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# BY COMMON CONSENT

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## First Conference Critique of 2000

Following the trend of general conference itself, the semi-annual conference critique concentrated first on impressions of the Conference Center and then, obedient to President Packer's instructions, shifted its attention to the conference messages.

Enthusiastic discussants braved a cordon of fire trucks around the Salt Lake City main library (which was experiencing a flood in the basement), ignored the fact that there were no working restrooms in the building, and flexibly accommodated a tax group that had mistakenly been put in the Alliance's second-floor meeting room instead of its own first-floor meeting room to share impressions and observations.

"Awesome, huge, and acoustics better than I thought" were the impressions of one participant who had managed to attend the pre-conference Tuesday night non-meeting where the building managers ran through various musical and speaking tests. Bob Vernon reported that, even with the "be prepared" announcement

he was still startled when a man stood up only a few rows away and shouted at the top of his lungs, "This is a disruptive-sound check."

Vickie Stewart and Anne Wilde, who had also attended the Tuesday night meeting, reported being favorably impressed by efforts to make the gigantic building fit sensitively into the hillside, "although it will probably look much better with the landscaping." The women's restrooms, they reported, were "more than adequate--at last--rows and rows of stalls leading off this long curving aisle. It was totally cool."

The center hall was uniformly stunning. "You feel as if you're in the mother ship," commented one. Several cited the newspaper reports that a 747 jet would fit on the main floor. Another noted the frequent appearance of the sun motif as decoration, while beehives appeared only on the pulpit, veneered with President Hinckley's black walnut.

Janice Allred, moderator of the discussion, observed that

the building had symbolic as well as literal meanings with frequent mentions of the building woven into talks. "One obvious meaning is that 'we've arrived,'" she commented, mentioning at least three apostles who contrasted the large and beautiful building with humbler meeting places of the past. She hypothesized that President Packer's parable of the pearl in the ornate jewel box was his appropriation, not of the building, but of its most significant function: instruction. Group opinion was divided whether Elder Packer's opening remarks were meant as a rebuke of President Hinckley's emphasis on the building or whether it was a failed attempt at humor.

Elder Joseph Wirthlin provided another symbolic (though quite strained) meaning for the building by comparing it to Daniel's stone cut out of the mountain without hands, while President Monson, by quoting Peter's statement on the Mount of Transfiguration ("It is good for us to be here") seemed to be drawing an explicit comparison between the mountain and the building.

Even though more than 400,000 requests for tickets were reportedly received for the 21,000 seats available and it has been well known that no tickets have been available for weeks, the building was not completely filled for all sessions. One attendee at the Sunday afternoon session, who had picked up a ticket with no problem at noon that day, observed that people were seated for almost an hour during that session and that there were "big blocks of seats--maybe three hundred--still empty by the end

of the session."

Possible trends were observed: a specific emphasis on God the Father that seems to go along with the renewed emphasis on Jesus Christ. "Are they reiterating the maleness of God?" Although President Packer started the trend some years ago of referring to the "plan of salvation" as the "plan of happiness," the phrase seemed to be much in evidence during this conference. More General Authorities seemed to be emotional than usual. "I think they were overwhelmed by the building," asserted one viewer. Even the usually impassive Elder Oaks became emotional as he bore his testimony of the resurrection; the sympathetic viewers attributed this response to his wife's recent death. At least ten General Authorities quoted President Hinckley at some point in their talks and nearly everyone mentioned him.

A puzzling moment was President Hinckley's interruption of his testimony of Christ to read a curse from Doctrine and Covenant 121 against the "mean and contemptuous critics" of the Church. Although it was not clear whom he was referring to, Elder Packer had used the same scripture against the Church's critics some time earlier, but without explaining that "lifting up the heel against" was not just a disagreement but an attempt to betray and kill (used in describing Judas' betrayal of Christ) and also that the "anointed one" referred to in the scripture is not General Authorities but is the Messiah, or Jesus Christ.

Least favorite among the talks was Elder Harold Hillam's recommendation to use titles,

his insistence on "respecting widows" in a way that conspicuously omitted divorcees, his description of self-esteem as a result of obedience (the inevitable corollary of which is that members who are unhappy must be doing something wrong), and especially his bizarre half-joking recommendation to "wiggle your tie," a limp phallic image that some viewers' found irresistibly comic.

Most favorite was Elder Yoshihiko Kikuchi's talk about missionary work, which not only used a personal experience but was also delivered with winning "earnestness."

The far-ranging discussion also included viewers comments about One Fold and One Shepherd, which replaced Legacy, the recently released missionary movie God's Army, and the video of the testimony of the First Presidency and Twelve that was shown between morning and afternoon sessions.

#### UNCOMMON DISSENT

Gene Mahalko

Water Water Everywhere . . .

and not a drop to drink. OK, actually there's not much water either, because I'm talking about the resurgence of neo-prohibitionists in and around the former farming community and recent upscale Salt Lake suburb of Draper, Utah.

It all started a couple years ago when a local golf course applied for some liquor licenses and was turned down. The "we can't look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" crowd was amazed that they were able to Just Say No to golfers, generally considered to be peo-

ple with money and political influence.

Emboldened by their success, they tried to pass a city referendum that would in effect stop any future issuance of liquor licenses, leaving Draper, a town of around 30,000 residents, with one licensed restaurant.

Despite considerable lobbying in local wards, the voters rejected the proposed ban by two to one. I guess the prospect of having no restaurants in town beyond drive-through fast food joints wasn't all that appealing.

However, a few months later the mayor proposed a similar ban to the city council. Now the voters got annoyed and packed the city council meeting, asking why the city council was ignoring the citizens' clear decision in the election.

A local Catholic Church also wanted to hold a street fair as a fund raiser for a new chapel, and wanted a one-day beer and wine permit for the event. They met all applicable laws and requirements but were denied anyway. Wingers wanted to build a restaurant but its request for a liquor license was denied until after the restaurant was already built.

That put an end to the local weirdness. Even the blue-noses were getting embarrassed. The council passed a liquor ordinance that was actually pretty normal. The Catholic Church got its permit, Wingers got its license, and this particular moralistic brain spasm seemed to have passed.

Just when it looked safe to come out, BYU professor Scott Howell, the original ringleader from the golf-course days, decided that it was immoral to

have a brunch at GuadalaHonkies for high school students graduating from the anti-drug DARE program. Why? Because it was the only restaurant in town with a liquor license. Never mind that the restaurant had donated the graduation dinner for the students for the last eleven years, ever since it opened. Oh well, they can always have the graduation brunch at Taco Bell's drive-thru.

Now the adjacent town of Highland, Utah, has a new Smith's Supermarket under construction. It will be the only Smith's in the entire chain that does not sell beer. Why? Because it could not get a lease in Highland unless it agreed to that condition. The moralistic infection may be spreading.

Even by traditional Mormon and Utah standards, this all looks a little heavy-handed. I'm not sure what is causing this recent outbreak of wanting to ram one group's practices down everyone's throat, but I hope it is just a phase. Maybe it is "the Terrible Two's," the second century of Mormondom. Maybe in a hundred or so years, Mormons will stop shouting "No" to everything, and just tag along behind people, incessantly asking "Why?" to every statement.

#### **THE CASE FOR BECOMING A LESS "PECULIAR" PEOPLE**

Shirley Brockbank Paxman

It has been a source of distress to me, as to many members, for many years that our Church is repeatedly criticized for being a "cult" or not being Christian. What both of these terms communicate is the radical "strangeness" which many Chris-

tians attribute to Mormonism.

While I realize that LDS principles and doctrines cannot be negotiated away, I strongly feel that we would find other Christians less quick to label us "cultists" if our behavior and practices did not create so many barriers. In most cases, indeed, these barriers are completely unnecessary. One simple avenue of rapprochement could be observing the Christian calendar.

Let me share some experiences to underscore why I think our isolation from the rest of the Christian world creates unnecessary "strangeness."

One year, our stake conference in Provo fell on Easter. My husband and I and our seven children dutifully went to the tabernacle, thinking how lovely an Easter service in that beautiful building was going to be. To our great dismay, not a single speaker in the entire morning session mentioned Easter, Christ's atonement, or the resurrection. Instead, we heard about tithing, missionary work, and the importance of the priesthood. Since many nominal Christians make a point of attending church only on Easter and Christmas, I could not help flinching at the thought that some of those in the congregation might have decided to give Mormonism a try that particular Easter. What must they have thought!

When teaching Relief Society in Provo Fifth Ward recently, I had a similar experience when I asked if anyone could tell us what Sunday it was. Out of the group of fifty or sixty women, only one raised her hand and identified the day as Palm Sunday. This was very disturbing to



me.

As a final anecdote, my husband and I wrote a book about family home evening activities, Family Faith and Fun (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1972). One chapter focused on "preparing the heart for Christmas" and described how to observe the four Advent Sundays before Christmas. The publisher asked us to remove this chapter because it was "inappropriate for Latter-day Saints." Reluctantly, we complied.

I was very discouraged by this attitude; and it goes without saying that I heartily disagree with it. Our family has observed Advent for over forty-five years. Throughout the years, we have invited friends and other families to join us during Advent month to read appropriate scriptures and sing hymns. Participation was so enthusiastic that, for the last twenty years, we have held our Advent program, now called "Carols by Candlelight," at the Provo Community Church. Each year it is attended by 250 to 300 people who appreciate participating in this candle-lit, reverent evening.

Advent has been universally observed by the Christian community since the fourth century. Why do we Mormons exclude ourselves in this way? We believe in repentance and self-mastery. Would not the observance of Lent be appropriate? Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are significant preludes to celebrating Christ's Resurrection, but there are other holy days in the Christian calendar that would immeasurably enrich family worship and personal spirituality, yet Mormons do not know about them because many of them are saints' days

and other Catholic holidays.

Another significant feature of Christianity is a reverent awareness of the cross, so markedly absent from LDS buildings and publications that visitors are disturbed by its absence. Yet many Mormons view the cross with an apprehension amounting to paranoia. I personally had a dismaying experience with this attitude. In 1897, my great-uncle, Joseph Wilford Booth, was called on a mission to the Middle East and never really released. After serving in Palestine, Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon, he died in Aleppo in 1927 and is buried there. In Jerusalem, he purchased a rosary and sent it to my mother. Before she died, she gave it to me. I treasure it, both for her sake and in memory of Uncle Wilf's sacrifices. One day when I was wearing it, a daughter of a member of the First Presidency walked up to me, yanked the rosary so hard that she snapped the chain, and demanded, "Why are you wearing that thing?" That "thing" is a revered symbol of Christ's suffering and sacrifice on our behalf. Why does it make so many Mormons anxious and uncomfortable?

As a registered nurse and former instructor of nursing, I have close associations with our local Utah Valley Regional Medical Center. Recently our family endowed a nondenominational chapel there, dedicated on 16 May 2000, and furnished with a cross, stained-glass windows, and kneelers for the pews to communicate a feeling of solace and faith and to accommodate patients, staff members, and families who can kneel in prayer and be comforted.

There is still no chapel at

LDS Hospital. Those who wish to pray must sit in crowded waiting rooms, pace the corridors, or take refuge in restrooms. The problem also extends to our LDS chapels, which communicate by their stark businesslike furnishings and lack of decorations or artwork that they are simply meeting rooms. Is there not some way in which LDS chapels could be designed to look more like sanctuaries and places of worship?

None of these proposed changes would cost any money -- except possibly more thoughtful chapel designs. They involve changes of attitude and a willingness to let common Christian symbols and observances play a larger role in our religious lives. The real change is in our attitude--a willingness to count ourselves among the Christian community instead of as rigid and often self-righteous separatists who cultivate difference for its own sake.

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In no small measure, debates over doctrine are debates over power, and deciding what is "correct" to believe means deciding who can wield that power.

--Bart D. Ehrman

## ON THE CALENDAR

Check the Sunstone schedule for the session sponsored by the Mormon Alliance on "reverse conversion"--the ways in which the process of leaving Mormonism resembles the process of convert affiliation.

The traditional semi-annual conference critique will convene on the Monday immediately after general conference, 9 October, in the second floor conference room at the main library, Salt Lake City 209 E. 500 South, Salt Lake City, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. The library is under construction, but evening parking is available on the street in the library block and across the street around the City & County Building Block. The April 9 conference critique will be in the same time and place, unless library construction requires a change. Audience participation is welcome.

On Wednesday, 10 January 2001, from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., the Alliance will sponsor "Toward More Sensitive Leadership: President Hinckley's Public Relations Success and the Internal Message." This meeting will also be held in the library's second-floor conference room.

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