

BENEFICENT WORK OF LADIES' RELIEF SOCIETY ORGANIZATION

An Address Delivered in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, Sunday Afternoon, March 17, 1907.

BY ELDER GEORGE ALBERT SMITH.

(Reported by E. W. Oosterstrom.)

My brethren and sisters: This is the conference of the Eastern stake of Zion, and this morning we enjoyed very much the reports that were made in that session. Those of you who were not present missed a treat in the singing of the Primary children of the stake. This afternoon we have assembled together in our worship, as it our custom, that we may be blessed of the Lord, that we may receive from Him such inspiration and strength as He may be pleased to give unto us.

This day is recognized not only as the conference of the Eastern stake but as the 65th anniversary of the birth of the Female Relief society, in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; for it was on the 17th of March, 1842, that the Prophet Joseph Smith, assisted by Elders John Taylor and Willard Richards, began the work that is known as the Relief Society organization. On this occasion the prophet had called a number of the sisters together, and he gave them instructions and started them out in this labor, that they might be a blessing to the human family and a strength to the church with which they were identified, and the organization has continued to grow from that day until the present time.

Among the requirements that were made of the sisters at that time was that they must fellowship each other; that they could not be members of the organization unless they did. That they must live together in the bonds of love and be exemplars in that regard to all the daughters of Zion who were in that time. In fact the prophet laid upon the sisters the obligation that they were to admit as members of the organization any persons who were not in full accord with the teachings of the Gospel, and who could not be exemplars in the organization. The organization was begun in the Masonic lodge room in the city of Nauvoo, and there commenced this great work which we recognize in the Church today as a strength and power for the blessing of the children of men. The work was organized not only to provide a temporal blessing but also to provide a spiritual blessing. It was intended that the sisters should minister to those who were sick and afflicted; should provide food and clothing as a shelter for those in need; should succor and comfort those who were bowed down with distress; and should be the spiritual comforters and advisers and teachers of the women who belong to the Church. Hence we see that the work assigned to them was not temporal work. In our day we refer to the Relief Society, very many times, because of its temporal blessing, because of the wonderful record it has made in visiting the sick and in providing for the wants of those who are in need, etc., but we often overlook that great field that it was intended it should occupy; I refer to the important duty that was given them to perform—of being instructors of the daughters of Zion, to teach them the principles of life and salvation, principles that will prepare them for the eternal world.

FIRST AUXILIARY ORGANIZATION

The Relief Society was the first auxiliary organization in the Church, and the only one, in fact, that was begun by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and it was intended at that time, that it would qualify and equip our wives and daughters that they might work in conjunction with the brethren and labor as ministers of comfort alongside those who hold the priesthood. In the early days a question arose with reference to the right of the sisters, who belonged to the Relief society, to administer to the sick and some of those who questioned it were somewhat reproved by the prophet who told them that any good woman had the right to administer to the sick in the name of the Lord, and while she could not do it by the authority of the priesthood, yet her prayer of faith and devotion would be accepted by our Father in heaven in the blessing of the afflicted one. So in our Relief society organization today, we have a great band of sisters, a great sisterhood, exemplifying the work of the

Relief society, as they visit from home to home, from place to place, and strengthen and encourage those who are in health, and administer to and bless those who are in sickness. There are today 679 branch organizations of the Relief society, scattered throughout the world, with a membership of over 35,000. What a magnificent organization! It may be said that in every part of this world where there is a branch of the Church, there is a Relief society; and what has been said of the empire of Great Britain—that the sun never sets upon that domain—so it may be truthfully said of the Relief society sisters, that the sun never sets on their organization, but it always shines down to illuminate the pathway for their labor among our Father's children in all the world. It was begun as a single organization, and thirty years later, after the people had come to the valleys of these mountains, it was decided that it would be better to organize in stake capacity, and the Relief society organization was organized in the same month by a similar organization in Salt Lake. Sometime after that it was proposed that a general organization be effected, and as a result a general board of the Relief society was begun, and the branches of the different stakes were made tributary to the general society, as the organization in the ward had been to that of the stake. There are four of our sisters who have been blessed of our Father in being permitted to preside over this great movement. First, Emma Smith, the wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who was called to be the first president of the Relief society and acted as such in Nauvoo, Ill.; succeeding her was Sister Eliza R. Snow, who labored unceasingly, while she lived, for the furthering of the interests of the cause; then followed Sister Zina D. H. Young, who also traveled from stake to stake, giving the sisters the benefit of her wise counsel. The present president is Sister Bathsheba W. Smith, who is the only surviving member of the first organization, begun under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith. These sisters, these mothers in Israel, these good women, who have devoted their lives for the blessing and benefit of their sisters in the world, have been a type of women whom the people have always been pleased to honor and respect, while they held the position as president of the organization, and they have been surrounded by a host of capable women no less loyal than themselves.

NO AGE LIMIT IN RELIEF SOCIETY.

There is no age limit in the Relief society. While some may consider that it is the duty and privilege of those who are older to belong to the organization, it would be well for our daughters to become identified with it when they are younger, and full of vigor and life; when they could devote their energies to the furthering of the cause of the Lord as outlined in the work. It is not an organization for elderly women, but for women of all ages, and was designed to stand side by side with the priesthood. All the daughters of Zion, both young and old, are welcome in the Relief society, and it would be a blessing to them if they would become identified with it and partake of the sweet influence of the meetings that are held and the wise counsels of those who preside. The Relief society teachers are exemplars to the priesthood teachers of the Church. They visit from place to place, they go regularly upon their "beats" more faithfully than do the ward teachers of the priesthood in the stakes of Zion. I think I can say, without successful contradiction, that the sisters—the teachers of the Relief society—have been more faithful in the discharge of their duties than have the male teachers in the organized wards. It is a common thing to hear of members of the Church and have them tell us that they never have a ward teacher come to see them more than once a year, and possibly not that often; but it is not common to hear of women where the teachers of the Relief society organization do not pay their regular monthly visit to minister to those who desire their assistance, great blessing those who are in need of their care. The society is the teacher, is the adviser, is the counselor, of the women

of the Church of Christ. Those who are members ought to qualify and fully understand the gospel of Jesus Christ, that they may teach it to those with whom they come in contact. It is a portion of their labor to teach those truths that prepare for eternal life. The daughters of Zion are not born with this information any more than are the sons of Zion, and it is the duty of the mothers in Israel to impart to them the truth. If one understands the gospel, she can teach and it is the object of the society to prepare its members to advocate those principles of truth that have been revealed in the day and age in which we live, and may avail of all who receive and apply them.

STORING WHEAT AGAINST FAMINE.

One of the labors that has been performed by this organization is that of storing wheat. That was one of the requirements placed upon it in early days. They were to store wheat from year to year, so that in case of famine they could provide breadstuffs for the community. Following these instructions, the Relief society has built its granaries in the various wards, and from year to year the contributions of the people are taken to these granaries. At the time of the last report there were 134,523 bushels of wheat in their bins, and that, of course, is being increased from time to time, so in case of famine or distress they are provided with means to sustain the needy. The organization is well off financially; it has its own meeting-houses in about one-third of the wards and branches of the Church; and where it has not its own houses it has real estate upon which can be erected the buildings required. The Relief societies are recognized in every ward and branch as a great assistance and strength and blessing to the bishops of the wards and presidents of the branches.

BUILDING FOR HEADQUARTERS.

In the near future the society will have a general building, in connection with the sister organizations, where they may assemble and transact business. It has been proposed that this building be erected on the block just east of this (the Temple block) and it will be so arranged that it will provide a home for the great general Relief society organization. The Young Ladies' association and the Primary association will also have a place. This will be a women's building, and it will be an honor and credit to the women of this great land. It will afford a place where they may hold services and meet together in sisterhood that will be cemented and bound together by the love that comes from the gospel of our Lord. At first it was the intention of the Relief society to erect a structure with their own means, but later it was decided to take their funds and those of the other organizations mentioned, and create one fund for the erection of a women's building in connection with the office of the presiding bishopric. The Church has added enough to erect a creditable structure. Here in this building our sisters will have the conveniences and privileges of a home where they will be able to do their work; they will feel that they are a part—an important part—of the organization that our Father has given to the earth in the latter days.

In the year 1842, the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of this organization, a grand jubilee was held, and among the services and music, together with the fact that at high noon in all the Relief society branches of the Church, in all the world, there was offered up a prayer, asking the blessings of our Father upon the organization, and from this stand was offered a prayer by President Joseph F. Smith. There were held no suitable exercises to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the organization's birth. Some people in the world credit us with being somewhat slow to recognize the women of our Church, and the statement has been made that the Mormon women, so-called, are not recognized as other women have been, and that our sisters are looked down upon. I stand here today to make the announcement that the first and largest organization of women in this country, that I have been able to find any record of, was the Relief society organized by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and it has continued in active operation; there has been no cessation of its labor. Other great women's organizations have been perfected and are growing today, but they were begun after the Relief society. As I take pride today when I see the Stars and Stripes floating at the masthead, realizing that while we are among the youngest of the nations, our flag is the oldest of the flags, and represents the greatest freedom in the world, and so among the women's or-

ganizations for the blessing of the human family, our Relief society stands at the head; it was the first great organization for the benefit and blessing of womankind in this free land of America.

FIRST FEMALE SUFFRAGISTS.

I believe there is a purpose in all these things, and I believe that the Lord, when He looked down to the time in which we live and proclaimed that His blessings should go out upon the world, had in mind many others. The Relief society of the Church of Jesus Christ, or at least the officers of the organization, were among those who were first in declaring for suffrage for women in the United States—foremost among those who attended the great conventions and who have labored to bring about a recognition of the rights of women before the government of our nation—foremost, I say, among them have been the leaders of the Relief society of our Church; and in attending these conventions from time to time they have been recognized by the great women of our nation and of other nations. Our sisters have been thus recognized as among the strongest in advocating the rights and privileges of woman as she stands side by side with man in the world.

WHAT SOCIETY IS DOING.

I find that there are many great and wonderful things that have occurred in our day. We are living in a remarkable age; we are living in a time when science is developing the comforts and blessings of home all along the line, and among the greatest blessings that have come has been this great, blessed organization—of mothers, whose desire has ever been to strengthen and build up those who are discouraged and distressed. With a few years this society has established a school of nurses, classes have been organized where women may receive a scientific and technical training to become efficient and helpful in all kinds of sickness. In these classes many have received this training who could not have paid the expenses which would have otherwise been necessary to obtain the course. As a result of these classes hundreds of homes have been able to secure the services of skilled women who have known their business and have been able to give such assistance and such encouragement and nursing as has been necessary; and this work is growing and developing and is a blessing to the daughters of Zion. Today we recognize the benefit the Church has derived from this organization. It is recognized as a strength in every hamlet and branch and ward of the Church. The women who stand at the head and the women who have stood at its head or been associated as its counselors in days gone by, have been women that our Father has delighted to honor and bless. Its members have rejoiced in the guidance of His Holy Spirit; they have

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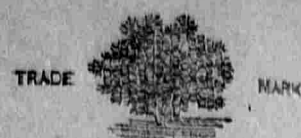
ministered in times of sickness and distress; they were the angels of mercy who came to many homes when others could not go, and by them means have been provided to bring comfort to those in need. This great organization has come to the world since the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. I wish to call attention to a prophecy that is contained in the 20th chapter of 2nd Nephi, page 122 of the Book of Mormon, where Nephi, in speaking to his brethren, told of the time when the Book of Mormon should be brought forth. He told of the time when the people all over the land should receive it; he told how it should go to the Indians; how the Jews should begin to believe in Jesus Christ, and how this land should be blessed. Among others he made this statement: "And it shall come to pass that the Lord shall commence His work among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, to bring about the restoration of His people upon the earth." More has been accomplished since that prophecy was translated by the Prophet Joseph and published in the Book of Mormon, in the year 1830, than for hundreds of years before. I realize that the Spirit of the Lord has been poured out not alone upon Latter-day Saints but upon all nations of the earth. The Lord has said that He would do this for the purpose of gathering His people, and when I think of the comforts and the blessings that we enjoy today, the majority of them have come since the time I have referred to; and I will make the statement that more great inventions conducive to the comfort of mankind, more improvements along all lines, more great privileges have been placed within the reach of all, by the convenience of communication and travel and in all respects more progress has been made since the coming forth of the Book of Mormon than in all the world previous to that time. Among the great discoveries that have been made, and applied, are electricity and steam, with their heat, light and power—making what was formerly tedious travel a pleasant pastime. The earth is girdled by the telegraph and telephone

wires, making instant communication possible to all parts of the earth, and hundreds of other things that there is not time to name today, have been revealed. These blessings have come through the inspiration of our Father in heaven. They have come to benefit all his children, and to facilitate the carrying of the gospel to the nations of the earth. One step in advance has been the emancipation of womankind, so to speak. It was the purpose of our Father that woman should stand side by side with her husband in all the great experiences of this life. It has been her privilege to be the mother of children—sons and daughters—who should glorify the name of our Father, and it was His purpose that she should be the assistant, the helpmeet, yea the equal of man, in the home; that she should have the intellect, the wisdom, and the ability, to rear and educate her children, that they might grow up to be men and women after God's own heart. It was his design that our sisters stand side by side with the priest-hood. It was His purpose that the Relief society organization should provide spiritual work for the daughters of Zion, and the mothers of Israel. God grant that they may grow and develop in the good that they are accomplishing, that the spirit of toleration and freedom that is known in the Relief society of the Church may be sensed and felt abroad, and that the blessings and privileges accorded to us, and to our wives, and daughters, by this organization, may be extended to the daughters of men wherever they may be, and may the spirit of this great benevolent organization be spread broadcast. May it continue to flourish, that our daughters may grow in wisdom, that they may learn gospel truths therein and apply them in their lives, that, side by side with their brothers, by reason of the intelligence and wisdom they possess, they may go into the world and teach their sisters the plan of eternal life. God grant that the day may never come that the power of the society for good will be less than it is today; for it has not only been a blessing to the Church but to our Father's children wherever they may be in all the broad land of America, and in all the world. I pray that the spirit of peace, that the spirit of love, and the spirit of sisterhood may characterize every member of this organization, that they may follow the teachings of their presiding officers, that their lives may be consecrated to doing good, that by reason of their faithfulness and devotion to the cause of our Lord, by reason of their patience in striving to bless the daughters of Zion, they may gain a crown, an eternal crown of glory and immortality in the presence of our Father, in my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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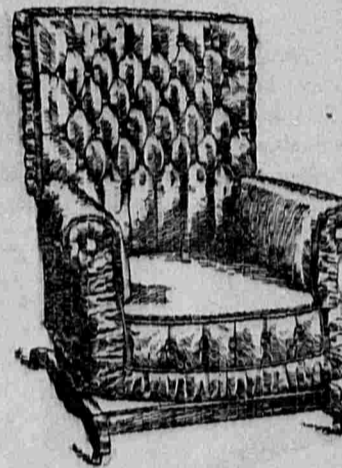
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