TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

Lorie Winder Stromberg

POWER HUNGRY

IN “WHY DON’T Women Hold the Priesthood? A Brief but Insightful Interview,” Betina Lindsey wrote:

Priesthood? A Brief but Insightful N “WHY DON’T Women Hold the

They might beat up the men,” is

Omni of responsibility over rights is problematic. In a discussion I had with Margaret Toscano, she suggested that Mormon women seem to have plenty of delegated responsibilities. What is lacking is their right within the organization to oversee and establish their responsibilities. Responsibility devoid of rights is servitude.

I’m weary of the false dichotomies set up for women in the Church. Former Relief Society General President Barbara B. Smith and Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve have both suggested that Mormon women ought to choose integrity over visibility, charity over charisma. What is wrong with having both integrity and visibility, both charity and charisma? Members of the Church’s male hierarchy don’t have to make such choices, so why should women?

If by power hungry you mean women must have a voice in the Church, then, yes, I’m power hungry. In a 1993 BYU Women’s Conference panel discussion on working with women, several male panelists admitted that they had never been forced to take women seriously until they became colleagues. While the panelists’ experiences were from secular settings, the question and answer period exploded with faithful, mainstream Mormon women wondering how they could get their Church leaders to listen to them. It was obvious to me, and I said so during this session, that women in the Church will never have a voice until, as in the secular arena, they are seen as colleagues—in this case, spiritual colleagues—within the power structure of the Church. How else will women truly be heard?

If by power hungry you mean I believe women should not only be represented but should also be an integral part of every major decision-making body of the Church, then, yes, I’m power hungry. I’ve often said that I’m passionately ambivalent about priesthood. I’m not fond of hierarchies and am leery of structures that promote them because they are almost always abusive. However, having power within an institution is preferable to institutional powerlessness, particularly if we are able as women to bring to the center of our religious community the consciousness of what it is like on the margins.

Positional power in the Church is granted primarily to those who hold the priesthood. This is particularly true above the local level. While a charismatic woman might have significant influence on a ward or perhaps even a stake level, beyond that point, positional power for women evaporates. Since, for the
most part, we as a Church no longer recognize charismatic power—only positional power—is it possible for women to have equal status to men in the Church without being ordained to the priesthood?

Perhaps recognizing the inequity inherent in an all-male priesthood, Bruce Hafen tried to minimize its importance. In his keynote address, “Women, Feminism, and the Blessings of the Priesthood,” given at the 1985 BYU Women’s Conference, Hafen listed several of the blessings that were available to both men and women in the Church. As if it were a mere trifle, he added, “The one category of blessing in which the role of women is not the same as that of men holding the priesthood is that of administering the gospel and governing all things” (my emphasis). As I read this, I wondered, how could Hafen deliver this line with a straight face, and perhaps more disturbing, how could an audience of women listen to it in silence? If by power hungry you mean I would welcome a heightened ability to bless the lives of others, then, yes, I’m power hungry. Aside from its administrative function, if priesthood is merely a sort of temporal permission to tap spiritual resources already available to the faithful, then it is superfluous. If, however, priesthood truly is a real, bestowed power that can enhance our ability to bring comfort and peace and joy into the world, then, yes, I’m power hungry and unambivalently so. Who would not righteously want such a power?

Finally, if by power hungry you mean I want the ability to participate in a model of power based on partnership rather than patriarchy, based on empowerment rather than domination, then, yes, I’m power hungry. Scott Bartchy, UCLA professor of Christian origins and early church history gave a Sunstone symposium presentation in which he asserted that Christ came to overthrow traditional models of power, which were based on dominance, coercion, and control. In their place, Jesus offered a model in which power is used to empower. Power used to dominate, coerce, or control will always burn itself out, Bartchy suggests. Only power used to empower is everlasting.

By now I’ve given sufficient weight to the word power in the term “power hungry.” Alas, I’ve neglected the word hungry. Just as by power, I do not mean domination or coercion, but rather voice and influence and empowerment, so by hungry I do not mean gluttony. Rather, I’m talking about sustenance. I’m talking about a soul-deep yearning for a life-sustaining, sacramental meal to which all are invited.

NOTES
6. The material in this paragraph was developed during a discussion with Stacy Burton.

RECIPIENT OF A MOMENT’S FUGUE
after Hart Crane

In Havana the old street vendors
sell their coconut death masks,
fiber-wigged, a kiss of crimson lips
by the barbershops and news-stands,
cluttered street corner trash,
a boy holds a cage of azulejos,
blue buntings captured in the distant mountains where the royal palms sway,

The color of love’s breath (heaven’s perhaps)
his eyes milked to so much regret,
of having cut the stem from the flower, desire flung from the cathedral’s bell tower,
shattered on the cobble stones,
this daily exchange of mortals
what is ravaged from this land, beyond the vendors, birds, flowers, beyond anguish,
el desespero de cada día,
from the flower, desire flung from the cathedral’s bell tower, shattered on the cobble stones,
this daily exchange of mortals
what is ravaged from this land, beyond the vendors, birds, flowers, beyond anguish,
el desespero de cada día,
each day’s despair, broken, swollen, a rock thrown at memory’s crystal veneer, fractured light everywhere.

—VIRGIL SUAREZ