

As Women of God, Shall We Not Go Forward in So Great a Cause?

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Here we are again. Another year has passed, and what a year it has been! We've welcomed in a new millennium-but not just any old millennium. This is the one that has been foreseen by prophets from the beginning of time. What a magnificent time to take our turn in helping shoulder the glorious burden of the gospel kingdom!

I love the magnitude and the drama of it all. But then, I love drum rolls and bugles and big finishes and anything that stirs our souls and moves us to righteous action. Which is just one reason I am drawn to the Prophet Joseph's exuberant declaration: "Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness! . . . Shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, . . . and on . . . to the victory" (D&C 128:19, 22).

Doesn't that just make you want to climb a rooftop or go on CNN and tell the whole world what you know and believe? We are engaged in the glorious cause of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, standing firm in that cause is not always easy to do. When I was fifteen, I was invited to speak about the Church in high school. Everyone knew I was LDS. Some of my friends had even come to Mutual with me. But as the only LDS girl in school, I often found myself trying to maintain that delicate balance between standing up for what I believed while not standing out. As the day of my presentation approached, I began to panic. How would my friends react to the story about Joseph Smith and angels and gold plates? I am sorry to tell you that fear got the best of me, and I backed out. Afterwards I was so ashamed. I had let the Lord down. But I had been more concerned about the praise of the in-crowd than the praise of the Lord. I had cared more about belonging to the "right" group than standing as a witness.

I imagine we have each had moments when we should have been more valiant in our testimony of Jesus Christ, moments when in our desire to belong we turned our backs on the Master. We each have a longing to belong-to feel that we "fit in," to be part of something greater and grander than we are-so we often scurry about, chasing worldly distinctions that give us the illusion of importance and acceptance. But ironically, as the Lord's covenant

people we already belong to an extraordinary "in-crowd," and we have the potential of belonging to the most exclusive group in time or eternity: the family of Christ. That depends, however, upon our willingness to go forward in the glorious cause of Christ.

If it were my privilege to be in Jerusalem today, I would choose to be on the Mount of Olives, where in 1873 Eliza R. Snow stood and reflected on the Savior's sacrifice. As president of the Relief Society, she declared that the day would come when we would stand "at the head of the women of the world," because we had "greater and higher privileges than any other females upon the face of the earth."[1](#)

For as long as I can remember, I too have felt deeply about our role as sisters in the latter-day kingdom of God. Said President Joseph F. Smith: "He that sent his Only Begotten Son into the world to accomplish the mission which He did, also sent . . . every man and woman in the world, to accomplish a mission. . . . We [must] learn the obligation that we are under to God and to each other and . . . to the cause of Zion."[2](#)

I broach this subject with trepidation because after I spoke here last year, one sister wrote: "I did not like Sheri Dew's concluding remarks. She robbed life of all its joy and fun. . . . We need to be more casual about things. . . . I did not like being told all I needed to be and do. . . . Telling me the Lord expects valiant women did not help me. I don't want to be incredible. I want to be me." Frankly, I agonized over that letter, and I apologize to anyone whom I discouraged. But I dare not back away from what I said then or from what I am about to say now.

There are three things about which I am absolutely certain: That Jesus is the Christ, that His gospel has been restored to the earth, and that every one of us has been foreordained to stand where we stand in the latter-day kingdom of God. We can't risk being casual about the Savior's work or about our role in it. No one else can fill my mission, and no one can fill yours. This knowledge shouldn't increase our burden; it should only reconfirm that we are beloved spirit daughters of God, whose lives have meaning, purpose, and direction.

When Nephi saw our day in vision, he saw that the power of the Lamb of God descended upon the covenant people of the Lord, who "were armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory" (1 Nephi 14:14). During this culminating millennium, the influence of the righteous-that's you and me-will be far greater than our numbers or our natural ability-if we go forward in so great a cause.

It is about standing joyfully where we have been foreordained to stand that I wish to speak today. To do so, may I focus on just three principles from the Relief Society Declaration.

AS SISTERS, WE ARE UNITED IN OUR DEVOTION TO JESUS CHRIST

I have come to believe that whatever we really want, we'll probably get. If we really want money and status, we'll find a way to get them. By the same token, if we really want to overcome bad habits or cultivate integrity or become more pure so that we can better hear the voice of the Spirit, we'll find a way to do those things as well. Fifty years from now what

we have become shouldn't surprise us, because we will have become what we have set our hearts upon.

Alma taught that the Lord "granteth unto men according to their desire" (Alma 29:4). And when asked to identify the first great commandment, the Savior said simply, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:37). It's no accident that our hearts were mentioned first.

Satan is also after our hearts, because he knows that if he can control our feelings and desires, he can control us-which is why he tries to harden our hearts, puff up the pride of our hearts, and set our hearts upon the vain things of the world (4 Nephi 1:28; 2 Nephi 33:2; 28:15; Helaman 12:4). The Nephite civilization collapsed entirely once the people were past feeling (Moroni 9:20). Likewise, we have been warned that in the last days "men's hearts will fail them" (D&C 88:91), and the nightly news verifies this sad reality. Children killing children. "Spin doctors" celebrated for their articulate cunning rather than censored for breaches of integrity. Violence that knows no bounds.

No wonder we are commanded to "come unto the Lord with all [our hearts]" (Mormon 9:27). No wonder the Lord "requireth the heart and a willing mind" (D&C 64:34). Notice that He said nothing about how gorgeous or thin, educated or affluent we must be. He simply asks for our hearts and our will, because that's all we have to give Him. Everything else is already His. Said Brigham Young, "The Lord must be first and foremost in our affections; the building up of his cause and kingdom demands our first consideration."³ Ultimately we will become what we give our hearts to, for we are shaped by what we desire and seek after. If we love the Lord such that our hearts are changed, His image will fill our countenances. But if we love the world more, we'll slowly take upon us those characteristics. As Truman Madsen has said, "At youth our face reveals genetics. At fifty, we have the face we deserve."

I'll never forget a visit I made to the MTC when an instructor there said that the missionaries liked to refer to the MTC as a concentration camp but that he thought of it as a consecration camp. Life is the ultimate consecration camp, where we learn to turn our lives and our will over to the Lord. Only in giving all we have may we receive all our Father has.

Two months ago I was in Africa, and the images of our beautiful African sisters are still vivid in my heart and mind. Their countenances reflect the image of Christ. When they pray, they pray. It's as though they reach right through the veil and talk to a trusted Friend. And despite severe temporal challenges, they are happy. By the world's measure, they have nothing-except happiness. By contrast, many of us have everything-except happiness. Their optimism springs from a bedrock faith in Jesus Christ, to whom they have given their hearts. I've found myself wondering who the Lord is most concerned about-those whose temporal challenges are extreme but whose hearts are fixed on Him, or those who have more things of this world but who haven't offered their whole souls unto Him (Omni 1:26). Hunger may be a problem in Africa, but our sisters there aren't starving spiritually.

Several years ago, I had an unforgettable conversation with a friend who listened patiently

while I whined about all of the pressure I was under. Finally he said, "Sheri, you always take on more than you have time for. You must want to live this way." You should have heard my rebuttal. I had to work. I was a stake Relief Society president. And I was consumed by a huge project that was demanding every spare minute. He countered: "But you don't have to do any of those things. You must want to do them."

It was several days before I realized that he was right. But coming to the realization that I did indeed want to do everything I was doing was liberating, and it made the burden lift. By the same token, once we have turned our hearts over to the Lord and decided we want to be like Him, the process of following Him becomes one of joy rather than white-knuckled endurance.

Which is crucial, because even as we turn our hearts to the Lord, we don't suddenly become perfect. We do have to endure to the end, and we'll all make mistakes and have lapses in judgment along the way. But when our hearts are changed, we have "no more disposition to do evil" (Mosiah 5:2), which means that we no longer want to make mistakes. And the Lord judges not only our works but our desires.

The question we might therefore want to ponder is simply this: What do we really want? And what are we willing to do to get it? When we were baptized, we said we wanted to come into the fold of God (Mosiah 18:8). But do we really? Do we delight in being called His people, though that probably means looking and acting and dressing differently from the rest of the world? If so, are we willing to yield our hearts to the Lord? Those who do will be born again as the sons and daughters of Christ (Mosiah 5:7). The choice is ours. For what we really want, we'll ultimately get.

WE ARE WOMEN OF CHARITY

I once attended a fireside where a General Authority began by asking the question, "How can you tell if someone is converted to Jesus Christ?" We gave dozens of answers about service and commitment and obedience, none of which satisfied him. Finally he said that while our comments were all good, he believed that the one sure measure of a person's conversion was how he or she treated others.

I frankly expected something more profound, but his assertion so intrigued me that it drove me to the scriptures, where after much study I began to see how profound his message was: When we turn our hearts to the Lord, we instinctively open our hearts to others.

After Alma the Younger was converted, his thoughts turned immediately to his people, for he "could not bear that any human soul should perish" (Mosiah 28:3). After Enos' all-night conversion, he "began to feel a desire for the welfare of [his] brethren . . . ; wherefore, [he] did pour out [his] whole soul unto God for them" (Enos 1:9). The Savior taught Peter, simply: "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:32).

Almost every major scriptural sermon focuses on the way we treat each other. We are taught to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), to be reconciled to each other (Matthew 5:24), to

love our enemies and pray for those who despitefully use us (Matthew 5:44), to serve each other and avoid contention (Mosiah 2: 17, 32). Said Joseph Smith, "The nearer we get to our heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion on perishing souls."⁴ He also said that "it is natural for females to have feelings of charity."⁵

Knowing this, Lucifer works hard at undermining our divine gift. All too often we fall into traps he has designed to estrange us from each other. He delights when we gossip and criticize and judge, when we stew over perceived offenses or measure ourselves against each other, or when we succumb to such envy that we even begrudge each others' successes. All of these spiritually debilitating behaviors wreak havoc in relationships. Let us not forget that Satan resents any righteous relationship-because he will never have even one. Thus his never-ending efforts to alienate us from one another.

A while ago a woman approached me after a fireside and asked, "Don't you feel guilty for choosing a career over marriage?" Her words hurt. But I'm sure her comment would have been different if she had known my heart, or if she had known how much time I've spent fasting and pleading with the Lord in the temple, seeking to understand His will for me. Only He knows how painful this process has been. But He also knows how grateful I am for the process, because it has sealed my heart to Him.

How often have you and I made judgments that are equally unfair? Why can't we resist the urge to second-guess and evaluate each other? Why do we judge everything from the way we keep house to how many children we do or do not have? Sometimes I wonder if the final judgment will be a breeze compared with what we've put each other through here on earth! I've wondered if we ought to have a special answering machine for calls that come in after we appear on satellite. If you liked our hair, push one. If you didn't, push two. If you liked the color of our clothing, push three. If you would like to nominate colors for the next meeting, push four.

All of this just wears me out because the Spirit cannot dwell in a home, a ward, or a relationship where there is criticism. Contention neutralizes us spiritually. When we fail to champion one another, we in essence betray each other.

In the second meeting of the Relief Society, Emma Smith urged her sisters to "divest themselves of every jealousy and evil feeling toward each other."⁶ And in a later meeting, the Prophet Joseph said, "Sisters of the society, shall there be strife among you? I will not have it-you must repent and get the love of God. Away with self-righteousness."⁷

It is simply not for us to judge each other. The Lord has reserved that right for Himself, because only He knows our hearts and understands the varying circumstances of our lives. Principles and covenants are the same for all of us. But the application of those principles will differ from woman to woman. What we can do is encourage each other to constantly seek the direction of the Holy Ghost to help us make decisions and then to bless us with the reassurance that our lives are on course. Only when the Lord is directing our lives may we expect to feel peace about our choices. And His approval is so much more vital than that of

the ward busybody.

Another kind of judging is more subtle but equally destructive. How often do we describe a sister with words like these: She's a convert. She's been inactive. She's a Utah Mormon. She's single. She's a stay-at-home mom.

When we label one another, we make judgments that divide us from each other and inevitably alienate us from the Lord. The Nephites learned this lesson the hard way. After the Savior appeared on this continent, those converted to the gospel lived in harmony for two hundred years. Because they loved God, they also loved each other. And though previously there had been Nephites and Lamanites and Ishmaelites, there were now no "-ites," as the scriptures tell us (4 Nephi 1:17). They were one. The result? There was not "a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God" (4 Nephi 1:16). It wasn't until they again divided into classes that Satan began to win many hearts. The Nephites never recovered spiritually.

Can't we get rid of the "-ites" among us? Can't we avoid this "hardening of the categories"? We gain nothing by segregating ourselves based on superficial differences. What we have in common—particularly our commitment to the same glorious cause—is so much more significant than any distinctions in our individual lives. I think again of our sisters in Africa. The fact that my life is completely different from theirs didn't matter. When we left that last meeting in Ghana, I wept because I felt such a bond with them. We are our sister's keeper. Heaven forbid that we would ever make even one sister feel left out. If there is anyplace in all the world where a woman should feel that she belongs, it is in this Church.

None of us needs one more person pointing out where we've fallen short. What we do need are each other's compassion, prayers, and support. What if we were to decide today that we would make just one assumption about each other—that we are each doing the best we can? And what if we were to try a little harder to help each other? Imagine the cumulative effect, not to mention the effect on us spiritually. Followers of Christ who pray with all the energy of their hearts to be filled with His love, the pure love of Christ, will become like Him (Moroni 7:48). As we are filled with this love, we no longer feel envy or think evil of others. That's because "charity never faileth" (Moroni 7:46). Charity is demonstrated when we give someone the benefit of the doubt, or readily accept an apology, or refuse to pass along a juicy piece of gossip. Might we this evening in prayer contemplate grudges we need to put behind us, jealousies we should let go, and relationships we could improve by simply laying our pride aside?

Said President Gordon B. Hinckley: "Do you want to be happy? Forget yourself and get lost in this great cause. Lend your efforts to helping people. . . . Work to lift and serve His sons and daughters. You will come to know a happiness that you have never known before. . . . Let's get the cankering, selfish attitude out of our lives . . . and stand a little taller . . . in the service of others."⁸

Let us keep in mind Lucy Mack Smith's classic statement that "we must cherish one another, watch over one another, [and] comfort one another . . . that we may all sit down in heaven

together"?⁹There isn't anything righteous we can't accomplish if we will stand together.

WE ARE A WORLDWIDE SISTERHOOD AND MEMBERS OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT COMMUNITY OF WOMEN ON THIS SIDE OF THE VEIL-THE RELIEF SOCIETY OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS.

When at age twenty-five I was called to serve as a ward Relief Society president, I wondered if my bishop was responding to inspiration or indigestion. I just didn't fit the Relief Society profile, which I saw as older, married, bread-baking women. But now, after I have had more than twenty years of Relief Society service, my view of our organization has changed dramatically.

The story of Relief Society is the story of prophets who have believed in the divine nature of women. It is the story of an organization destined to elevate women in their stature, their behavior, and their influence-both in quiet, one-on-one ways, and in contributions that affect communities, countries, and even continents. It is a classic story of using the simple to confound the mighty and strong, for the Relief Society is the only organization for women on the face of the earth founded by a prophet and undergirded by the priesthood of God. Joseph Smith said that the "Church was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized"¹⁰ and that Relief Society was not only to "relieve the poor, but to save souls."¹²

President Joseph F. Smith later stated that this organization was "divinely ordained of God to minister for the salvation of the souls of women and of men."¹² He also said that it is not for us "to be led by the women of the world; it is for [us] . . . to lead the women of the world."¹³

Then President Spencer W. Kimball made this declaration: "There is a power in [the Relief Society] that has not yet been fully exercised to strengthen the homes of Zion and build the kingdom of God-nor will it be until both the sisters and the priesthood catch the vision of Relief Society."¹⁴

I take prophets at their word. I believe that we as sisters in Relief Society have a divine mandate to help save souls, to lead the women of the world, to strengthen the homes of Zion, and to build the kingdom of God. Shall we not go on in so great a cause? The cause of women of God is to help build the kingdom of God.

Imagine what would happen throughout the gospel kingdom if every morning 4.5 million of us got on our knees and asked our Father what He needed us to do that day to build the kingdom. And then imagine if we did it. When the sisters of this Church put their minds and hearts to something, the results are spectacular. It's as President Hinckley said about us in his recent address to the National Press Club: "People wonder what we do for our women. I'll tell you what we do. We get out of their way, and look with wonder at what they are accomplishing."¹⁵What a commendation! Let's show President Hinckley that we deserve his vote of confidence.

Imagine what would happen if we turned our attention in force to the kinds of service that build the kingdom—things like rearing righteous sons and daughters who themselves go forward in the strength of the Lord, or increasing our own spirituality so that we can strengthen others, or igniting missionary work by reaching out to investigators and inviting friends into our homes to talk with the missionaries, or befriending a newly baptized sister and helping ease her transition into the Church, or taking an interest in a child who needs extra attention, or helping a friend come back after years of being away, or making friends with a young woman who is beguiled by the world, or giving someone a copy of the Book of Mormon, or learning how to talk comfortably about the Church to our non-LDS neighbors. Imagine what would happen if we could mobilize the sisters of Relief Society to help build the kingdom of God.

We have just completed a historic general conference, the first held in the magnificent new Conference Center. Despite its vast capacity, thousands were still unable to get tickets. I half-expected President Hinckley to step to the podium and say, "This just goes to show that if we build it, they will come." If we rally our sisters to build the kind of sisterhood the Lord intends Relief Society to be, the women of the world will come. If we radiate the light of Jesus Christ because His Spirit shines in our eyes, because we tell the truth and teach our children to tell the truth, because we treat each other with gentleness, because we are modest but beautiful in the way we dress and speak and act, because we are quick to attribute benevolent intent to each other's actions, because we are armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory, and because we love Jesus Christ and are trying to follow Him—the good women of the world will look to us in increasing numbers and increasing ways. Our influence will be penetrating and persuasive. Make no mistake about it: We have been foreordained to lead the women of the world. To borrow a phrase commonly applied to the British Empire, the sun never sets on the work of Relief Society. Shall we not go on in so great a cause?

Recently I and several other LDS women met with a group of wives of ambassadors to the United States. As we talked about the vital role of mothers and the family and the innate spirituality of women, several expressed curiosity about Relief Society. And when we exchanged good-byes, more than one ambassador's wife drew me aside and said, "There is such a wonderful feeling among your people. Could I find out more about your organization?"

If we build it, they will come. My dear sisters, the time has come for us to arise as never before and to let our light be a standard for the nations. We are up to the challenge, for there is nothing more beautiful than a woman under the influence of the Holy Ghost. There is nothing more compelling than a woman who with gentle strength stands for righteousness, whether within the walls of her own home or before an international gathering of women.

The Lord needs every one of us. He needs those leading our children and our young women. He needs every eighteen- and eighty-eight-year-old. Everyone who's been to college and everyone who hasn't. All who have borne children and all who delight in children. Lifelong members and those baptized yesterday. Those skilled at administering and those with a talent for ministering one-on-one. Those who speak Vietnamese and those who speak

Portuguese. He needs sisters who can testify of the doctrines of the kingdom, sisters who can receive personal inspiration and teach with the Spirit, sisters who show by their actions that their hearts are centered on Him.

He needs every one of us to fulfill our foreordained mission. Shall we not, as women of God, go forward in so great a cause? Shall we not proclaim from the rooftops that the gospel is a gospel of gladness and that we are thrilled to be who we are?

I have reflected many times on the mistake I made in high school when I stumbled under the weight of popular opinion. But I won't do it again. I pledge this evening to spend my life bearing witness of what I know to be true. Will you join with me? Can we stand together with our hearts devoted to the Lord and knit together in love one for another? If we will, the Relief Society will become a phenomenal force for good, a magnet and a beacon for those seeking truth, a haven for protecting the family and the nobility of womanhood. If we build a sisterhood filled with light, the women of the world will come. And we will become one of the greatest missionary forces this Church has ever seen. I repeat: The cause of women of God is to help build the kingdom of God. This is something we cannot be casual about. It is our stewardship, our privilege, our destiny.

Jesus Christ did not come in glory when He first came to earth, but when He comes again He will reign as Lord of lords and King of kings. The restored gospel will cover the earth. The Lord's kingdom will not fail. Which means that for you and me there is just this question: Will we go forward in so great a cause? Tonight I declare with the Apostle Paul what I wish I had said thirty years ago in high school, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ" (Romans 1:16). He is our Advocate, our Deliverer, and our Redeemer. Of His divinity I bear witness, and to His work I pledge my life.

1. Eliza R. Snow, *The Evening News*, 15 January 1870.
2. Joseph F. Smith, Conference Report, October 1907, 4; punctuation regularized.
3. Brigham Young, *Deseret News Weekly*, 5 January 1854, 2.
4. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932-51), 5:24.
5. Joseph Smith, "A Record of the Organization, and Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 28 April 1842, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; hereafter cited as Nauvoo Minutes. See also *History of the Church*, 4:605.
6. Emma Smith, Nauvoo Minutes, 24 March 1842. See also Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 36.
7. Joseph Smith, Nauvoo Minutes, 9 June 1842. See also *History of the Church*, 5:25.
8. Gordon B. Hinckley, Liverpool England Fireside, 31 August 1995. Quoted in Mike Cannon, "Missionary Theme Was Pervasive during Visit of President Hinckley," *Deseret News*, 9 September 1995.
9. Lucy Mack Smith, Nauvoo Minutes, 24 March 1842. See also *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 545.
10. Joseph Smith, *The Relief Society Magazine*, March 1919, 129. See also *Women's Exponent* 12 (1 September 1883): 51.
11. Joseph Smith, Nauvoo Minutes, 9 June 1842. See also *History of the Church*, 5:25.
12. *Joseph F. Smith, Teachings of Presidents of the Church Series* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 184.

13. Joseph F. Smith, Minutes of the General Board of the Relief Society, 17 March 1914, 55-56, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. See also *Joseph F. Smith*, 184.
14. Spencer W. Kimball, "Relief Society: Its Promise and Potential," *Ensign*, March 1976, 4.
15. Gordon B. Hinckley, quoted in "Church Leader Addresses Growth, Efforts to Improve People's Lives," *Church News*, 18 March 2000.

