

Equality through Diversity

M. Russell Ballard

Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles



I am honored to speak to you sisters of the Relief Society. Each one of you is a part of the largest and oldest women's organization in the world and the only one organized by a prophet of God. I bring you greetings from the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles. We and your local priesthood leaders value you sisters and hold you in high esteem. We recognize and appreciate all you do to help build the kingdom of God. We marvel at your faith and your dedicated service to your families, the Church, and your communities. We pray for you, and we extend our love to each one of you.

My brethren and I serve as priesthood advisers to the Relief Society general presidency and board. The task of Relief Society is more challenging than ever because of the diversity of languages, cultures and environments, and the ever-changing circumstances throughout the world. Careful planning has to be both broad and narrow: broad enough to meet the varying needs of more than three million women living in more than 130 different countries and locations, and yet narrow enough to meet the needs of each sister. Relief Society and the gospel should embrace *every* woman. Every one of you is welcome and needed whether you are eighteen or eighty, married or single, speak English or Portuguese, live on an island or in the mountains, have children or simply love children but have none of your own, have an advanced degree or little formal education, have a husband who is not active or are married to a stake president, have a testimony or are struggling to receive one. You belong here! You and your talents, strengths, and contributions are needed urgently in the Church. As Eliza R. Snow, the second general president of the Relief Society, said, "There is no sister so isolated and her sphere so narrow but what she can do a great deal towards establishing the kingdom of God upon the earth" (*Woman's Exponent*, 15 Sept. 1893, p. 62).

I pray for the Spirit of the Lord this evening as I teach a fundamental principle of the gospel that, if understood, will fortify and bless you sisters in your quest for eternal life.

Our Father in Heaven loves all of His children equally, perfectly, and infinitely. His love is no different for His daughters than for His sons. Our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, also loves men and women equally. His atonement and His gospel are for all of God's children. During His earthly ministry Jesus served men and women alike: He healed both men and women and He taught both men and women.

The gospel of Jesus Christ can sanctify both men and women in the same way and by identical principles. For example, faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost are requirements for all of God's children, regardless of *gender*. The same is true of temple covenants and blessings. Our Father's work and glory is to bring

to pass the immortality and eternal life of His children (see Moses 1:39). He loves us all equally, and His greatest gift, the gift of eternal life, is available to all.

Even though men and women are equal before God in their eternal opportunities, they have different, but equally significant, duties in His eternal plan. We must understand that God views all of His children with infinite wisdom and perfect fairness. Consequently, He can acknowledge and even encourage our differences while providing equal opportunity for growth and development.

Our Heavenly Father assigned different responsibilities in mortality to men and women when we lived with Him as His spirit sons and daughters. To His sons He would give the priesthood and the responsibilities of fatherhood, and to His daughters He gave the responsibilities of motherhood, each with its attendant functions.

The creation of the world, the atonement of Jesus Christ, and the restoration of the gospel in the latter days through the Prophet Joseph Smith all have one unifying purpose: to allow all of the spirit children of our Eternal Father to obtain mortal bodies, and then, through the gift of moral agency, to follow the plan of redemption made possible by the Savior's atonement. God prepared all of this for us that we might return to our heavenly home, clothed in immortality and eternal life, to live with Him as families.

A family can live with Him only after a man and a woman are sealed in marriage for eternity by the power of the holy priesthood. We acknowledge that many in the Church desire this great blessing but see little evidence of its fulfillment in this life. Nevertheless, the promise of exaltation remains an attainable goal for each one of us. The prophets have stated clearly that no blessing will be withheld from any of God's sons and daughters if they love Him, have faith in Him, keep His commandments, and endure faithfully to the end.

Most of what men and women must do to qualify for an exalted family life together is based on shared responsibilities and objectives. Many of the requirements are exactly the same for men and women. For example, obedience to the laws of God should be the same for men and women. Men and women should pray in the same way. They both have the same privilege of receiving answers to their prayers and thereby obtaining personal revelation for their own spiritual development.

Both men and women are to serve their families and others, but the specific ways in which they do so are sometimes different. For example, God has revealed through his prophets that men are to receive the priesthood, become fathers, and with gentleness and pure, unfeigned love they are to lead and nurture their families in righteousness as the Savior leads the Church (see Eph. 5:23). They have been given the primary responsibility for the temporal and physical needs of the family (see D&C 83:2). Women have the power to bring children into the world and have been given the primary duty and opportunity as mothers to lead, nurture, and teach them in a loving, spiritual environment. In this divine partnership, husbands and wives support one another in their God-given capacities. By appointing different accountabilities to men and women, Heavenly Father provides the greatest opportunity for growth, service, and progress. He did not give different tasks to men and women simply to perpetuate the idea of a family; rather, He did so to ensure that the family can continue forever, the ultimate goal of our Heavenly Father's eternal plan.

We need to recognize the hard mortal realities in all of this and must use common sense and guidance by personal revelation. Some will not marry in this life. Some marriages will fail. Some will not have children. Some children will choose not to respond to even the most devoted and careful nurturing by loving parents. In some cases, health and faith may falter. Some who would rather remain at home may have to work. Let us not judge

others, because we do not know their situation nor do we know what common sense and personal revelation have led them to do. We do know that throughout mortality, women and men will face challenges and tests of their commitment to God's plan for them. We need to remember that trials and temptations are an important part of our lives. We should not criticize others for the way they choose to exercise their moral agency when faced with adversity or affliction.

In these latter days, we see people, increasing in number, who urge others to feel and voice dissent when frustration and hardship enter their lives. They would have us believe that the Church or its leaders are unfair to women, or that women are denied opportunities to realize their full potential within the gospel framework. Sisters, we know that the Church is made up of mortals, that priesthood leaders are fallible, and some may not always handle their stewardships with suitable sensitivity. However, I want you to understand this plain truth: the gospel of Jesus Christ provides the only way for women or men to achieve their full potential as children of God. Only the gospel can free us from the terrible effects of sin. Only by following God's plan for us, with faith and determination to live ultimately in eternal families, can we qualify for eternal life in His presence. Ideally, the Church and the family do not inhibit our progress. They expedite it by putting our feet firmly on the gospel path that leads us back to God. We each have the privilege to carefully and prayerfully seek the Lord's will for us regarding our individual challenges and dilemmas. *Personal* revelation is personal, indeed. It is not based on gender or position but on worthiness. It comes in response to sincere inquiry. However, revelation for the Church comes *only* through the Lord's prophets, seers, and revelators.

In these confusing times, keeping our feet on the gospel path can be difficult. We hear many persuasive voices urging us to turn our backs on revealed truth and embrace the philosophies of the world. I offer three simple suggestions that will help us all to keep our eternal perspective clear and unimpaired.

First, focus on fundamentals. With so much depth and substance in the simple truths of the gospel, you never need to wade in the shallow waters of speculative theology. Teach one another in Relief Society and in your visiting teaching the pure doctrines found in the scriptures and in the approved curriculum; the Holy Ghost will guide and affirm your teaching. Teach your children faith, repentance, baptism, and the other basic principles of the restored gospel. Make your covenants with God, and receive all of the priesthood ordinances. Study and ponder the scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, individually and as families. In a world filled with conflict and confusion, you will find peace and safety in the revealed word of God.

Second, maintain balance. Free and open doctrinal discussion is important in gospel scholarship, but remember that most things have been put into place by God and simply are not subject to change. The doctrines and principles of the Church are established only through revelation, not legislation. This is God's plan; we do not have the prerogative to alter or tamper with it.

Our task is to integrate the principles of the gospel into our lives so that our lives will be in balance. When our lives are in balance, before you realize it your life will be full of spiritual understanding that will confirm that your Heavenly Father loves you and that His plan is fair and true and we should strive to understand it and enjoy living it.

Third, reach out to one another with love, for "charity never faileth" (Moro. 7:46). Many of your sisters, including some who are here tonight, may be hurting for one reason or another. Reach out to those who suffer, listen to their concerns, be worthy of their trust, and always keep their confidences. Share their burdens. Teach

them, both by precept and by example, about Heavenly Father's plan for His children. Help them understand our Father's unalterable commitment to the principle of moral agency. Teach them about the essential part adversity plays in our eternal lives. Take them by the hand and help them to repent, forgive, have faith, endure, or do whatever is needed. Never forget that the Lord may work a miracle in their lives through you.

Sisters, you belong to Relief Society. It is organized under priesthood direction in every ward and branch. The members of your local Relief Society presidency are wise, inspired women who have been called by revelation and set apart by those who hold the authority to administer the ordinances of the gospel. I have served twice as a bishop, and I want you to know that you are part of an organization that is vital to your ward and that your individual contributions are of great value to the work of the Lord.

May God bless you, my dear sisters, in your personal lives, in your homes and families, and in your Church callings. May He bless you for your faithful service. May you feel the comforting assurance that your Heavenly Father loves each one of you, His daughters, and that the way He marks for you is the way to perfect fairness and freedom in this life and in eternity. To this I testify and humbly pray for the Lord's blessings to be with you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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