences, but we should be careful about assigning mutually exclusive traits to one sex or the other. Nowhere, for example, does the Lord say that tenderness, kindness, charity, faithfulness, patience, gentleness, and compassion are strictly female traits and should be utilized by women only. And nowhere does he say that courage, strength, determination, and leadership should be the exclusive prerogative of men. Any notion that God desired that women be passive should have been dispelled when the Prophet told women that they were responsible for their own salvation.

Women aren't the only ones who suffer from sexual categorization; since men are also charged to become Christlike, a heavy burden is placed on a man when he realizes that many of the traits that will make him Christlike have been labeled by the world as feminine—and that by taking upon himself those characteristics he runs the risk of having his masculinity seriously questioned by his peers.

But while we oppose assigning gender to Christlike personality traits—believing that both men and women should possess them—we also oppose the current movement toward making men and women exactly alike. Again, that's the imitation. The Lord's plan is for men and women to become "like" each other only as we truly take upon ourselves the Savior's characteristics. If we are true to our natures as the Lord has outlined them for us, our basic masculinity and femininity will not come into question. We should all have both strength and sensitivity, courage and compassion, tenacity and tenderness. And as we best incorporate all those traits within our beings, we will be true to the male or female in us, which has been part of us since the beginning.

If our sexual identity is based solely on our outward visible activities, the situation is serious—and complicated—indeed. The Savior was not effeminate when he clasped the Nephite children to his bosom and blessed them and wept; neither was my great-great-grandmother unwomanly when she, as a widow, took the reins in her own hands and drove a team of oxen across the plains to Utah. If we feel a woman lacks femininity simply because she is magnificent on the playing field, or a man lacks masculinity simply because he is a great artist, I think we are missing the point.

If men are to be obedient and sacrificial, like the Savior, how can a man achieve his highest potential with only

“macho” traits? And if the woman is to reach her highest potential in her creative and nurturing role, how can she achieve it by being helpless and dependent?

President Kimball, in essence, has been urging women to get in condition, get involved in the life around them, and in more positive ways become a greater influence for good on what is happening in the world. He has urged women to become educated, to become gospel scholars, to develop every talent with which the Lord has blessed them, and then to use those talents for the benefit of mankind. We need to learn and then teach each other the exalted role of women as revealed by the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to be sure our spouses understand it. And if we have children, we need to be sure that our sons and our daughters understand it.

The Prophet Joseph said in 1842 that the key was now turned in behalf of women, and that knowledge and intelligence would flow down henceforth (see *Teachings*, p. 229). President Kimball put it this way to women in September 1979:

“Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world (in whom there is often such an inner sense of spirituality) will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world.”

He also counseled:

“You must be wise in the choices that you make, but we do not desire the women of the Church to be uninformed or ineffective. You will be better mothers and wives, both in this life and in eternity, if you sharpen the skills you have been given and use the talents with which God has blessed you” (*Ensign*, Nov. 1979, pp. 104, 103).

We have been taught that where much is given, much is expected. If we as Latter-day Saints really understand the gospel of Jesus Christ and all it offers women, we know that no blessing can be withheld from us if we are prepared and worthy to receive it. The Lord expects us to be exemplars and teachers. I pray that we may catch the understanding and vision of who we really are—and so be.

Notes

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