

Gender Studies 3960

Divine Nature, Individual Worth, Virtue

And its Harmful Effects on Young Women in the LDS Church

Cassidy Buhler

University of Utah

April 2016

Abstract

In countless talks at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) General Conference, it is pronounced that Young Women have an obvious role in the church and that is their contribution to their Heavenly Father. One of the auxiliaries in the LDS church is the Young Women's Mutual Society, colloquially known as "Young Women's." This auxiliary teaches LDS Young Women specific values, including divine nature, individual worth and virtue. These values may negatively impact gender dynamics between men and women in the LDS church community.

Main Body

"...When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*" (*Joseph Smith-History 1:17 Pearl of Great Price*)

This opening scripture is directly from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint doctrine: The Pearl of Great Price. The Church was founded on a young man named Joseph Smith. He craved to know the truth and decided to ask upon God. He prayed in a grove where God and Jesus Christ appeared. They told young Joseph Smith that none of the churches were true and that he must restore the only true church. Joseph Smith organized the Mormon Church in 1830, which is now known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Church of Jesus Chris of Latter-day Saints is only one of three branches of Mormonism. These three braches do not associate with each other, however, they all follow the

testimony and writings of Joseph Smith. While these three branches share common beliefs from Joseph Smith, they are drastically different. The Mormon Church released a Manifesto that stop the condoning of plural marriage. After this statement, the fundamentalists, widely known as the most radical branch of Mormonism, broke off and moved elsewhere to continue their practice of polygamy.

It should be emphasized to not confuse the LDS church with the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saint (FLDS) Mormons who are not modernly associated in any way. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has grown exponentially from it's founding in 1830. According to the *2015 Statistical Report* (December 31 2015) The First Presidency announced that there were 15,634,199 members of The LDS church worldwide at the closing of 2015. The primary goal of the LDS church is to live with your Heavenly Father again. There are many requirements to get to the Celestial Kingdom starting at baptism and leading up to temple marriage. The LDS church believes that a man and a woman must have very different roles in a marriage. "IN THE PREMORTAL REALM, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshipped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life. The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally." (*The Family: A Proclamation to the World, September 2013*) The Family Proclamation is a significant aspect of doctrine in the LDS church. This is to be kept in mind as we discuss gender roles and discrimination of non-binary gender.

With such a large population there are many auxiliaries for the members to be classified in. To fully understand the administration of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one should have some common knowledge on the different groups. The LDS church is a three-hour block every Sunday. During each hour, depending on age and gender, one will attend certain classes. There are four general auxiliaries within the LDS church that we will discuss: Primary, Relief Society, Sunday school, and Young Women. A brief explanation of each group is below.

For children under the age of 12 they attend primary, an allotted hour of church meetings specifically for young children. This is for them to develop a learning and understanding of their Heavenly Father. Because it is for such young people there is a variety of activities including: singing songs, arts and crafts, and leader instruction. “Primary is for children ages 18 months through 11 years. The Primary theme is “All thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children” (3 Nephi 22:13).” *LDS Handbook 2: Administering the Church (11.1)* once a child graduates primary at the age of 12 years old, they begin Sunday school. Sunday school involves more discussions on intensive topics in the LDS doctrine. There is a required maturity for Sunday school. “All Church members ages 12 and older are members of Sunday School. Those of other faiths are also welcome to attend and participate in Sunday school classes.” *LDS Handbook 2: Administering the Church (12.1)*

After attending Sunday school, children will also begin to attend Young Men or Young Women’s. “All adult women in the Church are members of Relief Society. A young woman normally advances into Relief Society on her 18th birthday or in the coming year. By age 19,

each young woman should be fully participating in Relief Society.” *LDS Handbook 2:*

Administrating the Church (9.1.4)

Lastly, there is the Young Women’s program. In the LDS handbook under the Purpose and Objectives it states, “The purpose of the Young Women organization is to help each young woman be worthy to make and keep sacred covenants and receive the ordinances of the temple.” *LDS Handbook 2: Administrating the Church (10.1.1)* The Young Women’s program is for girls ages 12-18. During the opening exercises the Young Women and their leaders will recite the Young Women Theme together, “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love Him. We will ‘stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places’ (Mosiah 18:9) as we strive to live the Young Women values, which are: Faith, Divine Nature, Individual Worth, Knowledge, Choice and Accountability, Good Works, Integrity, and Virtue.

We believe as we come to accept and act upon these values, we will be prepared to strengthen home and family, make and keep sacred covenants, receive the ordinances of the temple, and enjoy the blessings of exaltation.” *Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God (pg.3)*

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints perceives gender as binary and innate. “Some things cannot be changed. Doctrine cannot be changed.” (*For Time and All Eternity, Boyd K Packer, General Conference, October 1993*) This is detrimental to any person who does not fit in those two categories. A man and woman are vital to the Plan of Salvation and going against the confines in which the LDS church has declared risks one’s ability to reach the Celestial Kingdom, the highest kingdom of glory in the afterlife. Because of their strong belief

in marriage between a man and a woman, other genders are ignored and considered nonexistent. Due to the fact that male and female are the only genders acknowledged in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there are strict roles that go along with the gender. In the specific text for Young Women—Personal Progress, it provides exercises and projects to prepare for motherhood and one's exaltation. There are eight total values, however, three stand out from the rest.

Each Young Women value has a dedicated color and an expanded definition in the Personal Progress booklet. The goal of the Personal Progress program is gain a testimony in Jesus Christ and to practice the values: Faith, Divine Nature, Individual Worth, Knowledge, Choice and Accountability, Good Works, Integrity, and Virtue. *Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God* (pg. 6) "The Personal Progress program uses the eight Young Women values to help you understand more fully who you are, why you are here on the earth, and what you should be doing as a daughter of God to prepare for the day you go to the temple to make sacred covenants." The values and teachings of the Young Women program have a significant impact on young girls in the LDS church. However, the Young Men are not upheld to the same values as their female counterparts. These values are specifically aimed at young girls in the LDS Church. This inequality causes harm to both men and women. Values such as "Divine Nature, Individual Worth, and Virtue" are targeted towards girls. Because of this emphasis it leaves the Young Women to work and strengthen these values. The church places significant on the girls in the church to obtain these standards while the boys aren't filed with the same pressure. Many religions often insist on gender roles thus raising boys and girls

differently and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is no exception. It is not only prominent in the patriarchy LDS culture, but the LDS church history highlights sexism as well.

Divine Nature

(Hold High the Torch, Margaret D. Nadauld, Young Women General President, Ensign, May 2002) “The divine light which you carry within your soul is inherited from God because you are His daughter. Part of the light, which makes you so magnificent, is the blessing of womanhood. What a wonderful thing it is for you to know that your female, feminine characteristics are an endowment from God. Our latter-day prophets teach that “gender is an essential characteristic of individual pre-mortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.””

The divine nature in a woman is likened to such things as grace, poise, and elegance. In the Personal Progress handbook there are projects for strengthening one’s divine nature. Often that includes bringing out your “feminine” qualities to prepare for motherhood. From a young age it is hard to fathom disobeying the path one has been set on. There is much discrimination to a woman who decides not to have children. A famous scripture is often quoted when women question their role in the world, “And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.” *(Genesis 1:22)*

Being a woman and being given the ability to bear children is considered a gift in the LDS church. Denying this gift of motherhood greatly disappoints not only church leaders, but

also family and friends in the church. Divine Nature is not only a value that one must earn as a Daughter of God. Divine Nature is a value that will impact one's future husband and family.

In the LDS Church one is given "experiences" one must fulfill to receive the award of completion "As a young woman you are blessed with divine feminine qualities. Increase your understanding of and appreciation for womanhood. Read Proverbs 31:10–31 and two talks on womanhood from a conference issue of the Church magazines. Review what "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" says about being a wife and a mother. Then ask your mother or another mother you admire what she thinks are important attributes for being a mother. List the attributes in your journal. Then choose one of those attributes and strive to develop it. After two weeks report your success to a parent or leader." *Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God (Divine Nature, Required Value Experience, page 22)* The uses of womanhood and motherhood are interchangeable in this text. It is emphasized that to find one's divine nature one must look within one's self to bring out one's feminine qualities. Although a women's divine nature is clearly stated, there is no mention of males having divine nature. The emotional pressure young women must face knowing that they have an image to uphold is outstanding. This now leads to the second value: Individual Worth.

Individual Worth

Within the LDS Church, marriage is essential to go to the Celestial Kingdom. Because of this a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman. As a result, members of the LDS church face significant pressure to get married to another member as soon as possible. At Brigham Young University, an LDS religious institute, the percentage of married students is at

a staggering 25% (*OIT/SAAS T19, Institutional Studies, 2014*.) Members of the LDS church believe that is crucial for a woman to keep her standards high so she can have a temple marriage. Without a husband she cannot have celestial glory. This belief causes women in the LDS church to experience stress about their Individual Worth.

Personal Progress experiences emphasize one's role as a wife and how that ties to their Individual Worth. "You are preparing now to fulfill a unique mission on the earth. Read Doctrine and Covenants 88:119. In your journal make a list of your hopes and dreams for your future home, family, and education and some important things you would like to accomplish in your life, including becoming a wife and mother. Then write a plan that will help you achieve your goals. Share this plan with a family member, leader, or friend." (*Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God, Individual Worth, Additional Value Experiences, page 33*) In the LDS Personal Progress handbook Individual Worth is not entirely about one's individual being, but also includes what a woman has to offer others. The concept of Individual Worth is damaging to the self-esteem of young girls because they are taught that their self-worth is also based on how they perform as a wife and a mother. High standards are expected of youth girls in the LDS church and not meeting those standards can lead to feelings of rejection and isolation. The LDS church places a large amount of pressure to have a near-perfect marriage and family that even a slight error in the relationship can cause extreme stress to the woman. As her primary role in the marriage is to care for the children, failing to do so can give a women loss of meaning and worth.

For The Strength of Youth is a pamphlet defining the high standards youth in the LDS church must withhold. In the Dating section it states, “As you enter your adult years, make dating and marriage a high priority. Seek a companion who is worthy to go to the temple to be sealed to you for time and all eternity. Marrying in the temple and creating an eternal family are essential in God’s plan of happiness.” (*For The Strength of Youth, Dating*) Dating in the LDS Church is a high priority once one reaches adulthood. It is to prepare one for marriage. Members of the LDS church believe that temple marriage is the only way one can live in celestial glory and being unable to marry in the temple can be emotionally crushing to someone who has lived their life for such greatness. If temple marriage is not attained then one cannot live in the Celestial Kingdom with their Father in Heaven.

Virtue

Virtue is often tied with Sexual Purity. In the *For Strength of Youth* it states, “The Lord’s standard regarding sexual purity is clear and unchanging. Do not have any sexual relations before marriage, and be completely faithful to your spouse after marriage. Do not allow the media, your peers, or others to persuade you that sexual intimacy before marriage is acceptable. It is not. In God’s sight, sexual sins are extremely serious. They defile the sacred power God has given us to create life. The prophet Alma taught that sexual sins are more serious than any other sins except murder or denying the Holy Ghost (see **Alma 39:5**).” (*For The Strength of Youth, Sexual Purity*) The strong opinion and views on “Virtue” in the LDS Church can be difficult to follow. The fact that the prophet Alma likened sexual sins to murder or denying the Holy Ghost is disturbing to say the least. An action that an LDS leader

would consider sexual and sinful is then compared to murder and/or denying the Holy Ghost. This is open to much interpretation and instills fear into young people who fail to obtain the leader's standards.

In the LDS church, celibacy is directly correlated with purity and worth, "Prepare to be worthy to enter the temple and to participate in temple ordinances. Read Alma chapter 5. Make a list of the questions Alma asks. Answer the questions for yourself, and make a list of the things you can and will do to prepare yourself to be pure and worthy to enter the temple and receive all the blessings our Heavenly Father has promised His beloved daughters." (*Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God, Virtue, page 71*) Members of the LDS church believes if a young woman does not remain virtuous and stay away from young men and their temptations then she is to be punished. Contrary to this belief, if a young woman is to have sexual contact would make a young women impure and therefore unworthy to enter the temple. This again causes extreme stress to the young women. Currently, at Brigham Young University, many young women are coming out about their sexual assault. BYU has a strict honor code and young women are reporting that they are under scrutiny if they are assaulted while breaking the honor code. If a young woman gets raped or sexually assaulted she is faced with extreme consequences. Not only is her Honor Code violation and academic standing in question, but also her sexual purity for temple marriage is at risk. Because of these risks the young woman is often silenced and victim-blamed for her assailant's actions. The strong views in the LDS church on pre-marital sex make it difficult for young women to seek for help in these devastating situations. "Students must abstain from the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal substances and from the intentional misuse or abuse of any substance.

Sexual misconduct; obscene or indecent conduct or expressions; disorderly or disruptive conduct; participation in gambling activities; involvement with pornographic, erotic, indecent, or offensive material; and any other conduct or action inconsistent with the principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Honor Code is not permitted.” (*Brigham Young University, University Policies, Honor Code, Conduct*)

Because of the fear of losing their virtue, young women often do not report rape and or sexual assault. Once a young person has premarital sex it is a very long and hard process of repenting and cleansing your soul and public image. When one repents from a sin they must first talk to their bishop so he can decide what actions are appropriate in their situation. Often, that includes abstaining from taking the sacrament at weekly church meetings, praying to their heavenly father for forgiveness, and studious scripture study. Sexual relations are a very taboo topic in the LDS Church that leads to guilt even after a woman is married.

The LDS church believes that modesty is crucial to being a virtuous young child of God. In the *For The Strength of Youth* it gives a brief list of clothing women should avoid. However, men do not have such specific guidelines thus giving them room for interpretation, “Immodest clothing is any clothing that is tight, sheer, or revealing in any other manner. Young women should avoid short shorts and short skirts, shirts that do not cover the stomach, and clothing that does not cover the shoulders or is low-cut in the front or the back. Young men should also maintain modesty in their appearance.” (*For The Strength of Youth, Dress and Appearance*)

The constant stress and pressure of covering up one's body has misleading messages. It is often associated with fear and guilt of their body. Healthy sexual feelings are quickly suppressed, as they are toxic to their religious being before marriage. Sexual urges must be ignored until one is married and is used for procreation purposes.

"I will prepare to enter the temple and remain pure and worthy. My thoughts and actions will be based on high moral standards." (*Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God, Virtue, page 69*) Not having the "high moral standards" of an LDS woman implies one being lesser than. "Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies" The words "pure" and "worthy" are often associated with virtue and this can cause feelings of isolation and loneliness to young women. (*Proverbs 31:10*)

Conclusion

These values and how they are perceived in the LDS Mormon culture is detrimental to young people. A woman's Divine Nature, Individual Worth, and Virtue are all based on how she holds herself in the eye of others. The emotional damage that this causes is quite serious and hard to repair. Not fulfilling the dreams that were instilled in her at a young age can give the young woman a feeling of failure and loss of worth. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a widely popular with much public influence. With every meeting and talk there are values and standards that are preached and taught. With such an influence on young people it is especially important that influential LDS leaders are careful with their words. Teaching young people that their worth as a Child of God is dependent on these values is an unhealthy

way to feed their minds. Young people are especially moldable. It is irresponsible to take advantage of their naivety and give them unattainable standards to fulfill. Even as the child matures they will have a difficult time forgetting the teachings they learned in their youth. As they begin to form ideas and opinions on their own it becomes increasingly difficult separating their own beliefs between ones instilled in them as a child. The Young Women values stand firm and the members of the LDS church live their lives to conform to such values.

It is difficult to ignore the strictly enforced gender roles. The values are meant to strengthen the woman, but only as the woman that the LDS Church desires. The constant fear of sinning and judgment is unhealthy-especially to the youth. With Young Values such as Divine Nature, Individual Worth, and Virtue, there is great pressure to withhold and to be a desirable woman. The values themselves have positive meaning, but the ultimate outcome—temple marriage—is what ruins the values and their worth.

The emphasis on temple marriage through the Young Women values is prominent in talks by LDS leaders; “This should be a glorious goal for every woman in the Church. It should be a constant motivation to live with honor, to live with integrity, to live with virtue, to live with love and service.” (*Daughters of God, Prophet Gordon B Hinckley, October 1991*) The Prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints presented this talk during General Conference of October 1991. The most influential voice in the LDS Church was telling young women that their top priority is to be worthy for temple marriage.

The intentions of the LDS Church are meaningful. In countless talks they build up women and their part in the church, “First of all, I want you to be proud you are a woman. I want you to feel the reality of what that means, to know who you truly are. You are literally a spirit daughter of heavenly parents with a divine nature and an eternal destiny.” (*To Young Women*, Jeffrey R. Holland, October 2005) The reason why the women are important is because of their future contributions to the Celestial Kingdom. It is not because of whom they are a person. It is not because of their love for themselves. It is because of what they have to “offer” to their Heavenly Father. According to the church, these young women are in debt to their religion. It’s not about what they can do for themselves; it’s not about them as a person at all. The LDS Church believes that these thoughts are selfish. The women of the LDS church’s lives are supposed to be about their husbands and their children and most importantly—their Heavenly Father.