
BY COMMON CONSENT

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CONFERENCE CRITIQUE

Now that October 2006 is history, here are some comments made by alert observers who participated in the Mormon Alliance's semi-annual conference critique.

Janice Allred, who has been moderating the discussion for nearly the entirety of Gordon B. Hinckley's presidency, commented that there were more talks in this conference--31 which is six up from the usual 25 (excluding priesthood meeting). The motive was obviously to hear from more General Authorities, presumably because the number of Seventies is now high enough that what used to be a three-year rotation will not allow all of them to speak. President Hinckley had mentioned regrets that it wasn't possible to hear from even more. The Sunday afternoon session had a record-breaking nine talks, including President Hinckley's very brief concluding remarks.

About two-thirds of the attendees had attended conference in person in the tabernacle at some point, "sitting on the hard pine benches. They were painted to look like oak, and now they're going to be *real* oak, which won't be historic," reflected one. "There's a message there, but I'm not quite sure what it is."

Another difference was that conducting the sessions, usually divided up among First Presidency, now fell almost completely to President Thomas S. Monson, since President James E. Faust was confined to a chair, reportedly with back problems of an unspecified nature, and President Hinckley could walk only with his cane. He conducted a single session, but announced the entire two-hour program, obviously so that he would

not need to rise between speakers. President Monson also announced speakers in longer clusters.

President Hinckley, though thin and walking a cane, seemed in amazingly good health. One participant noted that for a man of his age to have survived surgery was remarkable enough, but the decision to treat a nonagenarian with chemotherapy, which "could have easily been fatal," was equally remarkable. Another participant, after some discussion of the advanced ages of the senior apostles, including Elder Joseph T. Wirthlin's tender tribute to his deceased wife, Elisa, commented that Church officials reversed the usual demographic trends in which women lived longer than men. "Among General Authorities, it's the wives who often die first," she observed. "Obviously they feel that they have significant work and they receive a lot of attention for doing it."

Janice Allred had done her "admittedly subjective" categorization of the addresses: 10 were institutional, 9 portrayed Christian living, and five were doctrinal, "definitely a high."

The women's fireside, which had preceded general conference by a week, received only a few comments. Although the theme of being "encircled" in the arms of Christ's love was a "wonderful message," by the end of the evening, to at least one participant, it seemed sentimentalized and even somewhat romanticized. More serious was the conspicuous absence of any mention of Mother in Heaven given the frequent repetition of "your Heavenly Father and your Savior love you," almost invariably followed by mother-child visuals. Another participant mentioned her disappointment that the six General Authorities in attendance were all listed by name while the camera panned over them while

Bonnie Parkin mentioned in a single phrase her counselors and the other auxiliary general presidencies. "Why isn't it just as important to say their names?" Another attendee remarked that President Hinckley's talk, while stressing the importance of getting all the education possible, was bemused that he concluded by assuring women that they were "not second-class citizens." She queried, "Didn't he just provide evidence of the problem that he was denying?"

Priesthood meeting comments focused on President Hinckley's and Elder Todd Christofferson's addresses, both of which focused on the kind of man teenage boys were expected to become. President Hinckley rebuked "slouchy" clothes, speech and behavior, although he uncharacteristically apologized for bringing up a sensitive subject. He also pointed to the gender disparities in educational achievement and told boys to improve their educational attainment so they could be "equally yoked" with their future wives.

Elder Christofferson directly addressed the ideal of Mormon manhood as a responsible and caring husband and father. To illustrate, he told the story of a husband who skipped lunch until he could buy his wife an ironing mangle that operated with knee pedals, since lifting the iron so pained her shoulder that she wept in secret. One attendee asked, baffled, "Why didn't the husband do the ironing?" Another attendee interjected, "That's not only a construction of Mormon manhood, but a construction of Mormon womanhood. You do the ironing even if it causes uncontrollable pain."

Pornography received at least passing mention in several talks and major emphasis from Elder Dallin H. Oaks, who read excerpts from a lengthy letter by a "repentant" homosexual who testified that he was rebuilding his life by focusing on the Atonement. A lively discussion ensued, especially comparing Elder Oaks's address with the unusually long "interview" Public Communications conducted with Elders Oaks and Lance Wickman, posted in early fall on lds.org/newsroom. Seen as positive was the admission that the causes of homosexuality are unknown (traditional explanations have been that it was deliberate sin, learned behavior, or "gender confusion" caused by early sexual abuse/experimentation). The new position is that it's simply a cross to bear, like a bad temper or physical disability (which seemed like problematic and trivializing comparisons). But through the atonement and faith in the Savior, these mortal circumstances can be managed. This approach seems to reflect the recent broader tendency toward identifying the

atonement as effective, not only in redemption from sin, but in "healing" all kinds of "afflictions" and "infirmities."

One woman, while praising this focus on the atonement, commented that she found patronizing the example of singleness as one of the "burdens" of mortality. "It may be for some people," she explained, "but other people may be single and feel just fine about it." "Or," quipped a man, "my singleness may be a blessing to someone else."

One emailed comment took strong issue with this "faith-based" approach, calling it a scenario for suicide. As usual, it blamed the gay person for lacking sufficient faith. Another participant, while acknowledging positive points in the presentation, was troubled by its inherent patronage and prescriptiveness. "I just have a hard time with men telling women how they think and feel, whites telling blacks how good they have it, and heterosexuals telling homosexuals how to live their lives."

One attendee speculated: "I keep wondering if the reason pornography receives all this attention while sexual abuse got two prepositional phrases is because pornography affects men while sexual abuse primarily affects women and children--that the General Authorities pay attention to men's problems, not women and children." Another attendee confirmed the volume of "shocked bishops dealing with the sheer volume of porn addicts," while another interjected, "They're losing bishops to their own porn addictions."

A lengthy and vigorous discussion centered on President Hinckley's talk commemorating the sesquicentennial of the Willie and Martin handcart companies. One participant, who had also seen the preview of Lee Groberg's docudrama, *Sweetwater Rescue*, and the documentary on the making of the documentary, found it convincing in its historic details but lacking in analysis of how such a bad decision had been made. "This story always gets presented as an icon of faithfulness," added another. "You get told you'll be blessed for following leaders. Well, the leaders made bad decisions, but the suffering was borne primarily by the women and children who had had no input into the decision. And once they'd started, they weren't *choosing* to be faithful. It was do or die at that point."

Another participant mentioned the oft-told story of angels helping to push the handcarts (not part of Hinckley's recital) and said, "I believe those stories. God does stop loving us and trying to help us just because we make mistakes or make stupid decisions." She also expressed faith in the story with which President Hinckley concluded about his wife's

grandmother finding her wedding ring in the straw after praying about it. "We can exercise faith in large things and small things. God helps me find car keys and glasses a lot, but he can do that without violating anybody else's agency, and that's not true of a lot of the things we pray for." This situation, however, raises the dilemma posed by adversity: "God obviously didn't temper the weather, as the leaders promised he would, so what's the criterion for when and who God helps and who he doesn't?"

Receiving specific praise as "at last! at last!" topics were Bishop Richard Edgeley's stirring sermon on the importance of honesty, Elder Shayne Bowman's "eloquent" presentation on Christ's infinite love and redemptive power, and Elder Don Clarke's moving story of his blind grandfather's answer when he prayed to have peace about his blindness.

Elder Craig A. Cardon received praise for explicitly including women in his discussion of priesthood's spiritual aspects. (His visual aid of the two apparently identical glasses of water was "strained," obviously because of the negative connotations of having the water representing priesthood be ice cold, as it would have to be for condensation to form on it at room temperature.)

Elder M. Russell Ballard acknowledged that "guilt" was an improper motivator, that the Church doesn't always come first, that people are more important than programs, and that "there's no such thing as 'done.'" Also commended was the prayer of Elder Carlos B. Pratt, who was the only one who prayed specifically for peace, for safety for the "men and women" in the armed forces of all nations, and especially the Latter-day Saints.

Seen as problematic were Sister Margaret Lifferth's claim that "obedience alone [i.e., having family scripture study even if it doesn't seem to be working] brings blessings, although participants endorsed her encouragement for members to pay attention to children, learn their names, and talk to them at church. Also puzzling was Elder Deiter Uchtdorf's statement that prayer is how we speak to God but that God speaks to us "through the scriptures" which were written by the prophets. One participant noted that this recipe has been standard seminary fare for years, but it troubled others that it seemed to leave no possibility of direct answers to prayer. A third talk that raised problems was that of Elder Larry W. Gibbons, who breezily asserted the classic argument of design as proof of God's existence and further argued that if God existed, he must love us and be involved in our lives (thereby ignoring the equally classic argument of the Watchmaker God). A third lapse in logic was his

insistence on "leaving the world" when, in mortality, we *must* live "in" the world. "When you ask people to do the impossible and they fail as a result, then that destroys faith."

A possible new trend was the hierarchy of prayer: almost invariably and in this order, the Seventies offering prayers thanked God for and asked blessings on Jesus Christ, Gordon B. Hinckley, his counselors (only Merrill Bateman specified them as "noble" counselors), the Twelve, and the missionaries.

Janice pointed out that Elder Russell M. Nelson's talk on the gathering of Israel was an excellent example of how the Church retains obsolete doctrines by redefining them, in this case by saying that "gathering" means staying put and preaching the gospel to all the nations, i.e., missionary work.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, as usual, was captivating with his eloquence, energy, and articulateness (and the fact that he wore the only yellow tie of the entire roster of speakers). He defined three purposes of general conference, which attendees attempted to apply in evaluating the success of this conference: (1) a living prophet is speaking in the name of God. Attendees could not identify any statements by President Hinckley in this conference that met that criteria, especially in light of the traditional definitions of prophethood: new doctrine and predictions of the future. (2) "Call to action." There was generally agreement that conference did indeed identify many areas of desired action. (3) Testifying that Jesus was the Christ. "Yes, indeed," summarized one participant. "Better than usual."

Historic questions:

1. When were teleprompters first used? Televisions broadcasts dictated the use of written texts for close control of the time beginning in the early 1960s, participants guessed, but most remember at least some General Authorities shuffling through papers at least through Ezra Taft Benson's presidency.

2. One participant raised in Salt Lake City remembers as a child of seven to ten attending conference with his mother and becoming suddenly attentive when, immediately after an address by Milton R. Hunter, J. Reuben Clark corrected him by saying something like, "What Brother Hunter meant to say was . . ." Commented the participant, "Needless to say, that didn't make it into the *Conference Report*, but does anyone know anything about this incident?"

3. President Hinckley said he wished for more baptisms from North America, uncharacteristically signaling a problem. What has been happening in terms of baptisms? One attendee suggested that this comment may not only represent an absolute dip in numbers, but, more significantly, a comparative loss of "market share" between white members and members of color.

How the Words of a Lesser-Known, Freelance Journalist Become the Inspired Words of God

Larry Mann

In an August 2004 First Presidency Message in the *Ensign* by President James E. Faust, "Fathers, Mothers, Marriage," he notes: "Mothers seem to take a dominant role in preparing children to live within their families, present and future. Fathers seem best equipped to prepare children to function in the environment outside the family. One authority states: 'Studies show that fathers also have a special role to play in building a child's [self-respect]. They are important too, in ways we don't really understand, in developing internal limits and control in children.' He continues: 'Research also shows that fathers are critical in the establishment of gender in children. Interestingly, fatherly involvement produces stronger sexual identity and character in both boys and girls. It's well established that the masculinity of sons and the femininity of daughters are each greater when fathers are active in family life.'"⁴

Footnote 5 cites Karl Zinsmeister, "Fathers: Who Needs Them?" (address delivered to the Family Research Council, 19 June 1992).

Who is this "authority" Karl Zinsmeister? Is he a psychologist? A social worker? An authority on child development? A research scientist? A psychiatrist?

Why . . . No—he's not. As a matter of record, Zinsmeister is not any of these things. It turns out Zinsmeister's greatest claim to fame is that he, according to his own credentials, was a freelance writer (1986-94), and a legislative assistant to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1981-82). He also did a few other "think tank" type jobs which led to his current position of "scholar" at the American Enterprise Institute. The most impressive feather in Zinsmeister's cap, more recently, is that he has traveled four times to Iraq as an embedded journalist, leading to three books and a forthcoming PBS film—a grassroot portrait of soldiers and soldering.

As we can see, this is what qualifies Zinsmeister to make authoritative comments on gender and gender identity so that the likes of President James E. Faust will recognize a true "authority" when he sees one.

In Zinsmeister's address to the Family Research Council, which impressed Faust enough to quote him in his First Presidency Message, Zinsmeister also said, among other things, "Exclusive rearing by women restricts a child's environmental exploration and delays development of some kinds of external competence. . . . There is no question but that fathers tend to be far more effective at discipline. In both intact and divorced families, for instance, children are more likely to obey fathers than mothers. . . . Boys lacking a father at home are often confused about their male identity. Studies show that compared to counterparts from intact families, they engage in more activities traditionally considered to be feminine, and that they play more like girls."

Okay, now do we know a little more about where our most inspired priesthood leaders are getting their inspiration? I think we do.

Wealth and Sacrifice: A Reflection

Garth N. Jones

After a high council sacrament meeting, my wife, Marie, pointedly inquired at the dinner table: "What did you think of his talk?"

"It was an ego trip," I replied. "He told stories about his own wealth and status. He flies his own airplane and rides his own horse. He hangs out with upper-crust Mormons from the Church president on down. He dresses in tailored suits and lives on the East Bench. He's the kind of hypocrite that's been under my skin for years."

Marie nodded and changed the subject and I calmed down enough to eat her excellent meal, but I was still agitated. Later that evening in my study, I reflected, I'm disgusted with people who spend more on dog and cat food than on aid to starving children. Presently 100,000 Mormon children and 50,000 Mormon mothers in Latin America are in abject poverty. Unless help comes soon, within the next five years, half of them will die, yet welfare funds pour out richly along the Wasatch Front and stingily south of the border.

Mormons are guilty of excessive procreation—too many children, all of them infused with high expectations. Rich General Authorities are role

models -- but not good ones -- for too many Mormons. I know one General Authority who owns a large home, seven bedrooms, each with its own bathroom. I know couples in their seventies who hold family reunions for more than a hundred descendants. Fertile farmland along the Wasatch Front is rapidly vanishing into subdivisions. Where will the next generation live?

And what about motor-home owners who just roam around, burning up precious gas and polluting the air, or those who live on golf courses, often subsidized by local taxes? I despise them both. At least my high councilor was doing some Church service. Yes, he probably enjoyed all the worshipful attention, but at least he was in church.

But am I just as guilty as the high councilor? I have three sons, a beautiful home in Anchorage, Alaska, and a lovely home on Salt Lake's east side. Yes, I've spent most of my professional years living in and working with the citizens of poverty-stricken countries: Indonesia, Pakistan, and India. But I also have a comfortable retirement income now. I still catch silver salmon annually on the Talachitna River, then eat my catch at my private hunting lodge.

My indignation is genuine, but so is my guilt and my discomfort. Greedy individuals generate wealth, but that wealth often provides good paying good, medical benefits, and property taxes that support schools. Without access to money, the capacity to do good is limited. Doesn't the tithing of that high councilor go for good causes?

Michael Novak claims: "Of the elites of American society . . . people of business appear to rank among the most religious. For many businesspersons their businesses are considered to be a calling in the religious sense of stewardship" (*Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life* [New York: Free Press, 1996], 43). Businessmen and lawyers run the Church--so they end up doing a lot of good.

I'd rather see that high councilor riding his horse at a youth gathering than playing golf at a private club. I'm glad he's the high councilor, not me. Sacrifice is comparative.

HAS A SECOND APOSTASY OF THE CHURCH ALREADY BEGUN?

Editor's Note: In December 2006, I came across this file in a directory I hadn't accessed for years. I had made a note that I'd downloaded it on November 9, 2004, but I have no record of who posted it or to what list, or whether

it was a private mailing to me. If anybody recognizes it as his or her work, please accept my apologies and after-the-fact attribution, to be published in the next issue. I have reformatted it for publication. --Lavina Fielding Anderson

A few comparisons between the behavior of ancient and modern Churches.

1. Attitude toward science

First Apostasy: Earth is the center of the universe. Anyone who claims that "science" says otherwise only brings down the wrath of the Church on those individuals and on science in general.

Second Apostasy: [The Church takes the position that sexual orientation is chosen and can therefore change, given enough will power and self-discipline.]* Many young people are "counselled" to avoid a career in the sciences because it might be dangerous to one's testimony. Individuals in the sciences who are connected with universities (especially BYU) do not investigate anything that might lead to findings contrary to Church teachings, at the peril of their continued membership in good standing.

2. Liturgical language

First Apostasy: The Catholic Church clung to Latin until centuries after it was no longer understood by anyone. This was a small inconvenience at first, as the languages in Italy, Spain, France, and other areas were still close to Latin but became a full-scale barrier to understanding later when the languages diverged.

Second Apostasy: The LDS Church clings to the archaic English familiar form, declaring it a "special language of prayer." Thus, far we are only at the "small inconvenience" stage. However, local leaders in Europe, Asia, and South America have been told that they should learn English rather than expect "the brethren" to learn all their languages. The King James translation of the Bible is the only one used, in spite of the fact that newer translations are both easier to understand and are more accurate due to linguistic knowledge and the existence of ancient documents which were not available to King James's translators.

3. Infallibility of leaders

First Apostasy: The pope, as personal representative of Jesus Christ on the earth, is infallible when speaking ex cathedra on matters of faith and doctrine.

Second Apostasy: "Follow the brethren and they can never lead you astray." This is because the Brethren are the personal mouthpieces for Jesus

Christ on the earth and Christ will never let them fail. The word "infallible" is never used, but the exact same concept is taught using other words.

4. Church versus state

First Apostasy: The early Church assumed more and more power, by threats of excommunication and consignment of souls to hell, until it had the sole right to crown kings and negotiate disputes between nations.

Second Apostasy: Under the guise of speaking on moral issues, the current LDS Church has begun to "buy" elections by making contributions that are so large they completely overwhelm the local efforts on both sides. The claim of not being involved in politics is maintained by declaring any political issue a "moral issue" if the Church wishes to become involved in it. When there were public outcries against the contributions made in Alaska to the anti-gay rights movement, the Church changed tactics in California and, instead of making contributions, bullied members into making them "voluntarily."

5. Thought control

First Apostasy: The Church at first criticized, then killed, dissidents, culminating in the inquisition. Speaking against the pope was considered heresy, punishable by excommunication. Reading the Bible was forbidden to common people, because they might misunderstand something and be led into error. The official Church explanation of the Bible was sufficient.

Second Apostasy: The Church at first privately criticized, then publicly criticized, then excommunicated any who dared make a public expression of an opinion not in harmony with the Brethren. "Evil speaking of the Lord's anointed" is defined as a sin. Studying in private groups is forbidden. Reading the scriptures is not yet forbidden, and in most modern societies probably could not be forbidden, but it is made clear to members that the official Church explanation is the

only possible one, and any alternative is heresy.

6. Clerical misconduct

First Apostasy: Many local leaders, deciding that they were above suspicion and punishment, undertook to sell forgiveness for sins even above the official selling of indulgences. They also conveniently overlooked or forgave atrocious conduct on the part of kings and princes that supported the Church and the Holy Roman Empire.

Second Apostasy: Local leaders feel free to ignore serious moral crimes among the favored members of their wards/stakes, even overlooking sexual abuse of children by their fathers with the excuse of "working with them to overcome the problems." This time people are less in awe of those who claim to speak for God, and many lawsuits have resulted over the misconduct of local leaders in not reporting crimes as required by law. Many of these cases have been settled by cash payments out of court, sometimes accompanied by pronouncements that the Church and its leaders were totally innocent of all charges. The LDS Church, by the way, is NOT entitled to any exemption to reporting of crimes under any "sanctity of the confessional." In the Roman Catholic Church, what is said in confession is absolutely secret. It is not shared with ANYONE else, not even other priests in the same parish. LDS bishops routinely share things they have heard as confessions with others in the Church, both other leaders and even home teachers, using the excuse that they are all doing the same work and need to know these things. Thus, the confessions are not held sacred, and are not exempt from law enforcement considerations.

*This statement was originally phrased: "Sexual orientation is either inborn or formed very early and is virtually unchangeable." Given the rest of the article, I believe that this statement represents the author's position but not the Church's traditional position. The bracketed words are my rephrasing.

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