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Kathryn H. Shirts

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Review of eight books about women's conference talks

Reviewed by Kathryn H. Shirts, who holds a master's degree in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School.

The first eight volumes of selected speeches from the women's conferences at Brigham Young University provide a unique perspective on the concerns of Latter-day Saint women during the past two decades. They also represent a continuing dialogue between the Women's Research Institute at BYU, whose goal is to publish scholarly articles on women's issues, and Deseret Book, whose goal is to attract a wider readership by featuring sermons and personal essays. Despite the tension between these goals—or perhaps because of it—the result is a unique blend of quality scholarship on compelling religious and social issues and highly intelligent personal statements from women of diverse backgrounds. These women's conference books are both challenging and readable. It would be difficult to find a more appealing combination of faith and scholarship on the variety of issues important to Mormon women.

The History of Women's Conference Books

Brigham Young University has sponsored a women's conference every year since 1975. The first conferences were relatively small student events, which quickly became popular among women of all ages wanting to discuss issues affecting their lives and which moved from student sponsorship to joint BYU-Relief Society endeavors. Because of the great interest in the women's conference sessions, selected talks have been published since 1980, first in paperbound volumes and, starting in 1986, in hardbound volumes from Deseret Book.

The first hardbound book, Woman to Woman, is unusual among the BYU women's conference books not only because it is a compilation of the earlier, paperbound publications, but also because it draws from an entire decade of conferences. The next three volumes, A Heritage of Faith, As Women of Faith, and Women of Wisdom and Knowledge are also compilations but include selections from fewer conferences. Beginning with Women and the Power Within (1991), each new book in the series draws from a single conference, is professionally edited under the direction of the Women's Research Institute, and is published the following year.
Significant differences exist between the conferences and the women's conference books, even in the years when the books are edited by the same women who chaired the conferences. On the whole, less than a quarter of the conference presentations in any given year are represented in the published volumes. The conferences include panels, talks given from outlines, question-and-answer sessions, dramatic performances, and casual discussions in the hallways. The more informal aspects of the women's conferences are not reflected in the books, which highlight keynote addresses and fully crafted presentations. Speakers who wrote out their talks or were willing to transform their notes into a complete essay were more likely to be included in the earlier books of the series. In later books of the series, editors were given the resources to spend more time transcribing valuable presentations from spontaneous speakers and helping first-time authors create polished manuscripts.

Conference Themes in the First Decade

The women's conference is a conversation, Marie Cornwall writes (1990: 3); the conference presentations can, in fact, be seen as an extended conversation about the issues that matter most to Mormon women. Thus the primary focus of Woman to Woman is essays by prominent Mormon women addressing women’s social concerns of the preceding ten years. Although rarely mentioned directly, the national controversy over the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment was obviously on the minds of the women's conference presenters, who express the need to sift through the issues of home versus career or public service (1986: 7, 30–31, 85, 115) and carefully evaluate the pluses and minuses of the women's movement. An appendix in Woman to Woman features a 1974 talk given by Belle Spafford, former general president of the Relief Society. Sister Spafford praises the efforts of nineteenth-century women to enhance their social and political status yet expresses concern that the goals of the contemporary women’s movement were compromised by "shifts in some of the traditional values of life" (1986: 207).

Although the national debate over the Equal Rights Amendment was about women's legal, but not religious, status, persistent
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questions about equality prompted women's conference essays on women and priesthood. Themes of these essays include the administrative roles and saving blessings of the priesthood (1986: 56), the balance between the responsibilities of motherhood and sisterhood and those of fatherhood and priesthood (1986: 76), and the ultimate spiritual equality inherent in the conviction that the Savior is the main role model for women as well as for men (1986: 101-13, 46).

Conference Themes in the Second Decade

The complex commitments and questions that shaped the lives of contemporary Mormon women in the second decade are reflected in essays on such topics as achieving unity in a culturally diverse and increasingly international Church, balancing women's roles, learning from women in scripture and Church history, dealing with adversity, and understanding the Atonement and developing one's relationship with the Savior.

Achieving Unity. The most common recurring theme in women's conference books since 1988 is the challenge of achieving unity among diverse Mormon women of the eighties and nineties. Underscoring the Savior's admonition, "If ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27), sociological and linguistic studies suggesting that women are especially conscious of interpersonal relationships give insight into the dynamics of women's conference presentations. For example, Cheryl Brown, BYU linguistics professor, notes that unlike men, who generally speak in order to establish self-worth and independence, women generally use language to establish intimacy (1993: 237-46). This tendency among women to focus on relationships may partially explain the persistent women's conference themes of unity and community.

In "The Faithful Heritage of a Convert," Carolyn Rasmus affirms that the most important factor uniting Mormon women should be a realization of their common commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and to his Church (1988: 40). Patricia Holland urges women to unite through a mutual appreciation of an "eternal female identity." Since Eve was designated the "mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20) long before she had borne a child, women must not let the word *mother* divide them. The title is first and foremost a
statement about women's nature, not a headcount of their children (1988: 26). Julia Mavimbela, a convert from South Africa, feels that women can unite to meet "our common enemies—illiteracy, poverty, crime, disease, and stupid unjust laws that have made women feel so helpless as to be hopeless" (1990: 63).

Delmont Oswald describes the power of labels and stereotypes we commonly use to harm one another and to fracture our sense of community (1992: 288-96). "We can perceive polarity where it doesn't exist," observes Donlu Thayer, "seeing ourselves in competition with something we are actually part of, thus destroying any possibility of real community with others" (1993: 139).

Often when we have been labeled by others, authors note, we bear the burden of healing the rift and remaining in the community. Even though being in the minority may be painful sometimes, Kate Kirkham insists, "We need to claim the right to be different and to be present" (1993: 213). Hattie Soil, an African-American convert from inner-city Chicago, describes her experiences in an LDS branch among college students who assumed that she would not understand their conversations. This rejection enabled her to evaluate who she was—the daughter of heavenly parents—and she "survived this period with testimony and a truckload of tact" (1992: 283). Lisa Boswell tells how an infertile woman surrounded by prolific Mormon mothers felt "like a blind person who was a member of a Church that worshipped sight" (1992: 201). She considered leaving the Church but decided to stay. Now her presence helps remind members of the Church that not everyone fits typical patterns (1992: 201).

In the international Church, sensitivity to cultural differences creates a spirit of unity. For example, anthropology professor John Hawkins cautions that behavioral differences are similar to language differences and that Latter-day Saints need to be aware of what they are communicating, perhaps inadvertently. Allowing teenagers to go to youth activities unchaperoned in Guatemala, for example, is equivalent to saying that Mormons do not care about the morals of their young people (1988: 161). In the effort to achieve greater unity and understanding, Hawkins advises, "Say what is truth in the distinctive behavior and distinctive language of every region" (1988: 168).
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The key to bridging the gaps that divide us, Emma Lou Thayne asserts, goes beyond superficial congeniality. We need to know the details that form another's life and perspective; "we need to hear each other's stories" (1994: 175). "However, if we disbelieve someone's experience," observes Kate Kirkham, "or if our hearts are blind to what another has been experiencing, we will be unable to reach that wholeness that is the community of Zion" (1993: 219). Tammy Heaton addresses the special importance of listening with respect to victims of abuse in order to allow such victims to regain a sense of their place in the community (1991: 250).

The essay by Allen Bergin is one of the few that deals with the way organizational principles can foster unity. He suggests the principles of Church government recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 107 allow both Church councils and marriage partners to act in unity (1990: 125). Noting that the Relief Society was organized "under the priesthood after a pattern of the priesthood," Jannath Cannon and Jill Derr use historical examples to demonstrate how women can use that priesthood pattern to achieve unity in their collective endeavors (1989: 122-23). Younger Relief Society board members advocating standardized lesson plans worked sensitively with older members who feared that standardization would lessen spirituality. Relief Society sisters worked with bishoprics in coordinating the transition from separate Relief Society halls to Relief Society rooms within ward chapels (1989: 125-26, 141-42).

Balancing Women's Roles. Women's conference contributors have also continued to be concerned with women's choices regarding work and mothering. Cheryl Preston suggests that the variety of opportunities available to contemporary women make women's choices more difficult, and the difficulty of their own choices can make women less tolerant of other women (1994: 177-85). Donna Lee Bowen expresses dismay that the degrees after her name disqualify her from being a "real" woman in the eyes of some women. Could such women relate to her more if they knew of her dreams and her joys, her difficulties and insecurities, if they knew of her battle with breast cancer, her miscarriages, and her divorce? Do profession, clothing, education, income, appearance, or other factors that do not represent our whole selves need to distance us from one another (1992: 268-79)?
Interestingly, as Mormon women explain their positions and tell their whole stories, they seem much less different from each other. The women writers, such as Camilla Kimball, who emphasize the crucial role of the mother in nurturing children also recognize the need for women to prepare for a vocation where they can serve the community and be financially independent in a family emergency (1986: 1–11). Women like Ida Smith, who emphasize the need to prepare for circumstances which might require work outside the home also stress the prime importance of building a home where all who live there can thrive (1989: 203–22). Again and again, it becomes obvious that women with advanced degrees value the role of wife and mother. Their decision to pursue professional careers often comes with difficulty, after careful thought about how to move on productively with their lives (1992: 222–30).

The authors discuss not only how women with different roles relate to each other, but also how women relate to the different roles they fill in their own lives. Leanna Ballard writes honestly of her great difficulty balancing interests in biology with the attention she wanted to give her young family (1994: 231–40). Emma Lou Thayne, from the perspective of a lifetime, writes more comfortably about mingling education and family so that each enriches the other. Thayne went back for a master’s degree in creative writing when her youngest daughter started school and found that she came home to her children “better able to talk their language, having talked a grown-up tongue” for a while (1990: 101). Her insecurities about entering the work force were allayed when she realized how much she had learned in her twenty-five years out of school. Quoting Rilke, she affirms “All the things that I lavish myself on, grow rich and lavish me” (1990: 102).

Like Emma Lou Thayne, Karen Davidson (1993: 17–27) and Ann Finlayson stress the ways in which the normal activities of a Mormon mother can prepare her for valuable service in the community when her children are grown. Finlayson, chair of the Pocatello schoolboard, comments that Latter-day Saints do not realize what marvelous leadership training they receive by fulfilling Church callings. Mormon women are unusually prepared to become involved in community affairs when the time is right in their lives (1990: 73–76).
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One way women can balance education and family is to be aware of the varying stages in their lives and to appreciate the value of each. "Don't wish away your years of caring for small children," admonishes Marjorie Hinckley. "This is a time of great opportunity for you to build the kingdom. . . . When you teach children to love their Heavenly Father, you have done one of the greatest things you will ever do" (1989: 5). Helen Stark and Camille DeLong affirm the importance of women paying attention to their own needs even in the "busy-ness" of rearing families (1991: 155–63; 118–24). As DeLong notes, her children are sensitive to her stresses, and when she allowed herself to care for her own needs, her daughter's "lights came back on" too (1991: 121–22).

Janet Lee and Kathleen Jensen caution against the kind of discouragement that comes when a woman measures herself against an imaginary Patti Perfect or Mormon Supermom. Louise Plummer, a talented creative writer and popular conference speaker, presents witty essays about her lack of homemaking skills. With humor, Plummer broadens the ideal of the successful Mormon woman to include the intuitive "grasshoppers" as well as the organized "ants" (1988: 185–91; 1993: 125–28).

Several conference essays deal with men joining women in the important task of nurturing children. A panel entitled "Equal Partners: Two Versions" shows how husbands with either flexible or structured careers can sustain and encourage their families (1991: 93–117). Alan Hawkins and Kathryn Sargent demonstrate how a father's involvement with his children is not only good for the children, it is also essential to the father's own growth and maturity (1994: 127–39). Sociologist Stephen Bahr points out that parent aloneness is the most constant variable in struggling families. For homes without fathers, he suggests the importance of teams such as "mother-grandmother" (1989: 223–41).

The continuing conversations on learning, parenting, careers, life stages, and unity and diversity can be seen as one aspect of a woman's search for identity in the hectic and demanding twentieth century. What does my life-style say about who I am? When my life-style changes, how do I stay the same? What do I have in common with other Mormon women at different places in their lives? Alongside these conversations, women's conferences provide forums for a deeper look at women's essential identities.
Learning from Women in Scripture and Church History.
Conference organizers invite speakers with expertise in scripture study and history to lead rigorous discussions; contributions by women are especially encouraged. Consequently, the women's conference volumes contain some of the best contemporary Mormon scriptural exegesis regarding women.

Several women's conference authors are drawn to the story of Adam and Eve and find it pivotal to any discussion about women. All of them give a favorable account of Eve's role in bringing about the conditions of mortality. This interpretation might be expected, given the Mormon emphasis on the positive aspects of the Fall. Interestingly, however, all of the writers emphasize aspects of the story which deal with achieving unity among women and men—a more unusual reading but consistent with the themes of BYU women's conference presentations.

In "Becoming Bone of Bone and Flesh of Flesh," Eugene England focuses on the ways in which both men and women are created in the image of God. He believes the revelations of Joseph Smith indicate that scriptural references to "God" mean the eternal partnership of heavenly parents; thus both men and women are indeed created in the divine image. Furthermore, the Book of Moses affirms that both male and female were created in the image of the Only Begotten (Moses 2:27), who came to reveal to both men and women what they could become together (1989: 107–21).

Suzanne Lundquist points out the richness of the Adam and Eve story in the Latter-day Saint tradition. Four versions—in Genesis, the book of Abraham, the book of Moses, and the temple endowment—illuminate each other in meaningful ways. All four accounts describe how men and women become separate from each other and require mutual repentance and a healing of their relationships in order to become whole again (1989: 88–106).

With "Eve's Role in the Creation and the Fall to Mortality," Jolene Rockwood makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the primordial unity of Adam and Eve by analyzing critical phrases from the Hebrew text of Genesis. Such understanding challenges the assumptions of the Judeo-Christian culture that has placed the blame for sin in the world entirely upon Eve, thus establishing the inferiority of women. For example, in Hebrew 'adam
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refers to humankind, both male and female. The words 'ish (man) and 'isha (woman) were not used in the story until after the account of the Fall (1991: 56).

Along with the story of Adam and Eve, authors explore the New Testament as a primary source on women. In "Choosing the Good Part," Rockwood notes that for Christ “women were to have the same spiritual priorities as men” (1991: 109). Christ invited Mary to sit at his feet and study the law, and he pairs male and female examples in his parables to make sure that both women and men see his teachings as relevant. Rockwood indicates that, in general, women were active participants in the early Church—praying, prophesying, and exercising spiritual gifts. Given his Jewish background, Paul was “much more than a moderate” in his affirmation that “there is neither male nor female in Christ,” according to Keith Norman (1990: 206).

While we are not as influenced by Old Testament models today, Carol Madsen points out the richness of the concept of “mother in Israel” for women in the nineteenth-century Church. Motherhood was the major source of authority for Israelite women, and the judge Deborah identified herself as a “mother in Israel” because she had unified her people in throwing off their oppressors (Judges 5:6-7). Among the Puritans and later among the Mormons, this special title “linked the spiritual and domestic spheres, identifying both as natural and desirable areas for female ministry” (1990: 170-201).

In “A Latter-day Saint Theology of Suffering,” Francine Bennion explains how we go beyond scriptural analysis of individual topics to formulate broader concepts which help us deal with our whole life experience. She writes, “Theology provides a framework that binds diversity and complexity into a more simple net with which we can make sense even of things we don’t fully understand” (1988: 55).

Overcoming Adversity. Expressions of theology need not necessarily be systematic. Women’s conference speakers use both the personal essay and the sermon to affirm their faith despite adversity. The atmosphere of the BYU women’s conferences provides an opportunity for participants to speak personally in their sermons and rigorously in their personal essays, acknowledging
their own circumstances and trials. The authors are especially effective because they combine honesty about the difficulty of adversity with faith in the sustaining influence of the Lord and the community of believers.

Carlfred Broderick’s essay, “The Uses of Adversity,” summarizes succinctly the theme of many essays: “The gospel of Jesus Christ is not insurance against pain. It is resource in the event of pain,” which will inevitably come to us in mortality (1989: 172–73). For example, Martha Beck expresses the difficulty she had accepting the birth of a handicapped child. She realized that what she really needed was not a change in her son’s condition, but freedom from the great distress she felt about his condition. This freedom came through her increased understanding of his inherent worth (1993: 159–61).

Richard Ferre and Marian Bergin describe the pain of having wayward children. As Ferre poignantly observes, God “suffers for us in our agency. We suffer for them in their agency” (1990: 165). Bergin refers to psychologist M. Scott Peck, who likens pain to going into the desert for self-discovery, as did the Savior. Pain makes us aware of what we value and more capable of experiencing joy. Accepting a child who has made wrong choices does not mean that we give up, but that we free ourselves to make appropriate responses (1990: 153–58).

Marjorie Conder and Craig Conder write from the perspectives of mother and son regarding Craig’s withdrawal from the Church in the aftermath of a personal tragedy. Both emphasize the importance of patience in allowing children to come to terms with their own experiences and of prayer to the Lord that he will provide appropriate help at the appropriate time (1994: 145–54). In “Staying Together Despite Not Praying Together: Families Dealing with Inactivity,” Edward Kimball stresses the importance of maintaining our own standards, keeping lines of communication open, appreciating the admirable qualities of inactive family members, and praying for wisdom and patience (1993: 167–74).

Several authors discuss the financial, legal, and emotional hardships caused by divorce. According to Elaine Sorensen, time alone will not heal the pain of divorce, and women going through a divorce must evaluate their needs and discover the ward and
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community resources available to them (1994: 46–50). Neither the process of divorce nor the absence of the father need remain permanently devastating, maintains Suzanne Dastrup. The way remaining family members function is what determines either turmoil or success (1994: 58).

Anne Horton, Grethe Peterson, Tammy Heaton, and Warren Nielson address the problem of child abuse (1988: 100–109), and Lynda Driscoll describes her journey from victim to survivor. Driscoll reports how honestly working through her feelings and learning from other survivors helped her to evaluate her experiences and gain control of her life (1991: 247–67). Catherine Thomas, the adult child of an alcoholic father, observes that those who do not have a model for consistent and mature love when they are growing up often struggle when they themselves become parents (1991: 186–90). Through the gospel of Jesus Christ, however, “we can mature spiritually and make up for those deprivations” (1991: 187).

Midge Patrick and Carol Clark write eloquently and candidly about the value of forgiving and the challenges of doing so. Patrick, who was driving the car at the time of an accident that disabled her and killed her son and husband, decided she was not willing to let her children suffer because she could not forgive herself and get on with life. “I was able to forgive myself,” she says, “because I literally felt the Lord’s kind, gentle arms around me during this time. . . . My soul was touched, my spirit healed, and I came to feel at peace with our circumstance as it was” (1993: 120). Clark describes an intense three-year effort to learn to forgive, which involved praying, searching the scriptures, and talking with supportive friends. She concludes. “Never have I felt the Atonement more personally than when I worked for years to forgive someone who had wounded me to my very core” (1993: 175–78).

Understanding the Atonement and Developing One’s Relationship with the Savior. The focal point of women’s conference sermons, as well as that of the personal essays, is the atonement of Jesus Christ. In “A Perfect Brightness of Hope,” Elaine Jack, Relief Society general president, affirms that the basis for faith and hope in the midst of life’s real challenges is not wishful thinking, but our understanding of the Atonement and the

In a joint presentation, “‘Eve Heard All These Things and Was Glad’: Grace and Learning by Experience,” Bruce and Marie Hafen focus on Adam and Eve as role models who together teach us how to receive the Atonement. Through our covenantal relationship with the Savior, we overcome not only the effects of our sins, but also all the other negative consequences of the Fall—physical disability, death, and the harm which others may do to us as a result of wrong choices (1994: 16–33).

Cheiko Okazaki of the Relief Society general presidency gave the powerful concluding talk of the 1993 conference, “Grace and Glory: Strength from Our Savior” (1994: 241–52). Christ is not like a man waiting on the shore with a life preserver on a rope, calling that he will save us after all that we can do. Christ is the master of wind and wave, yet “he is in the water with us, feeling the batterings of the same current. He lends us strength so we can try. He gives us his vision so that we can see the shore. . . . It may be true that we can always do more—but not because we have no limits. It’s because he has none” (1994: 249).

When we understand the willingness of the Lord to be with us and sustain us in the particular circumstances of our own lives, assures Ardeth Kapp, “our service becomes customized by the Spirit” (1991: 34–35). Cecile Pelous, who balances a job as a fashion designer with work among disadvantaged children in India and Nepal, affirms that in the hands of the Lord “I have been able to do much more than I thought possible. I see that what I accomplish is a part of the work of the Lord and that I am his instrument. He guides me and opens doors for me, sometimes in unforeseen ways” (1993: 15).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks encourages women to seek after spiritual gifts, which can lead us to God and compensate for our inadequacies (1988: 38). Maureen Beecher affirms, “The sacred spirituality
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that graced the Nauvoo Relief Society is still our birthright. It is
generated among us, in answer to our own needs" (1992: 61). In her
keynote address, "In the Covenant of Grace," Carol Madsen invokes
the blessing of Zina Young, taken from her testimony at a 1874
women's meeting: "The spirit of God is here, and when we speak
to one another, it is like oil going from vessel to vessel" (1994: 14).

Looking Ahead

The themes discussed over the last ten years at the BYU wom-
en's conferences have remained remarkably constant. However, as
an ongoing record of the conferences, the women's conference
volumes have changed format and will undoubtedly continue to
change. To Rejoice as Women, the most recently published vol-
ume, indicates decreasing emphasis on scholarship and increasing
emphasis on sermons and personal narratives.1 Undoubtedly, this
trend will continue, reflecting Deseret Book's interest in promot-
ing the books to a wider readership.

In the preface to Women and the Power Within, BYU presi-
dent Rex E. Lee acknowledges that maintaining a forum for the dis-
cussion of issues relevant to Mormon women will never be easy nor
free from controversy. But he concludes that "few things that are
really worthwhile enjoy either of those luxuries" (1991: 3). Over
the years, the BYU women's conference books will remain a store-
house of insights for women seeking to pursue wisdom and knowl-
edge and to reinforce their faith in the gospel and in themselves.

NOTE

1Susette Fletcher Green and Dawn Hall Anderson, eds., To Rejoice As
Women: Talks from the 1994 Women's Conference (Salt Lake City: Deseret
Book, 1995).