

LDS WOMEN—A REFLECTION ON RIGHTS AND POWER INSPIRED BY JOHN SHELBY SPONG'S BORN OF A WOMAN

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Summary: My purpose is to encourage LDS women to go the “hard route,” to break with tradition, to make a revolutionary claim to her rights and her power in the church

First, I will use Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong’s writings in Born of a Woman,¹ and Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism² to attempt to undermine Biblical myths that define women as second class citizens. And, I will suggest that the image of Mary of Nazareth is a male-created female figure that embodies the kind of woman dominant males think is ideal--docile, obedient, powerless.³

Second, I will ask: What might challenging patriarchal religious beliefs mean to an LDS woman? I will broaden the challenge by calling into question the creation story, its male prejudice towards Eve, from the alternative view given by Charles Darwin.

¹ John Shelby Spong, Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus, San Francisco: Harper, 1992, paperback, ISBN 0-06-067513-6

² John Shelby Spong, Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism, San Francisco: Harper, 1991, paperback, ISBN 0-06-067518-7

³ Born, 221

Third, I will discuss women's complicity in her own subordination.

Fourth, I will identify mechanisms of control by which church women are subdued and her self worth undermined.

Finally, I identify self worth and self trust to be at the root of women's power. I assert that the power of church leadership is derived from the consent of the people, half of whom are women. Hence, given a small degree of unity among a vigorous and vocal minority, church women could claim their place of power, and claim their rightful influence in the reformation of the LDS church.

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First is the challenge to the Bible-based view of women. I had always wondered if the Bible's great age is cause to believe its message is wise or good?

Bishop Spong uses ancient Biblical scripture to point out areas that most harshly conflict with an enlightened modern understanding of not only women's rights, but human rights as well. For example, the Hebrew scriptures

extol tribal hatreds as virtues. Captive women were used for sexual sport by their Hebrew conquerors. Judah treated his daughter-in-law Tamar as a prostitute then proposed to kill her when she became pregnant (Genesis 38). The Old Testament God appeared in some passages to be not only a nationalistic deity but also a sadistic one who delighted even in killing the firstborn in every Egyptian household (Exod. 11:4-6). Slavery was assumed, and the master could beat the slave mercilessly, for the Law said, "The slave is his money" (Exod. 21:21). The child who struck or cursed a parent shall be executed (Exod. 21:15, 17). Anyone who sacrificed to a God other than Israel's God "shall be utterly destroyed" (Exod. 22:20). Menstruation was unclean, and whatever the menstruating woman touched was unclean (Lev. 15:19ff). A man who had a wet dream "shall be unclean until the evening" (Lev. 15:16). . . . If a "spirit of jealousy" came upon a man, he could order his wife to undergo an ordeal of drinking a poisoned potion. If the woman died, her guilt was assumed. If she

survived, she was presumed to be innocent (Num. 5:11ff). One shudders to think of the mentally unbalanced males who put their wives to death wrongfully under this male-inspired law that was said to be "the word of God." The list of objectionable passages could be expanded almost endlessly.⁴

Are these views we would adhere to, or that we would want to hold as our own? Yet, they are part of the Bible that many Christians even today say is the literal word of God.

The ancient Hebrew patriarchal world carried on into Jesus' day. Men ruled – women were the ruled. It was considered inappropriate for a man to talk to a woman in Jesus' day. The Bible even defined women as the property of a man. Such Bible based oppression of women has continued for 2000 years. The Christian church has participated and supported the oppression of women primarily through the church's ability in the name of God to define a woman and to make that definition stick.⁵ We don't like to be reminded, but, in this country (U.S.), women could not own their own property, in their own name, in most states until the last quarter of the 19th century. Women could not vote in this country until 1920. Women cannot be ordained in the major churches of the Christian faith today because those churches still treat women as if they are second-class citizens.

Spong's point is clear: Christians who live by a higher ethical code than that described in their own scriptures have already made a decision not to apply all of the teachings in those scriptures. Now I ask why do we of the 21st century LDS Church still apply those same outdated and shameful traditions when it comes to the rights and power of women.

Bishop Spong examines and rejects the traditional Bible based view of women. He focuses particularly on the creation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the "ecclesiastical stereotype of the ideal woman against which all women came to be judged" and against which, inevitably, they came up short⁶.

Women's self-definition is influenced by important models like that of Mary. However, just as Mormon writers are "creative" in the telling of their own so called "faith promoting"

⁴ Rescuing, 17-18, 20

⁵ Born, 1

⁶ Born, 1

histories, early Christians may also have written about Mary to suit their prospective convert audiences. That is Spong's point in the example of the Virgin birth story. It is significant, Spong says, that only Matthew and Luke, who wrote in 90-100 CE/AD and who were self-consciously addressing the expanding Gentile presence in the church, tell the story of the virgin birth. Spong cites nine examples of a "virgin birth" associated with the divine origin of heroes from Greek and Roman mythology that were transferred to the biographies of historical figures like the pharaohs, Alexander the Great, and Caesar Augustus.⁷

As he looks at the discrepancies between the versions of Christ's birth, Bishop Spong summarizes: "The minimum conclusion is that both versions cannot be historically accurate. The maximum conclusion is that neither version is historic. This latter conclusion is the overwhelming consensus of biblical scholars today. Indeed, it is an almost uncontested conclusion, and to that conclusion I subscribe"⁸.

Not only is the Biblical story of Mary and the Virgin birth to be challenged, but Catholic Theologian and Priest, Father Tissa Balasuriya, in his book Mary and Human Liberation, challenges the negative female model of Eve as told in creation story. His challenge is from the perspective of male prejudice rather than from Evolution: "The interpretation of the Genesis story given by the Fathers of the Church, especially after Augustine, was that woman was the cause of the fall. She was the temptress, the accomplice of Satan and destroyer of the human race. The identification of Eve with evil became so common in Christian thought that the serpent acquired female features, as in Michelangelo's painting of the fall in the Sistine Chapel. . . . Male theologians and clergy have been responsible for perpetuating this denigration of women throughout the centuries . . . This simplistic and damaging interpretation of the Genesis story calls into question the Genesis text, . . . and of male superiority and prejudice. . . ."

The creation of this stereotype took a long time, and Spong attributes its final achievement to the fifth-century philosopher and theologian Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who stigmatized a physical and sexual Eve as the source of corruption in the mythic world of Eden and empedestalled Mary as the spiritual and asexual redemptive counterweight to the

⁷ Born, 56-57

⁸ Born, 50

Augustinian view of Eve. Bishop Spong looks at Augustine's biography to explain his attitude. Before his conversion, he describes himself as a libertine, prayed over constantly by his pious mother. He fathered a son on his long-term mistress, but then became a convert to Christianity, renounced his flesh, abandoned his mistress and child, and took up the "higher calling" of a Christian ascetic, ultimately becoming a priest and bishop. He expresses little concern for his mistress and his child from that point on. "They were expendable for the righteous Augustine," summarizes Bishop Spong. "His primary spiritual task was to remove the stain of his sexual desire. He thus became the great theologian of guilt and sin, but, as is so often the case, he remained blind to the price that others had to pay for his righteousness. . . . From that day to this, the church has trafficked in guilt and enhanced its power by raising ever higher the levels of sexual guilt in both men and women" ⁹.

Mary's virginity was a theological requirement so that Jesus could enter mortality without being tainted by "the corrupting pattern of sexuality." Christ could be the universal savior, however, only if all humankind was sinful. Augustine, by linking virtually any sexual activity except the most pious act of marital intercourse for the sole purpose of conception as sinful, virtually assured universal sin. ¹⁰

"Sex clearly, said the church, was not designed for joy, for love, or for recreation. Sex was evil save as a means for keeping alive the human race. The sexuality of the woman was the most evil of all, for she was the source of male desire." ¹¹ [Oh sure] Although Mormonism contains the healthy doctrine of the "fortunate fall" and asserts somewhat abstrusely that Eve's "transgression" was not the same as a "sin," I would argue that Mormonism yields to no religion in its ability to couple sexuality with guilt.

This asexual Mary was imposed on believers through an "all-male hierarchy" that insisted

These ... definitions of women were divine, unchanging, and imposed by God Any attempts to challenge these assumptions or to suggest some other possibilities were immediately condemned as a sin against God, the Bible, or the divine nature of creation. Any attempt to open the ecclesiastical hierarchy to women was met by

⁹ Born, 216

¹⁰ Born, 217

¹¹ Born, 219

screams that God's will, expressed through an unbroken, all-male sacred tradition, was being violated. The emotional response betrayed the irrationality of the fears as well as the weakness of the argument. . . . Those sexist attitudes can be challenged only by challenging the doctrine of God, the meaning of Christ, the definition of sin, the role of the Savior, and the structure of the church on which they are based. ¹²

Many Christian denominations are enmeshed in the challenge to patriarchal views of women. Mormonism has yet to even engage the issue in any serious way, and documents like "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" which are now being called "inspired" by General Authorities are a measure of the ecclesiastical resistance to serious discussion on the equality of women. Yet Bishop Spong predicts with considerable optimism:

If that resistance succeeds . . . the church will die. The church will have won the battle only to discover it has lost the war. Only the church that manages to free itself from the sexist definition of women, . . . will survive. . . . But the feminine side of God in some new incarnation will . . . arise to take her place. When that occurs, the church of Jesus Christ will be more whole, more inclusive, and more reflective of the reality for which the word God is a symbol. ¹³

Second: What does rejecting patriarchy mean to an LDS woman?

Can she claim with integrity to be a Christian and at the same time dismiss the masculinity of the Christian deity? Can she remain inside the church when the maleness of God is "... a concept that has been used for thousands of years to justify the oppression of women by religious institutions ... universally relegate[ing] women to clearly defined secondary roles until the latter years of the twentieth century[?]" Does she care to worship in a church dedicated to a God called Father that has consistently justified its rampant discrimination against women as the will of this patriarchal deity? Can she contribute where the leadership are all men sitting in solemn assembly and committed to this sexist

¹² Born, 222-3

¹³ Born, 224

prejudice, intending to stay that way, and acting as if they can determine what a woman may do morally with her own body?¹⁴

For example, in just 16 years, a close relative of mine gave birth to nine children. Tragically, three of the last five children were discovered to be severely mentally retarded. Birth control could be appropriate, however she could not feel it right to choose to use birth control without the consultation and blessing of her local church leader. Even for married couples¹⁵, sex, she was taught, is not designed for joy or for love. "... the prime purpose of sex desire is to beget children. Sex gratification must be had at that hazard."¹⁶ Thus taught President Spencer W. Kimbal, Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith¹⁷, and others.

We live in a world where the expansion of knowledge has obliterated the reality that was perceived by the ancient Hebrews and at the time Christianity was formulated. The vengeful patriarchal God of antiquity has become not just unbelievable, but in fact no longer worthy of devotion.

The revolution in religious belief is broader than sexism alone. We no longer believe "... epilepsy and mental illness result from demon possession, even though Jesus was portrayed in the Bible as believing that they did (Mark 5:8 and 9:25)."¹⁸ We no longer believe sickness results from being punished by God nor healing a sign our chastisement is complete. Instead our belief is in Western medicine. We believe in the use of antibiotics to attack bacterial diseases and anti-viral cocktails to block the receptor sites marked by the surface protein's of the HIV viruses. Because we live after the time of Charles Darwin, we know these living microscopic colonies selectively evolve inside our bodies to become resistant to our medications.

In 1859 Darwin's masterpiece, entitled *The Origin of Species*, was published. That book caused to go up in smoke the religious idea that by her transgression, Eve, the mother of

¹⁴ Why Christianity, 5 - 6

¹⁵ Editorial Page, On Limiting Families, *Church News*, May 24, 1975, 16

¹⁶ President Spencer W. Kimbal, "The Marriage Decision", *Ensign*, Feb 1975, 4

¹⁷ Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol 2, 87 - 89

¹⁸ Why Christianity, 7

human kind, had caused all to be cast into a fallen state of imperfection. Instead, Darwin suggested that the world of God's creation was not yet finished. The world, he said, was still evolving, still being created.¹⁹ We are not fallen from a state of perfection to be rescued by God's son, and restored to a perfection we never had, but we are highly evolved animals with superior brains and related to all life on earth.

“The Christian Church resisted Darwin with vigor, but the ecclesiastical power of antiquity had already been broken, and the Church's ability to threaten Darwin with execution as a heretic no longer existed. ... Today, whether his critics like it or not, Charles Darwin's thought organizes the biological sciences of the Western world. His work has made possible such once-unthinkable things as organ transplants using organs derived from subhuman species. They work because Darwin was right. My cousin, Jimmy, had the heart valve of a pig replace his defective valve. The pig valve was chosen because along with size, the pig is genetically close to humans, thus less likely to be rejected. That strange thing called “creation science” is nothing more than ignorant ranting reflecting a frightened and dying religious mentality.”²⁰ And so also is that foundational religious myth of Eve's transgression that has been used throughout millennia to teach and to justify the denigration of women.

Not only because of sexism, but faced with revolutionary change on many fronts like that of evolution, “The institutional church seems fearful of inquiry, fearful of freedom, fearful of knowledge – indeed, fearful of anything except its own repetitious propaganda, which has its origins in [an ancient] world that none of us any longer inhabits.”²¹

Again the question, “Would I be wiser and more honest if I were to do what many others in my generation have done – namely, resign from my membership in this faith-system? Should I renounce my own baptism, deny that I am any longer a disciple of Jesus, take up citizenship in the secular city, and become a member of the Church Alumni Association?”²²

¹⁹ Why Christianity, 36

²⁰ Why Christianity, 37

²¹ John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, Harper Collins, 2001, ISBN 0-06-067063-0, 4

²² Why Christianity, 7

However, by walking away we grant power to those who have claimed control of the community from us. Do I want to concede that? Most Latter-day Saints do not acknowledge a power struggle exist, nor see any conflict of interest, nor see that the present centralization of authoritarian power into the hands of a relatively few men does not mean their victory is permanent. The dignity, rights, and power of women, make that victory unstable.

Third, how are women complicit in their own subordination?

Church women (and men) are in deep collusion with the victory of authoritarianism as Erich Fromm explains in his book Escape from Freedom. I was stunned first time I read Fromm's descriptions of submission and the authoritarian character. [As if to say: "How kind of you to want to live my life for me."²³]

The Mormon authoritarian character would probably disagree that there is an escape from freedom and responsibility because she (or he) may consciously conceive of herself as free and subject only to herself. However, that this escape has indeed occurred is illustrated, first, by the total absence of financial accountability (for tithing) required by the contributing membership of their church leadership. Not that everyone would want this information, but that no lay tithing payers require, or are provided this information, is shocking.

Secondly, the faithful Mormon authoritarian character will say that her (or his) individual freedom and autonomy are fundamental religious precepts²⁴, yet she is silent about or supportive of the forceful repression of the freedom of speech, as when church women are excommunicated for expression of opposing views. Even among the Mormon Intelligentsia this culture of public silence is justified as "the Mormon way."²⁵

However, by this loyalty to authority the development of her character is stunted. Normally, love is based on freedom and an equality of power. But, in the authoritarian system, the meaning of love, and self love are confounded by submission. An attitude of

²³ Ashley Brilliant's Pot Shot 533

²⁴ J. Fredric Voros Jr., Freedom of Speech in the House Household of Faith, *Sunstone*, Oct 1991, Volume 15:4, 16 - 22

²⁵ Orson Scott Card, Walking the Tightrope, *Sunstone*, April 1989, Volume 13:2, 41

self-denial for the sake of communal unity, and the surrender of one's own rights and power are perceived as examples of "great love," duty, and devotion. However, just the opposite is true in that loyalty and *obedience* are placed ahead of self-trust. Because, love, self-love, and self-interest (rather than self-denial) are the essential affirmations of one's own life, happiness, growth, freedom, and purpose.

Likewise, the teaching of *sacrifice* is a perversion of true sacrifice if the individual self is in submission to the higher power of an authoritarian system. Rather, sacrifice has moral authority only when individuals act freely in the sense of spontaneity, acknowledging no higher authority or motive than from within themselves.²⁶

Indeed, one of the most obvious losses of individual self within Mormonism is the submission of "Endowed" temple goers to the church laws of *obedience*²⁷ and *sacrifice*²⁸.

Many conscientious women, in that self sacrificial way they are taught, have already given so much of themselves they have no energy left to give more. But, implicit in that sweeping temple covenant of seeking to be all-giving and perfect, is the expectation that those calling you to service will understand your circumstances.²⁹ You implicitly expect that the church will know your needs and respect your needs. You expect the other persons in your life and the church to know the limitations of how much you can give. You are entrusting the boundaries and the shape and the direction and the inspiration of your life to others.

Thus, you have issued a sweeping invitation to someone else to make free with your life. You expect to be protected from your own openness, your own generosity. But you are not

²⁶ Erich Fromm, Escape From Freedom, 1941, 19,21,177,178,182, 266, 295

²⁷ 1. "Obedience", Family home evening Manual, Gospel Principles, Published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978, 213 – 219
2. "All That Thou Commandest Us We Will Do," Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide 1980 – 81, Choose You This Day, Published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979, 1
3. "Obedience Is The First Law of Heaven", Choose You This Day, 1979, 125 – 130
4. "First Law of Heaven", In His Footsteps Today, For the Sunday Schools of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1969, 49, 156 - 162
5. "What Does It Mean to Sustain the Lord's Servants?", A Personal Study Guide for the Melchizedek Priesthood 1975 – 1976, A Royal Priesthood, Published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1975, 38 – 39

²⁸ 1. "Sacrifice", Gospel Principles, 1978, 161 – 167
2. A Royal Priesthood, 1975, 77, 80
3. "The Law of Sacrifice", Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide 1979 – 1980, He That Receiveth My Servants Receiveth Me, Published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978, 86 - 91

²⁹ Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz, How to Take Charge of your Life, USA, 1977, 34

really being generous and kind. When you give up what you want, when you expect an organization to be in charge of what you can give, you are placing an impossible demand. You have participated in the setting of a trap.

Obediently, women sacrifice the most valuable things they possess to the church's prescription for their lives. They give their time to church attendance and to service and their money to tithing. They sacrifice their unique personal choices about career, family, life style, to a "one size fits all" conformity. They obediently forego their own self discovery and self empowerment in submission to external church expectations of achieving a personal perfection.

However, such ideas about the virtue of selflessness³⁰ are mistaken. And, believing such an idea as the perfect human being is only another way of mistreating oneself.³¹ Ironically, one of the transcendent experiences of joy, or ecstasy, is the experience of escape from expectations, the deep realization that she is okay just as she is, and reawakening to her own worth and beauty.³²

Fourth: What are mechanisms of control by which church women are subdued and by which her self worth is undermined.

To produce revolutionary change, requires an understanding and a correction of the mechanisms by which the church so effectively domesticates women to accept her own oppression and even inducing her to promote it.

Gloria Steinem hints at women's vulnerability (and men's) in the title, Revolution From Within, A Book of Self-Esteem. She believes "that self-esteem plays as much a part in the destiny of nations as it does in the lives of individuals; that self-hatred leads either to the need to dominate or to be dominated; that citizens who refuse to obey anything but their own conscience can transform their countries; in short, that self-esteem is the basis of any real democracy."³³ However, the truth is that by women's constant silent

³⁰ Ayn Rand, The Virtue of Selfishness, Signet Books, 1964

³¹ Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz, How to Be Your Own Best Friend, Random House Inc., 1974, 82-3

³² Thomas A. Harris, I'M OK – YOU'RE OK, Avon Books, 1973, 268

³³ Gloria Steinem, Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem, Brown & Co, 1993, ISBN 0-316-81247-1, 9 - 10

accommodation she internalizes society's low estimate of all that is female. The result is a lowered self esteem.³⁴

Steinem further points out there is little mention of external organizational structures that undermine her worth in order to assure their own authority.³⁵

First among Mormon examples is the undermining of self worth when the innate goodness of our human nature is called into question, and said to be dependent on obedience to church law and priesthood authority. Otherwise she is declared to be in a fallen state, naturally "carnal, sensual, devilish."³⁶ It is a denigration of her very being.

Second is the undermining of individual conscience by suppressing freedom of speech. Because to the extent that she self-sensors herself, and to extent that she adopts the code of public silence, and to the extent that she sacrifices her moral agency to church demands to "Follow the Brethren," then to that extent is her integrity and personhood devalued and the church's espoused purpose defeated. That purpose is her self development and empowerment. Lesser priorities are church influence, power, control, reputation, programs, and image.

On the dome of the Jefferson Memorial are inscribed the words, "I have sworn upon the alter of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Yes, the church does use excommunication, or the threat of it, to intimidate and control women. However, difference of ideas cannot be the basis of separation among God's children.

Third is the undermining of individual privacy as in worthiness interviews in which one's personal qualifications are judged. For example: Does she pay a full 10% tithing? Does she attend her church meetings and fulfill her church duties? Is her religious faith appropriate? Is she morally (sexually) clean? However, Dr Harriet Lerner says

³⁴ Revolution, 25

³⁵ Revolution, 3 - 4

³⁶ Book of Mormon, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1959, Alma 42:10

Mosiah 16:3 "The wicked are carnal and devilish"

Helaman 12:4 "how devilish are children of men."

D&C 20:20 "by transgression of laws man became sensual and devilish."

differently that a woman's right of privacy includes her right to control access to the emotional as well as the physical space that she takes to be hers alone. She does not want her mail opened, her journal read, her phone tapped, her property searched, her behavior monitored, her medical records or her sexual history revealed. She closes the door to her home, her office, the bathroom, and the voting booth. She requires periods of time each day when she is not spoken to, looked at, or focused on. Her right of privacy is a critical aspect of her self-preservation. It protects her from intrusion and ensures her separateness as a human being among others.

Her right of privacy includes her right to protect her body, and any decisions regarding it from unwanted control and intrusion by others. She is entitled to make personal choices about reproducing, loving, and dying without state intervention. If she does not control her own body, she does not control her own life, and she is in no position to seek or define her own truths.³⁷

Forth, church truth claims, stated with the certainty of "knowing beyond any doubt," are willful coercive acts that undermines church women's integrity and sense of worth. Instead, faith is a plunge into the unknown. It is the opposite of Testimony in that uncertainty (not knowing) is the virtue.³⁸

Fifth and last is the emphasis on *obedience* because it undermines moral living. Instead of obedience, discipline, and control; moral living is an authenticity rooted in freedom, love, spontaneity, and genuine delight, without any ulterior motive like getting to heaven. To obey is not enough. Slaves obey. Purity of motive is essential. Motive is corrupted by fear, hope of reward, or a burdensome sense of duty. Individual freedom takes precedence over obedience.

"At the center of a woman's life is the quest to discover, speak, and live her own truths, to cease living a life dictated and defined by others."³⁹ For her "There can be no greater

³⁷ Harriet Lerner, Ph.D, The Dance of Deception: Pretending and Truth-telling in Women's Lives, Harper Perennial, 1994, ISBN 0-06-016816-1, 35 - 7

³⁸ Alan W. Watts, The Wisdom of Insecurity, 1951, 18

³⁹ Dance, 217

stress than that generated by denying the authentic self.”⁴⁰ “It takes so much energy to be what you are not. It takes so little to be what you truly are.”⁴¹ Even your life expectancy is shortened by the stress of trying to be who you are not. [Self Matters, Phillip C. McGraw]

Instead of *obedience*, love is the only passion which satisfies our need to unite while at the same time acquiring a sense of integrity and individuality.⁴²

The list of self-diminishing organizational controls could go on. The controls need not be taught, because they are the natural and obvious workings of the opposite paradigm, from that of love, that seeks unity through obedience and submission.

Finally, will LDS women have the self-esteem and self-trust that is required to assert her rights and claim her power?

Are we naturally worthy of trusting ourselves? If she doubts so, then she has internalized the self-doubt that leads to her subordination. Your male leaders spot internal uncertainty or meekness in an instant. In fact, they may even demand it. However, the pervasive unspoken premise in the work of spiritual and emotional healing is that we are innately good, as in “God is good.” In his book On Becoming a Person, Carl Rogers argues trustworthiness is the basic nature of human beings.

Yes, and I argue that trusting ourselves is ultimately inescapable, try as we may. Even when we try not to decide for ourselves by being a follower of others, or a church, we have still made a choice of who or what to follow. So, we are inescapably personally responsible for everything we choose on our own, and responsible for everything chosen for us by the church or leaders we choose to follow. We choose in all cases. The extension of this argument to the limit is that we are all individually responsible for the actions and teachings of our church. [PAUSE]

⁴⁰ Phillip C. McGraw, Self Matters, Free Press, 2001, 30, ISBN 0-7432-2725-5, 33

⁴¹ Self Matters, 34

⁴² Disobedience, 2

Dr Harriet Lerner emphasizes the need for more self honesty in women. She says “ ... it is painful and exhausting for a woman to begin to uncover her own truths in a culture that validates only male experience, but that the politics worth having, the relationships worth having, demand that we go this hard route.

For women to go the hard route is to fly in the face of all that has been prescribed for us regarding possibility and place, to say nothing of good manners. It also requires us to protest the exclusion of women from public life. When we collude with the objectification, diminishment, and invisibility of women, we compromise all manner of clarity, truth, and honor.

... There are, however, many categories of pretending in which men will not participate. Men will not pretend, for example, that words like “she” or “chairwoman” should ever truly include them. Men will not pretend that the works of womankind represent humankind. Men will not fail to notice when they are excluded from a particular subject, event, discourse, or governing body.”⁴³

All leaders obtain their power through the consent of the people, even if consent is obtained by the coercive claim of “being right,” or being the only “true church”. Control is always the purpose behind truth claims. We know so because church leaders do not publicly acknowledge their mistakes. They blaspheme God instead, as if God could be the reason why their racism caused them to deny the priesthood to African American church members. They attribute to God their own blatantly racist teachings they have still failed to correct, and to publicly renounce, about the Lamanites, and about God’s chosen Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manassah, that they have taught throughout North, Central, and South America, and Polynesia. Likewise, they define God to be a male like them, thus attributing to God what is their own failure of leadership to correct the ongoing inhumanity to women. Their coercive claim to “being right” is doubly compounded by church use of excommunication to threaten women’s rightful use of her power to publicly oppose them regarding the equality of women.

⁴³ Dance, 218

Twice in Mormon verse it is said that if God were unjust, “ ... God would cease to be God.”⁴⁴ If so, who is it then that says to God, sorry, that does it, you are not God anymore! We do. Because Gods power is the voluntary honor and love of all creation. If sinful, then in one gasp of realization, God’s power evaporates. Because such power is the unity arising out of our love and respect. God’s power originates inside each of us.

Women should claim that power. Harriet Lerner points out: “Women make up over half the world’s population, yet as a group we wield virtually no economic or political power and have no social authority. We have been taught to pretend that our special role as wives to men and mothers to children somehow accounts for this fact, or makes it tolerable or even natural.”⁴⁵

We should be sensitive to those for whom religious belief provides a sense of security. However, I believe the courage to define oneself, to live in freedom and with power is the essence of Christianity. To do so is scary.

How can church women assert themselves? Vote! Vote not to sustain Presidencies and councils at all levels that do not contain women. Balasuria says, “Women need to develop their own strategies for achieving an appropriate place and power in the church”, but “such changes do not occur merely because of prayer or theology. Women must develop and use their women-power.” He hypothesizes that “if for two weeks, women did not contribute to Church funds unless women's rights were accepted, there would be an immediate impact on the power-holders. Or, if women contributed instead to funds which supported women's emancipation--Mary's pence instead of Peter's pence--they could have more effective power as women-Church. These are nonviolent methods that need to be developed. Woman-power, thus built up, needs to be linked across the world.”⁴⁶

Not to be naive, revolution does not produce “gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned.” It is a mistake to expect support or kindness from the Church when you oppose it. Openness and authentic public debate of significant issues is not tolerated in the church -

⁴⁴ Book of Mormon, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1959, Alma 42:13, 25

⁴⁵ Dance, 219

⁴⁶ Liberation, 103

never has been. Hence, your and your family's⁴⁷ well being are not well protected. Witness the example of Janice Allred⁴⁸ and others. Mormon leaders equip their members with ready-made labels and prior judgment that are easily used to brand opposing views as apostate or anti-Mormon.⁴⁹ However, to be fair, neither is this paper absent labeling when saying the ongoing "sexism" is a failure of church leadership.

I do not believe that women are any less human or less holy than men, and therefore I cannot imagine being part of a church that would discriminate against women in any manner or even suggest that a woman is less suited for any church office from that of church President or Apostle, to the humblest role of service. I regard the Church's exclusion of women from positions of leadership to be not a sacred tradition but a manifestation of the sin of patriarchy.⁵⁰

"The modern woman will note with pleasant surprise that Mary of Nazareth ... was *far from being a timidly submissive woman* or one whose piety was repellant to others; on the contrary, she was a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and the oppressed, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions (Luke 1:51-53). The modern woman will recognize in Mary, who 'stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord', a *woman of strength* ... Mathew (2:13-23)"⁵¹

THE END

⁴⁷ Dianne T. Wright, Case Reports of the Mormon Alliance Vol 3, Signature Books 1997, Chapter 24, "The Family Church, The Family Disciplinary Council: A Personal Response", 347

www.mormon-alliance.org/casereports/volume3/part5/v3p5ch24.htm

⁴⁸ Lavina Fielding Anderson & Jancice Merrill Allred, Case Reports of the Mormon Alliance: Vol 2, 1996, Signature Books, 117

<http://www.mormon-alliance.org/casereports/volume2/part4/v2p4.htm>

⁴⁹ Simon Southerton, "DNA Genealogies of American Indians and the Book of Mormon", March 17, 2000

www.fnhenderson.us/DNA.pdf

⁵⁰ New Christianity, 5 - 6

⁵¹ Liberation, 186