

The Implications of Feminism for BYU

Elouise Bell

The academic year 1975-76 is rather a momentous year as far as commemorations go. We're launching into the celebration of our 200th birthday as a nation; we're celebrating the centennial of BYU—the 100th birthday of this great institution; and in memory of the Seneca Falls Convention 127 years ago, and in observance of International Women's Year, the United States Government is issuing a special commemorative stamp. (If you don't remember the significance of Seneca Falls, I urge you to look it up.) Nineteen seventy-five has been proclaimed by the United Nations, by the President of the United States, and by the Governor of the State of Utah as International Women's Year. When I was informed that I was to be given the honor of addressing a BYU forum, I thought that it would perhaps be my lot to inaugurate BYU's celebration of International Women's Year. But President Oaks beat me to the draw on that particular matter, as he does on all matters, by making two key speeches on the subject of women's concerns and by taking some steps in the university administration that are going to be very significant for women. Far from feeling cheated out of my opportunity to inaugurate our observation of Women's Year, however, I am delighted by the vigorous action the president has taken and by what this portends, but I will add my voice to his on the matter of women's concerns at BYU by turning my attention for this talk to the implications of feminism for BYU and for the larger LDS community.

I would like to begin by recounting something that occurred a number of years ago on the BYU campus. It happened in a forum assembly in the George Albert Smith Fieldhouse. The speaker was introduced as a Russian Communist, a foreign policy expert who would address us on certain Soviet concerns and give us the Soviet perspective on a number of vital issues. As you might expect, he drew a

A forum address delivered 30 September 1975 at Brigham Young University.
Elouise Bell is assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University.

large audience. He spoke most lucidly, although with a rather heavy accent. But the forum progressed smoothly, if occasionally rather excitedly, to the end of his talk, at which point he suddenly lost his Russian accent and informed us that he was not a Russian, not a Communist, but a faculty member of a large California university, a political scientist if I remember correctly, and an expert in Soviet policy. He had chosen this particular way of presenting the Russians' viewpoint to dramatize his message.

As I was leaving the fieldhouse that day, two faculty members behind me were talking. One said to the other, "Well, it was very informative and I really enjoyed it. The only thing that disappoints me is that we can't have a real Communist talk on campus." To which the other replied, "A real Communist! Are you serious? We can't even have a real *Democrat!*"

Well, of course that was long ago and far away. But that anecdote came vividly back to my mind as I prepared these remarks and especially as I talked to people in other valleys than our own. When they asked me what I was going to talk about, I told them, and they said "You mean they're going to have a real feminist talk at BYU?" I'm not sure how to answer that question because I'm not sure what those people mean when they say a "real feminist." East of the Utah-Colorado border and certainly west of the Nevada border, I would be considered only a very moderate feminist if I were indeed granted that label at all. Within the boundaries of this state I think I might be considered only *too* real a feminist for some people's taste. And even now as I am talking to you, even now as you are hearing me, some of you have already decided what I'm going to say and what you think about what I'm going to say. To put it another way, there are some people who will not hear what I say, but only what they think I have said. And as a teacher, I feel a strong impulse to correct this situation as much as I can. I want to challenge everyone who is listening to me or who may read these remarks to follow the example that President Oaks has set. Watching President Oaks in the last year or so as a number of women's concerns and issues of feminism have come to his attention and required his action, I have observed that he considers each issue on its own merits. He brings the tools of his trained mind and his total education to bear upon each issue in turn, instead of making a blanket decision about a package labeled somewhat amorphously "Women's Concerns," "Feminism," "The Women's Movement." And this is the challenge that I would like to put before every student in this studentbody, the men no less than the women,

the faculty no less than the students, and the community members as well.

Perhaps one of the first lessons a university or college tries to teach the student who comes within its influence is the lesson of not prejudging, of not deciding before examination, of looking at the evidence, of bringing the critical mind to bear on a matter. Wayne Booth, one of the foremost rhetoricians and critics in the country today, formerly dean of the Liberal Arts College of the University of Chicago, and a BYU graduate, has written a brilliant article called "Is There Any Knowledge that a Man Must Have?" In this article he talks about the way an educated person approaches a problem. He says that you cannot tell whether a man is educated by whether he believes in God or does not believe in God, by whether he believes the UFO's come from outer space or do not come from outer space, but, he says, you can tell whether a man is educated by the way he goes about examining the problem. My intention in this address is not to persuade anyone to my particular set of views on the matter of feminism, but hopefully to convince everyone to consider this important matter by bringing to bear on it the best tools that a good education can provide. I'd like to proceed by asking a series of pertinent questions. I hope that none of them is impertinent, but all of them pertinent to the matter of feminism and to its implications for BYU.

(In parenthesis I'd like to say here by way of instruction—and teaching is one of the things that teachers like to do best when they have any free moments from filling out report forms—I'd like to get in a little instruction here and say that you will not hear me using in any serious way the terms "Women's Lib" or "Women's Libber" during these remarks or at any other time. These words are considered pejorative, that is, negative words, by any woman who is seriously involved in the women's movement. They are terms of scorn, mocking terms. It is appropriate to speak of the Women's Liberation Movement, although the concepts that are involved in that phrase are narrower than in some other phrases. But the terms "Women's Lib" and "Women's Libber" are considered to be and are *intended* to be insulting. So if you are talking about this matter, it is more precise and certainly more polite to use other terms: The Women's Movement, the Feminist Movement, Women's Rights Movement, Feminism, and so forth.)

Let us begin, then, with a definition. What is a feminist? What are we talking about? What does it mean to say that Sister Bell is a feminist or that President Oaks is a feminist? Well, surely you could find in 1975

enough definitions to fill a semester's notebook. I'm not going to turn to any printed definitions but rather give you my definition, which I think is simple but useful for our purposes. In my understanding, a feminist is a person, whether a man or a woman, who believes that historically there have been inequities in the education and treatment of women in several or many spheres of society and who is interested in correcting those inequities as he or she sees them. That's about the extent of my definition of feminism. That's about as far as I'm prepared to go with a definition that will cover the views of the many different people I know who are concerned about feminism. To become more specific is to start to branch off into different aspects of feminism about which agreement varies. You'll notice that my definition has two corollaries, the belief in historical inequities in the treatment of women and the concern for righting those wrongs. I will not make an extensive case here for the fact that there have been inequities in the treatment of women. This is a fact easily substantiated, and anyone who is interested in finding out the details in specific areas can do so. But, for example: Women were not allowed to vote until 1920. This was a political inequity. Even today, women are paid for the same work in some jobs as little as sixty percent of what men in the very same job will be paid. This is an economic inequity. Of all the people in the world who are illiterate, more than eighty percent are women. This is an educational inequity. As I say, there are many different spheres in which these inequities can be found, and different feminists are interested in correcting different problems. You will find individual feminists enthusiastic about particular concerns here as in any movement.

Let me then now pose a second question. What are the concerns of the feminist who is looking particularly at higher education? Or to make the question even more specific, what is a feminist at BYU concerned about? A feminist focusing on education is concerned with it from the very earliest years of a child's life. A feminist is interested in the way boys and girls are portrayed in children's storybooks, for instance. She is interested in the implicit lessons that are taught in the textbooks used in the early grades, in the textbooks used in junior high and high school, in the classes that are offered, in the counseling that is given both formally and informally, in the kind of messages that young women receive through their educational careers, messages that for years have said: "Don't be too smart." "Don't compete with the fellows." "Don't take certain courses; you probably won't succeed. If you do succeed, you won't be happy," and so forth. Many kinds of

training and many kinds of conditioning go on long before higher education. But let us focus on higher education. What is the feminist concerned about in higher education? First of all, that women have equal opportunities for scholarships and admissions. And in that regard I might say that BYU is moving ahead. The president's scholarship, named after the current president of the Church, and so currently titled the Spencer W. Kimball scholarship, is now, for the very first year, available to women as well as to men. (You'll be interested to know also that the prestigious Rhodes scholarship offered by Oxford University will probably be made available to women very soon.) The feminist is also concerned that when women come to college, they are counseled wisely, that they are told about a full range of options for career choices, that they are not channeled into two or three traditional majors only, that they are not, for instance, directed only into education, into home economics, into nursing. In April, 1975, BYU granted 1,510 degrees to women. Of that total, 1,180 were in two colleges—740 in Child Development and Family Relations and 440 in Education. While these are fine fields for women, there are many other opportunities. There are as many opportunities for women as for men, and it's this message that the feminist wants to communicate to the young college woman. The feminist is concerned also that at a university, a young woman have many strong and positive female role models. That is to say, she ought to see women in positions of authority, in positions of success, in positions of achievement, and she ought to get the message, indirectly as well as directly, that there are opportunities for women and there are many options open.

Another aspect of higher education which has been sorely neglected and will take considerable effort to reverse has to do with the whole presentation of knowledge, the whole organization of knowledge. While I do not have time to present this case here, let me just explain briefly. Nearly all of the disciplines—history, art, economics, agriculture, medicine, literature—nearly all of these disciplines have been organized by men, developed by men, the textbooks have been written by men, and they are, by and large, *about* men. Now the obvious thing to say in rebuttal is that most of the great achievements of the world have been made by men. Well, that is an easy rebuttal. But we are not sure that it is entirely an accurate rebuttal, and what many feminists are now calling for is a reexamination of the whole information basis of various disciplines. We know, for instance, that throughout the centuries much of the world's agriculture has been done by women. While not the case in our country, women have done

much of the farming throughout the other nations of the world, and therefore it is only logical to assume that a great many inventions, discoveries, and processes in agriculture were developed by women. Even the way we divide up history in order to look at it is usually on a political (and hence largely male) basis, the reign of such-and-such a king, or such-and-such an administration, or we take a chronological look at history. Many scholars now say if we look at history from the perspective of the other half of the human race, that is the female half of the human race, we might make very different divisions, we might ask different questions about history, and we might gain entire new insights if we ask a different set of questions. So the feminist is concerned with a scholarly, rational review of the actual fundamental underpinnings of most disciplines. As I said, this is a large order, but it's an exciting kind of thing. It's the kind of thing that has gone on before in the history of ideas, and it is certainly time for it to happen now.

But what would the feminist at BYU be particularly concerned about? She would be interested in all of these things that have been mentioned and in a number of others. Let me mention just two concerns out of a great many that interest me. The first has to do with what it is now fashionable to call life-planning. Someone has said that the average BYU coed has planned her life up to the point of naming her first four children, and beyond that she has made no plans. I am very much concerned that we help our young women to view their lives as a series of changing phases and that they use these college years to lay groundwork which will serve them in future years. Let us grant that most young women who come to Brigham Young University are planning marriage within four to eight years. I would like very much to see us, while we have those young women here at BYU, help them think through their lives beyond the wedding reception. No one, of course, can predict life in advance, but there are certain things that we can be aware of. We should help our young women gain competence and skill in specific areas so that if it were necessary for them to earn the family income for a short or a long period of time, they could do so. If they were widowed, if they were divorced, there would be a solid base of skill and college training on which they could build. I hope that we would encourage every young woman to plan for her years after child rearing. Certainly child-rearing years are crucial years, key years, but thanks to the advancements of science, medicine and nutrition, most women today have twenty-five to thirty-five years of healthy, relatively vigorous life left to them after their youngest children have

left home. Now a woman does not suddenly become, at the age of forty-five or fifty, a vital, questing, self-actuating, self-determining, person. She doesn't finally see her youngest child off to college and then decide "Now I will become a person of fulfillment with many outside interests and much that I can contribute to the community and to the world around me." That just doesn't happen. We know what happens to talents that are not developed. The college years are the years to sow the seeds which may not be harvested for many decades but which can be nurtured and developed and be growing nonetheless. College women need to develop habits of using their minds, being interested in things, learning skills, asking significant questions, being alert to the world around them so that these attitudes can continue, perhaps lessened in quantity but still vital in quality, during the child-rearing years and ready to be expanded afterwards.

You may have read about Sister Camilla Kimball's example in this respect. In all the years of her marriage to President Spencer W. Kimball, Sister Kimball has continued her education, taking a class regularly every year, except for one or two years when they were traveling. This is an example of the kind of thing that I am talking about. Surely while her children were small, she did not have the time or opportunity to do the things she can now do, but those habits were there, being nurtured and developed, building on the knowledge and talents she had gained while in college.

Let me voice my second concern as a feminist at BYU, and please keep in mind my definition of feminism. You may be familiar with the expression "separate but equal." It's a term that was used when racial integration was an issue in the schools years ago. The phrase "separate but equal" was offered by those who believed that the races, black and white, should have separate schools, but schools that were, at least in theory, equal in facilities. Thus, a black child and a white child would not go to school together, but theoretically they would get equivalent educations. Sometimes I have a nervous feeling that what we have at BYU is exactly the opposite. We have "integrated but unequal" education. Certainly our young women and our young men are integrated. I do not believe that there is any institution in the United States in which men and women are so thoroughly integrated as at BYU! But I wonder, in some cases, if the young women are receiving equal educations, or if they are not really receiving educations of quite a different character than the young men, educations in some senses quite inferior. Now why would this be so? Of course it has nothing to do with what the university offers to the young women, or what the

administration permits young women to take; instead it has to do with an attitude that I think many young women come with and some of us on the faculty may foster. Sometimes I worry that our young women pursue less rigorous courses than our young men. Sometimes I wonder if they are less concerned about the nature of the educational package that they are putting together. Integrated but unequal. I would ask the young women in the audience today: How eager are you for knowledge; how thirsty are you for wisdom and the learning that is available to you? What kind of priority do you put on your classes? Do they come rather far down on the list after your church activities, your social activities, your relationships with your roommates and a number of other interests? Most of our young women at BYU are very busy. That is not the issue. No one could ever accuse BYU young women of being slothful playgirls, but I sometimes feel there is not the active intellectual involvement that there should be. A bright young man at BYU usually realizes that there is a certain amount of knowledge and a number of ideas he must get into himself, that he must interiorize and make part of himself, before he's equipped to go out into the world and make his contribution. Sometimes the bright young woman takes a more passive attitude. She may be less avidly searching and questing than her male counterpart. But I certainly don't make this as a blanket indictment of all BYU women. I do think such an attitude is more prevalent than it should be, and it is more prevalent than the abilities and potential of our young women warrant.

Now let me ask a third question which may be of concern to many of you as you hear me, or anyone, talking about feminism, and that is the question, stated very directly: "Don't the objectives of feminism threaten the family as an institution? Isn't feminism at its heart inimical to many of the principles of the gospel, especially the principles of home and family?" Now this is a crucial question, because the family is the most sacred institution on earth, and any threat to the family as God has ordained it must certainly be resisted. But voices that decry the family as an institution, voices that tell us that there is a better way to do it than the family, are not new voices. They've been heard for centuries and they have been identified with many different movements—not just the women's movement, but with political movements, economic movements, and so-called philosophical movements. Most anti-utopian novelists—Orwell, Huxley, and other writers—have depicted a future in which children were reared in some way other than by the family. So, this is not a threat that comes anew with the feminist movement. More importantly, I am convinced that

only the more radical voices in the feminist movement would seriously harm the family. Of course we must vigorously counter any such voices wherever we find them.

It is true, however, that a central thrust of feminism is a reexamination of many of society's institutions: the family, the school, the penal institutions, the church. Many different institutions are being reevaluated, that is true. But reevaluation does not necessarily mean rejection, and in fact as I have read the writings of many feminists and talked with some of them, I have found that as a result of their reevaluation they are going back to family values and family traditions with a renewed zest and a renewed appreciation of what they mean. I find many people expressing a renewed determination to spend more time with their children, to spend less time "getting and spending"; less time after the material goods, and more time with the family. Many women feminists are not only spending more time with their children themselves, but urging and helping their husbands to find time to be with their children, to do things together as families, to work together as a family, play together as a family, get close to nature together as a family. I see many of these kinds of things happening. So, remember that reevaluation does not necessarily mean rejection. And while this reevaluation is going on, I certainly think that we as members of the Church ought to be involved so that we can show our brothers and sisters in the world just how important the family is, so that we may teach them what God has ordained in the way of family and family structure, and the eternal nature of the family, so that we may show them in specific ways how families can operate for the greater growth of every member.

Let me summarize, then, by saying, yes there are voices in the feminist movement which, in one sense or another, may threaten certain values which we cherish, but we can certainly counteract that threat and teach and instruct by example and by precept.

Now one more question. A question that I am asked very often when I'm away from campus and rather frequently when I'm on campus is this: "Can a person be a devoted member of the Church, a devoted Latter-day Saint, and a feminist at the same time?" Let me give two answers to that question. For the first answer I would like to cite a kind of evidence much revered in President Oaks' field of training—the law. If I understand it correctly, precedence is an important factor in the law, and do we ever have precedent on our side for the fact that women can be vital, dynamic feminists, and devoted, dedicated members of the Church at the same time! Our pioneer foremothers

here in the State of Deseret in the last century were very much aware of what was going on in the feminist movement. They were in touch with the great feminist leaders of America like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They not only corresponded with these women, but had them out here to Utah, talked with them, stumped with them from meeting to meeting. They were very active, very much concerned. They wrote essays, editorials, letters, and pamphlets; they worked vigorously for women's causes in those days and, at the same time, they went about their work in building up the kingdom. I'm talking about such leaders as Emmeline B. Wells, Susa Young Gates, and many other women whose names should be better known than they are. This is an intriguing chapter, a less known but intriguing chapter of our history, and light is being shed on it by a book which will be forthcoming within the week from Bookcraft. This is a book called *The Flight and the Nest* by Carol Lynn Pearson. It chronicles the activities of vigorous Latter-day Saint feminists of the past century. So there is great precedent for Mormon feminism.

But when people ask me that question, what they usually mean is this: "Is it possible to be an active, devoted member of the Church, and an active, concerned feminist when you know that sometimes there's going to be a seeming paradox in the principles and teachings and goals of these two parts of your life? There are going to be some questions raised by feminism that seem to be contradictory to gospel principles. There are going to be some things that are taught in the gospel that seem to go contrary to the objectives of feminism."

Let me give my own personal answer to that question. First of all, it *is* a real concern. There *are* questions that come up that seem to be paradoxical; there *do* seem to be conflicts, there *do* seem to be contradictions. I will not deny this. Some years ago a colleague of mine asked her freshman English class for a definition of maturity. The class tried many definitions and then a young man who was a little older than the average, he had been in the service and was perhaps twenty-five or so, raised his hand and said, "To me maturity means being able to live with a few loose ends; being able to live with a few unanswered questions." I believe this. I believe that we need not become panicked or upset when we see seeming disparities. We *can* live with unanswered questions.

I was delighted to read in the last issue of the *Ensign* magazine, the article about Sister Camilla Kimball, "Lady of Constant Learning." This same idea of living with a few loose ends is expressed in this article, and if you will permit me, I'll just quote very briefly from it. The

article says that, "even more important than Sister Kimball's freedom to read was the freedom granted her to explore ideas within the context of the gospel." She talks about going to her father with some new ideas about evolution that she had been learning in school. She explains, "My father very patiently heard me out then said, 'Well, daughter, there are theories, and then there's the truth, and you'll come to know the theories from the truth if you'll bide your time!' " Because of her family's hospitality toward searching and studying, Sister Kimball says, "I've always had an inquiring mind. I'm not satisfied just to accept some things. I like to follow through and study things out. I learned early to put aside those gospel questions that I couldn't answer. I had a shelf of things I didn't understand, but as I've grown older and studied and prayed, and thought about each problem, one by one I've been able to better understand them." And, she continues, "I still have some questions on that shelf, but I've come to understand so many other things in my life that I'm willing to bide my time for the rest of the answers."¹

My brothers and sisters, that is my answer to people who ask if I can reconcile my religion and feminism. May I share an experience with you that I think bears out how truly we can trust this principle. I went to Mexico City in June of this summer to attend the Tribune of the International Women's Year, a glorious conference for women from all over the world in celebration of the International Women's Year, and a conference called to discuss some very crucial issues. Before I went to that conference, I sought a priesthood blessing as is my custom in such travels; and a great priesthood leader placed his hands upon my head and gave me a beautiful blessing, in which he said, "I bless you that you may discern the influences of Satan at this conference, for they will surely be there. And I bless you equally that you may discern the influences of Deity and of righteousness, for they will also surely be there." Both influences are present in feminism, but we have God-given powers by which to discern between them.

As I have attempted to live the commandments and to live my religion, and also to be a concerned feminist, there have been questions come up to which I do not know the answers. There have been problems and puzzles and enigmas. I have found that clear thinking and the use of the tools that a good education can provide, utilized under the influence of the Holy Spirit, which one must seek, and which has province over all matters of the intellect and all matters of

¹Lavina Fielding, "Camilla Kimball: Lady of Constant Learning," *The Ensign* 5 (October 1975):62.

learning, that these in combination, the Holy Spirit and the process of clear thinking, can solve many problems and answer many questions. But where they do not supply the answers, I am content to wait. There's no question for me where my priorities are or where truth abides. The gospel is an eternal, timeless context of truth. Feminism is a current, topical, timely matter of great concern to me as a woman in the year 1975. There need be no clash of priorities here whatsoever.

Now I would like, in closing, to answer very quickly a final question: Just how important is feminism anyway? One always hesitates to urge a Mormon audience to action, because there are so many demands on our time. There are so many things which we *already* feel a little guilty about not doing, and not keeping up with, that to say "here is one more thing about which we must be concerned" is to take a very great responsibility indeed, but I do take that responsibility. I believe that the issues of feminism are crucial to us. Feminism is going to influence us. There is no way we can escape the influence of this movement. I think history will show the feminist movement of the last part of the twentieth century to have as great an impact on the world as, for instance, the Russian Revolution, perhaps even as great an influence as the Industrial Revolution. We cannot escape being touched by the feminist movement any more than someone can escape being touched by television. A person may say, "I do not own a television, I never watch it; therefore it doesn't influence me." That just is not true. That's naive. There's not a person on this planet whose life in some way or another has not been touched because of television, so pervasive is that influence. I repeat that the women's movement is going to influence our lives. We must control the influence. We must confront the issues, rejecting goals and conclusions which are not congruous with the gospel, which are not righteous goals—and do so vigorously and boldly. We must accept and work for those principles which are clearly for growth and fulfillment and better lives for more people. And we must prayerfully search out the answers for the areas in between.

Now let me also say that the women's movement is *not* the greatest movement on earth today. The greatest movement on earth today is the movement of that stone cut out of the mountain without hands which is rolling forth, as Daniel foresaw, to fill the earth; that is to say, the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world. *That* is the greatest movement. But it is my firm belief that the righteous objectives of feminism will help accomplish the goal of building the Kingdom. Elder John A. Widtsoe, of the Council of the

Twelve, made a relevant statement. He said, "Women bear joint responsibility with men in establishing the kingdom of God. They have a common destiny, which as free agents they may attain or lose according to their own actions."² I truly believe that the righteous goals of feminism, the wise goals as opposed to the unwise goals, will help us prepare a generation of women more fit than ever before to bear their joint responsibility in establishing the kingdom of God.

Let it not be said that BYU or the Latter-day Saint people stood on the sidelines while great and needed social reforms were taking place in the twentieth century. Let it not be said that we turned our backs or placed our heads in the sand. Rather let it be said that we took our rightful positions in the forefront of that movement. That we were agents for directing it. That we used discernment to know worthy objectives from pernicious ones. That we became teachers and leaders for every righteous aim of self-fulfillment, growth, and high achievement. To all those in the BYU community, I extend the challenge to examine the issues of feminism, to make decisions about them individually on the basis of reason and the light of truth within you, to welcome a new day when women can hold on to all that is traditionally fine and right and God-given and God-ordained, and to encompass as well new alternatives, new options, greater fulfillment of potential, and an ever-increasing responsibility and desire and willingness to do our share in building the kingdom of God.

²John A. Widtsoe, "The 'Mormon' Woman," *Relief Society Magazine* 30 (June-July 1943):372.