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Elder M. Russell Ballard

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Elder M. Russell Ballard

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## *Let Us Think Straight*

ELDER M. RUSSELL BALLARD

Elder M. Russell Ballard is a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

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*From a devotional address given on August 20, 2013, during Campus Education Week.*

Campus Education Week is a great opportunity to learn more about the plan of happiness our Heavenly Father has given to us. There is so much information that I always feel we need to be cautious and wise to ever keep uppermost in our minds the simple doctrine and gospel of Christ. Simply stated, it is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repentance of sin, baptism by immersion for the remission of sin, receiving the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end.

Sister Ballard and I returned a few days ago from England, where we had the privilege, along with several of the Brethren and their wives, to watch the first-ever presentation of the British Pageant. Some two hundred cast members and several hundred other volunteer members told the story in song, dance, and the spoken word about the arrival of Elders Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, Willard Richards, Joseph Fielding, and a few others who came to establish The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in England.

As I watched that story unfold, it brought great memories flooding back to my mind of my experience sixty-five years ago arriving in England to serve a full-time mission as a young man. And as the story progressed, I was deeply touched by the overwhelming contribution converts in the British Isles, and, of course, some from Scandinavia, made in building up and strengthening The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1837 and even on through to today. These fearless early missionaries, bearers of the priesthood and the message of the Restoration, touched hundreds and later thousands of lives through their testimonies, priesthood blessings, and love for the people of Great Britain. They reaped a great harvest of wonderful converts.

As I watched the pageant, I thought to myself, “How did they do this?” The early Saints did not have any proselytizing systems. They did not have *Preach My Gospel*. They did not have a Missionary Training Center. They did not have easy ways of transportation. But what they did have was an abiding, deep testimony that Joseph Smith knelt in the presence of the Father and the Son as They appeared to him in 1820 and opened the way of the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Father and the Son gave him the principles of the doctrine of Christ that I have previously mentioned.

As I pondered the miracle of the mission to Great Britain, it seemed to me that the simple gospel truths, powerfully explained by those great Apostles of yesteryear, just penetrated the hearts of the people. I was also deeply impressed—in fact, so much so that I changed what I had in mind to share with you today because of the impressions that came to me about the power and the importance of the faith and testimony of the dear women and even the children who joined the Church during that formative era. As I watched and remembered, it was overwhelming. They withstood the challenges of the journey to Zion because of their faith, their own study and knowledge of the Book of Mormon, and their unwavering acceptance of Joseph Smith as the prophet of this dispensation. The women of the British Isles who made their way here—many arriving without their companion and some of their children whom they buried along the way—were in many ways the heart of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in those early days.

The same is true now. In so many ways, women are the heart of the Church. So today, with the help of the Lord, I would like to pay tribute to the faithful women and young women of the Church. To you dear sisters, wherever you live in the world, please know of the great affection and trust that the First Presidency and the Twelve have in you.

In 1948, when I arrived in England, it was after World War II, and many of the little branches that grew into wards and stakes were really held together by the faith—the simple faith—and trust in our Heavenly Father and His plan of those sisters who remained behind while their husbands and sons went off to fight in World War II. Had it not been for the sisters and their faith and their strength during those difficult days, we would have had to start our work from scratch in several of the branches where I served.

### Thinking Straight about the Plan of Happiness

Brothers and sisters, I pray that the Lord will bless me that I may follow the counsel of a small plaque in my office that reads, “Above all else, brethren, let us think straight.” These were the last words spoken in mortality by my grandfather, Elder Melvin J. Ballard, who was in the hospital suffering end-stage leukemia in 1939.

My father, who was sitting at Grandfather’s bedside, told me that Grandfather pushed himself up in bed, looked around his hospital room as though he were addressing a congregation or a group, and said clearly, “And above all else, brethren, let us think straight.” I don’t go into my office any day of the week that I don’t see those words.

“Thinking straight” for all of us has always been important, but never more so than today.

From the beginning of time, there have been articulate men and women who have had unusual powers of persuasion. Those with gifts of communication have always had great influence, but the influence of persuasive communicators has never been greater than it is today. Because of the Internet, and particularly the popularity and proliferation of social media—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and heaven only knows what else has become popular that I’m not aware of yet—anyone can talk to anyone about anything. Today anyone who is clever, articulate, and glib can find an audience and develop a following. Unfortunately, not everyone who has cultivated the ability to communicate uses his or her powers of expression to spread or teach truth. And not everyone has the help of the Holy Ghost to think straight.

In what I write, please keep in mind and think straight about the basic doctrines of Christ that include the love our Father in Heaven has for His daughters who are precious and essential to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I encourage you brethren to listen carefully as well as the sisters because I believe there are some truths that both women and men need

to understand about the essential role women have in strengthening and building up the kingdom of God on the earth.

We are beloved spirit sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. We lived with Him in the premortal realms. In order to fulfill the mission of bringing “to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39), Heavenly Father created a plan designed to help His children achieve their ultimate potential. Our Father’s plan called for man to fall and to be separated from Him for a time by being born into mortality, gaining a body, and entering a period of testing and probation. His plan provided for a Savior to redeem mankind from the Fall. The Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ provides the way through gospel ordinances and sacred covenants to return to the presence of God. Because we would live in a mortal environment filled with danger and distractions, Heavenly Father and His Son knew we would need access to power greater than our own. They knew we would need access to Their power. The gospel and doctrine of Christ give all who will accept it power to achieve eternal life and power to find joy in the journey.

There are those who question the place of women in God’s plan and in the Church. I’ve been interviewed enough by national and international media to tell you that most journalists with whom I have dealt have had preconceived notions about this topic. Through the years many have asked questions implying that women are second-class citizens in the Church. Brothers and sisters, nothing could be further from the truth.

Let me suggest five key points for you to ponder and think straight about regarding this important topic.

### Gender Is Eternal

I repeat: Our Heavenly Father created both women and men, who are His spirit daughters and sons. This means that gender is eternal. He has a plan designed to help all who choose to follow Him and His Son Jesus Christ achieve their destiny as heirs of eternal life.

Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ are perfect. They are omniscient and understand all things. Further, Their hopes for us are perfect. Their work and Their glory is to see Their children exalted—to bring about the immortality and eternal life of mankind.

Surely if our eventual exaltation is Their essential goal and purpose, and if They are omniscient and perfect as we know They are, then They understand best how to prepare, teach, and lead us so that we have the greatest chance to

qualify for exaltation. There was an old-time television program called *Father Knows Best*, in which the father in the family was depicted as having all the answers. Well, we all know that no father on this earth is infallible. But there is one father, our Father in Heaven, who knows all, foresees all, and understands all. His comprehension, His wisdom, and His love for us are perfect. Surely we must agree that our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ know best which opportunities the sons and daughters of God need to best prepare the human family for eternal life.

Most everyone has family or friends who have been caught up in various troubling contemporary social issues. Arguing about the issues generally does not bring any resolution and, in fact, can create contention. There are some questions about the Church’s position on sensitive issues that are hard to answer to anyone’s satisfaction. However, when we seek the Lord in prayer about how to feel and what to do in these situations, the impression comes: “Do you believe in Jesus Christ and do you follow Him and the Father?” I believe most everyone in the Church at one time or another will wonder if they can do all they are asked to do. But if we really believe in the Lord, the reassurance comes: “I believe Jesus Christ, and I’m willing to do whatever He needs me to do.” So we move forward. How powerful are the words “I believe Jesus Christ”!

When all is said and done, each of us has the privilege of choosing whether or not we will believe that God is our Father, that Jesus is the Christ, and that They have a plan designed to help us return home to Them. This, of course, requires faith, which is why faith is the first principle of the gospel. Our testimonies and our peace of mind and our well-being begin with the willingness to believe that our Father in Heaven does indeed know best.

### Priesthood Emanates from God

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord’s Church, and His Church is governed by and through priesthood authority and priesthood keys. “Priesthood keys are the authority God has given to priesthood leaders to direct, control, and govern the use of His priesthood on earth. The exercise of priesthood authority is governed by those who hold its keys (see D&C 65:2; 81:2; 124:123). Those who hold priesthood keys have the right to preside over and direct the Church within a jurisdiction.”<sup>1</sup>

Those who have priesthood keys—whether that be a deacon who has keys for his quorum or a bishop who has keys for his ward or a stake president who

has keys for his stake or the President of the Church who holds all priesthood keys—literally make it possible for all who serve or labor faithfully under their direction to exercise priesthood authority and have access to priesthood power.

All men and all women serve under the direction of those who have keys. This is how the Lord governs His Church. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “The Priesthood is an everlasting principle, and existed with God from eternity, and will to eternity, without beginning of days or end of years.”<sup>2</sup>

President David O. McKay further explained: “Priesthood is inherent in the Godhead. It is authority and power which has its source only in the Eternal Father and his Son Jesus Christ. . . . In seeking the source of the priesthood, . . . we can conceive of no condition beyond God himself. In him it centers. From him it must emanate. Priesthood, being thus inherent in the Father, it follows that he alone can give it to another.”<sup>3</sup>

Let me repeat something I stated in the April 2013 general conference: “In our Heavenly Father’s great priesthood-endowed plan, men have the unique responsibility to administer the priesthood, but they are not the priesthood. Men and women have different but equally valued roles. Just as a woman cannot conceive a child without a man, so a man cannot fully exercise the power of the priesthood to establish an eternal family without a woman. . . . In the eternal perspective, both the procreative power and the priesthood power are shared by husband and wife.”<sup>4</sup>

Why are men ordained to priesthood offices and not women? President Gordon B. Hinckley explained that it was the Lord, not man, “who designated that men in His Church should hold the priesthood” and that it was also the Lord who endowed women with “capabilities to round out this great and marvelous organization, which is the Church and kingdom of God.”<sup>5</sup> When all is said and done, the Lord has not revealed why He has organized His Church as He has.

When thinking about those things we do not fully understand, I am reminded of these words by my deceased friend and Apostle, Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who said, “What we already know about God teaches us to trust him for what we do not know fully.”<sup>6</sup>

And Elder Jeffrey R. Holland stated in this last April general conference, “In this Church, what we know will always trump what we do not know.”<sup>7</sup>

Brothers and sisters, this matter, like many others, comes down to our faith. Do we believe that this is the Lord’s Church? Do we believe that He has

organized it according to His purposes and wisdom? Do we believe that His wisdom far exceeds ours? Do we believe that He has organized His Church in a manner that would be the greatest possible blessing to *all* of His children, both His sons and His daughters?

I know these things are true and testify that they are true. I testify that this is the Lord’s Church. Women are integral to the governance and work of the Church through service as leaders in Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary; through their service as teachers, full-time missionaries, and temple ordinance workers; and in the home, where the most important teaching in the Church occurs.

Let us not forget that approximately one-half of all of the teaching that takes place in the Church is done by sisters. Much of the leadership provided is from our sisters. Many service opportunities and activities are planned and directed by women. The counsel and other participation of women in ward and stake councils and in general councils at Church headquarters provide needed insight, wisdom, and balance.

Elder Quentin L. Cook told about a life-changing role a stake Relief Society president had in Tonga. During a stake conference held while Elder Cook was there, the names of sixty-three prospective elders were sustained for ordination to the Melchizedek Priesthood. When Elder Cook asked how this “miracle” had been accomplished, the stake president told him that in a stake council meeting, the stake Relief Society president spoke of many men in their late twenties and early thirties who had not served missions and who were in various stages of activity. She suggested that the council focus on priesthood ordinations and temple ordinances for them as well as for their wives—some of whom were less active or not members.

“As she spoke, the Spirit confirmed to the [stake] president that what she was suggesting was true,” Elder Cook related. “It was decided that the men of the priesthood and the women of the Relief Society would reach out to rescue these men and their wives. . . . Those involved in the rescue focused primarily on preparing them for the priesthood, eternal marriage, and the saving ordinances of the temple. During the next two years, almost all of the sixty-three men who had been sustained to the Melchizedek Priesthood at the conference I attended were endowed in the temple and had their spouses sealed to them. This account is but one example of how critical our sisters are in the work of salvation.”<sup>8</sup>

For more than twenty years I have been teaching the importance of councils, including the vital participation of sister leaders, and the work of councils is emphasized in the current Church handbooks. As I write these things, however, I acknowledge that there are some men, including some priesthood leaders, who have not yet seen the light and who still do not include our sister leaders in full partnership in ward and stake councils. I also acknowledge that there are some men who oppress women and in some rare circumstances are guilty of abusing women. This is abhorrent in the eyes of God. I feel certain that men who in any way demean women will answer to God for their actions. And let me add that 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.

Now, sisters, in speaking this frankly with men, may I also exercise a moment of candor with you. While your input is significant and welcomed in effective councils, you need to be careful not to assume a role that is not yours. Ward and stake councils that are the most successful are those in which priesthood leaders trust their sister leaders and encourage them to contribute to the discussions and in which sister leaders fully respect and sustain the decisions of the council made under the direction of priesthood leaders who hold keys. Families are helped and individuals are activated through council meetings in which this partnership exists and in which the focus is on people. Units in the Church are strengthened by members who love and desire to help one another as they serve the Lord.

The proclamation on the family teaches foundational truths about the separate roles of men and women, particularly as they relate to their positions as husbands and wives: “By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.”<sup>9</sup>

It takes a man and a woman to create a new life. And it takes both men who respect women and the distinctive spiritual gifts they have and women who respect the priesthood keys held by men to invite the full blessings of heaven in any endeavor in the Church.

### **Equal Does Not Mean the Same**

Men and women are equal in God’s eyes and in the eyes of the Church, but equal does not mean, brothers and sisters, that they are the same. The responsibilities and divine gifts of men and women differ in their nature but not in their importance or influence. Our Church doctrine places women equal to and yet different from men. God does not regard either gender as better or more important than the other. President Gordon B. Hinckley declared to you women that “our Eternal Father . . . never intended that you should be less than the crowning glory of His creations.”<sup>10</sup>

I mention this simply because there are those at times who become confused and fail to think straight when comparing the assignments of men to those of women and the assignments of women to those of men.

I have been surrounded by women my entire life. I have three sisters. I was the only boy. I have five daughters, twenty-four granddaughters, and nineteen great-granddaughters. And, of course, I have been blessed through sixty-two years of marriage to my wife, Barbara. I learned long ago to listen to her. I learned that when she said she’d been thinking about something or had strong feelings about a matter pertaining to the family, I had better pay attention, because in nearly every case she had been inspired. I know firsthand how young adult sisters and young mothers sometimes feel and sometimes question their self-worth and their ability to contribute. But I am a witness that when one’s thoughts turn toward the Savior, a strength and conviction that Heavenly Father and the Lord understand will bless them.

Women come to earth with unique spiritual gifts and propensities. This is particularly true when it comes to children and families and also to the well-being and nurturing of others in the Church as well as in the family.

Men and women have different gifts, different strengths, and different points of view and inclinations. That is one of the fundamental reasons why we need each other. It takes a man and a woman to create a family, and it takes men and women to carry out the work of the Lord in the Church. A husband and wife righteously working together complete each other. Let us be careful that we do not attempt to tamper with our Heavenly Father’s plan and purposes in our lives.

### **Priesthood Blessings Are Available to All**

When men and women go to the temple, they are both endowed with the same power, which by definition is priesthood power. While the authority of

the priesthood is directed through priesthood keys, and priesthood keys are held only by worthy men, access to the power and the blessings of the priesthood is available to all of God's children.

As President Joseph Fielding Smith explained: "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."<sup>11</sup>

Those who have entered the waters of baptism and subsequently received their endowment in the house of the Lord are eligible for rich and wonderful blessings. 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. 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 fulness of the gospel, and, ultimately, to become heirs alongside Jesus Christ of all our Father has.

Elder John A. Widtsoe explained that "the Priesthood is for the benefit of all members of the Church. Men have no greater claim than women upon the blessings that issue from the Priesthood and accompany its possession. Woman does not hold the Priesthood, but she is a partaker of the blessings of the Priesthood."<sup>12</sup>

And Elder James E. Talmage taught:

It is not given to woman to exercise the authority of the Priesthood independently; nevertheless, . . . woman shares with man the blessings of the Priesthood. . . . In the glorified state of the blessed hereafter, husband and wife will administer in their respective stations, seeing and understanding alike, and co-operating to the full in the government of their family kingdom. . . . Then shall woman reign by Divine right, a queen in the resplendent realm of her glorified state, even as exalted man shall stand, priest and king unto the Most High God. Mortal eye cannot see nor mind comprehend the beauty, glory, and majesty of a righteous woman made perfect in the celestial kingdom of God.<sup>13</sup>

### **We Must Stand Together**

We need now for you women of the Church to know the doctrine of Christ and to bear testimony of the Restoration in every way that you can. Never has there been a more complex time in the history of the earth. Satan and

his minions have been perfecting the weapons in their arsenal for millennia, and they are experienced at destroying faith and trust in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ among the human family.

All of us—men, women, young adults, youth, and boys and girls—have the Lord and His Church to defend, to protect, and to spread throughout the earth. We need more of the distinctive, influential voices and faith of women. We need you to learn the doctrine and to understand what we believe so that you can bear your testimonies about the truth of all things—whether those testimonies be given around a campfire at girls' camp, in a testimony meeting, in a blog, or on Facebook. Only you can show the world what women of God who have made covenants look like and believe.

None of us can afford to stand by and watch the purposes of God be diminished and pushed aside. I invite all throughout the Church to seek the guidance of heaven in knowing what you can do to let your voice of faith and testimony be heard. The Brethren of the General Authorities and the sisters who are general officers cannot do it alone. The full-time missionaries cannot do it alone. Priesthood leaders and auxiliary leaders cannot do it alone. We must all defend our Father in Heaven and His plan. We must all defend our Savior and testify that He is the Christ, that His Church has been restored to the earth, and that there is such a thing as right and wrong.

If we are to have the courage to speak out and defend the Church, we must first prepare ourselves through study of the truths of the gospel. We need to solidify our own testimonies through diligent, daily study of the scriptures and by invoking Moroni's promise, which is that we can "know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:5) if we seek it through humble prayer and study. Do not spend time trying to overhaul or adjust God's plan. We do not have time for such. It is a pointless exercise to try and determine how to organize the Lord's Church differently. The Lord is at the head of this Church, and we all follow His direction. Both men and women need increased faith and testimony of the life and the Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ and increased knowledge of His teachings and doctrine. We need clear minds so that the Holy Ghost can teach us what to do and what to say. We need to think straight in this world of confusion and disregard for the things of God.

Sisters, your 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 you, the daughters of God, can—you who have such inner

strength and conviction. The power of a converted woman's voice is immeasurable, and the Church needs your voices now more than ever.

“Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid . . . : for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Deuteronomy 31:6). Take comfort in this counsel from Moses to Joshua as you let your voices be heard, for, as President Hinckley said, “You cannot simply take for granted this cause, which is the cause of Christ. You cannot simply stand on the sidelines and watch the play between the forces of good and evil. . . . You can be a leader. You must be a leader, as a member of this Church, in those causes for which this Church stands.”<sup>14</sup>

Let us never forget that we are the sons and daughters of God, equal in His sight with differing responsibilities and capabilities assigned by Him and given access to His priesthood power as we make and keep sacred covenants and counsel together. Be careful that you continually strive to live and sustain the great plan of happiness that is our Father's revealed plan of salvation for His sons and His daughters. Surely we will be able to think straight if we stay focused on God's eternal plan and doctrine and use our strength in reaching out and helping others to do the same as we share our testimonies and our knowledge of the basic and simple message of the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The restoration of the priesthood power of God is the authority to do His work in helping to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of His children. Brothers and sisters, let us stand together, bound by our testimonies, and do our work just as did the Saints of Kirtland, Nauvoo, Winter Quarters, and Preston, England, in the 1830s and the 1840s.

I leave you my witness and my testimony that we are in a day and a time when we must stand in unity. We must stand together—men and women, young men and young women, boys and girls. We must stand for the plan of our Heavenly Father. We must defend Him. He is being pushed aside. We cannot stand idly by as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and allow that to continue to happen without being courageous enough to let our voices be heard.

May God bless you to have the courage to study and to know the simple truths of the gospel and then to share them every chance you get.

I leave you my witness, my testimony, that Jesus is the Christ. He is the Son of God. He does live. This is His Church we have been talking about, and I have been testifying to you of His great plan of happiness that He has given to us. **RE**

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## Notes

1. “Priesthood Keys,” *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 8.
2. Joseph Smith, quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 104.
3. David O. McKay, quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 115.
4. M. Russell Ballard, “This Is My Work and Glory,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 19.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Women of the Church,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 70.
6. Neal A. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 56.
7. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 94.
8. Quentin L. Cook, “LDS Women Are Incredible!” *Ensign*, May 2011, 20–21.
9. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Stand Strong against the Wiles of the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 98.
11. Joseph Fielding Smith, “Magnifying Our Callings in the Priesthood,” *Improvement Era*, June 1970, 66.
12. John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 83.
13. James E. Talmage, “The Eternity of Sex,” *Young Woman's Journal*, October 1914, 602–3.
14. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Stand Up for Truth,” BYU devotional address, September 17, 1996.