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# By Common Consent

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## Tulip Time on Temple Square

At the October Conference Critique, Janice Allred, who has been moderating the critiques since at least April 1997, announced that she will be stepping down to devote more time to some writing projects. Paul Tinker, a long-time participant, will be moderating the April 2011 discussion, but volunteers are invited for these vigorous, insightful, and appreciative semi-annual discussions. Attend, participate, and sign up!

The April Conference Critique will be held Monday, April 4, in the main Salt Lake City library, 210 East 400 South, in Meeting Room A on the first level, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. This meeting room is the first on the right going west from the elevator on the lower level. Take the elevator just inside the east plaza-level entry and go down one floor. The best parking (though not free) is in the lot under the building. Enter from Fourth South going east and turn right at the mid-block entrance between 200 East and 300 East.

And don't miss the annual Relief Society broadcast on March 26. Last year, President Julie Beck announced a new plan of making the Relief Society history better known to LDS women. After three months of quotations incorporated in the monthly visiting teaching messages in the *Ensign*, how does it seem to be working?

## October Conference Critique

Unquestionably, President Boyd K. Packer's hard-line, '70s-style conference talk denouncing pornography and same-sex marriage topped the charts for controversy, concern, and indignation at the October Conference Critique on the Monday following general conference. Using his trademark coded language (attacks on "the family") and never once allowing either "homosexual" or "gay" to cross his lips, he recycled a story he's used before about a schoolchild who suggested that they determine the sex of a "kitty" by voting on it. President Packer announced that moral law cannot be voted on more than the laws of gravity. His main piece of theology was that a "loving" Father in Heaven would not allow his children to be born with "pre-set" tendencies that are "impure and unnatural."

Conference critique attendees pointed out that, since homosexuality is widespread in nature, it cannot logically be called "unnatural." Furthermore, even conceding for the sake of argument that homosexuality can be considered evil, President Packer's theology promptly raises the question of why a "loving" God would allow other preventable evils such as spina bifida, cancer, child abuse, and starvation. Making the same point more light-heartedly, one participant queried: "If God can

make blind people or Down syndrome people, why can't he make gay people? Or for that matter, sociopaths?"

Equally intriguing was the political aspect of President Packer's speaking on this subject now. For the second conference in a row, he spoke while seated, occasionally had trouble reading, and toward the end was slumping a little sideways and also speaking faster. An oxygen tube was clearly visible over his right ear. [A second-hand source reported that he was also wearing a seatbelt. Did anybody else notice this--accoutrement?]

And the questions were unusually thick as a result:

\*Did President Packer consider this harshly judgmental address to be his last?

\*Had this talk gone through the usual process of correlation and review by the First Presidency's office?

\*If so, if his address had been deemed inappropriate for any reason, why did President Monson allow him to proceed?

\*And why was President Packer delivering it in the prime, Sunday morning spot, a slot he rarely occupied during the Hinckley administration? (Note: Richard C. Russell, a diligent researcher, has since examined President Packer's speaking slots from 1997 [Hinckley became president in 1995] to the present, and the results are: 7 for both Saturday morning and Saturday afternoon; twice for priesthood meeting, and 6 times each for Sunday morning and afternoon.)

\*Should President Packer's address be considered a direct response to Elder Marlin K. Jensen's warmly sympathetic and open listening at an invitation-only meeting of Mormon gays and gay-supporters at the Oakland California Stake on September 19, 2010, at which he had expressed deep personal sorrow for the pain suffered by gays?

\*And considering the recent flurry of gay youthful suicides, was there danger of increasing the separation between families and gay children?

One participant commented on the obvious inconsistency of asserting the sanctity of the Church's "doctrine of marriage" and demanding

respect and legal protection for it but of then seeking to impose legal restrictions on others to conform to that doctrine.

Another participant who had been tracking the e-coverage noted that the *Deseret News's* first coverage of President Packer's address had been strikingly neutral, making it sound like "just another talk." Listeners speculated that this may have been an initial, though ill-advised, strategy of "business as usual" in an attempt to deflect attention and bad publicity. In contrast, the *Salt Lake Tribune's* approach not only quoted the talk's key paragraphs but also provided some context (Elder Hafen's 2009 address to Evergreen) and quoted responses from Laura Compton, an LDS activist in California against Prop 8, and Duane Jennings of Utah's Affirmation, who pointed out that the talk undercut the Church's sincerity in supporting recent city and county fair practices.

One respondent pointed out the real effect that it has already had: validating already-existing prejudice and hatred. At a service station in Utah Valley on Monday morning, the attendants had been loudly approving of the *Salt Lake Tribune's* banner headline: "Packer: Gays Can Change" and had sneered at his efforts to explain the pain such a talk could cause. Would such an attitude encourage a return to gay-bashing or even murder?

[Note: The continued attention generated by President Packer's talk did not die after conference weekend and included a statement by the Church reaffirming its traditional stand on marriage, an outpouring of comments on blogs and email lists, a demonstration in downtown Salt Lake City, a signed petition calling for the withdrawal of President Packer's statement and, perhaps most significantly given the strenuous efforts to make the oral and printed versions of address match, the substantive editing done to President Packer's talk before its posting on the Church's website and publication in the *Ensign*. Although most of the media attention has focused on President Packer's gay-oriented statement, insiders also found "extremely significant" the Church's stepping back from his attempt to claim revelatory status for "The Family: A

Proclamation to the World."]

The question of correlation's role in conference talks led to queries about the rather mystifying revival of interest in President Ezra Taft Benson, with two separate speakers (Elders Claudio R. M. Costa and Kevin N. Duncan) quoting verbatim Benson's 1980 BYU address, delivered before he became Church president, titled, "Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet." (It was sufficiently controversial at the time that Church Education System instructors were told not to use it in their classes.) Three other speakers also quoted shorter passages by President Benson, including his landmark presidential address on pride. Quipped one participant, "If correlation hasn't been going over the talks, maybe this will reinstitute the practice."

Another apparently inadvertent doubling was that both women speakers, Rosemary Wixom, Primary general president, and Mary N. Cook, counselor in the Young Women's general presidency, both began with near-identical personal stories about the births of granddaughters and the need to safeguard these "precious" children.

Someone else who "made a big comeback" during this conference was Satan. One participant who started listening for such references said that Satan appeared in virtually every talk. Even though the subtext was the encouraging message that Satan has no power to override an individual's will, the references to Satan as a person, his rejoicing in human misery, and his subtlety in temptation gave him an unusual amount of "air time" in this conference. Again, why?

A first-time conference topic was Elder Russell M. Ballard's recommendation that those suffering addictions of various kind (his most prominent example was prescription drug abuse, a theme that President Spencer W. Kimball had been the first to broach) get involved in the Church's "twelve-step" program. This program is based on the famous and effective Alcoholics Anonymous program, which specifies the requirement of acknowledging a "higher power," however that is defined, but the LDS version insists on traditional Mormon

beliefs about faith and the Atonement. Even worse, the reiterated message to pray and read the scriptures "minimizes the seriousness of genuine addiction" with its implied message: "Your faith is inadequate."

The other major theme--though far from unusual--was stress on following the prophet. "It was so self-reinforcing," commented one. "That emphasis on God giving authority to men, and we're the men," that "suffocating priesthood authority," and the "huge emphasis on obedience." Another newly popular term was the concept of "submissiveness," primarily through the quotation of a couple of key scriptures. Is it a new development in "follow the prophet" thinking?

While Elder Dallin H. Oaks's mention of "single mothers" in part of one sentence was seen as a gesture in support of equality, listeners were troubled by his insistence that individuals could not receive revelation, except from Satan, if they were out of harmony with their priesthood leaders. "Laman, Lemuel, and Alma the Younger were definitely out of harmony," commented one participant, "but I think the scriptures make it clear that they received genuine revelation." Another speculated on whether this talk might have been directed at Christopher Nemelka, who has been in the news for the past year for his claims to have translated new scriptures.

Elder Oaks's Constitution Day address, held in the tabernacle, had argued for the state control of marriage. An attorney who was present pointed out that it was based on a "misreading of Constitutional law, especially the separation of powers" while another added that the decision had been made "forty years ago" (in *Virginia v. Loving*) that marriage is a civil right and that the Civil War decisively solved the question about whether state or federal law takes precedence in claims of jurisdiction.

The evils of pornography (as always, undefined) came in for its usual denunciations. One woman lamented that some of her acquaintances think even "very mild romances" are "soft porn" while another had been deluged by emails demanding that she join in protesting a head-and-shoulders shot of a woman in a

Bath and Bodyworks ad. "Literature, art, and film are excellent ways of exploring sexuality," while another commented that the recent *Deseret News* series on pornography completely avoided the topic of how to develop "wholesome sexuality."

Other participants offered additional examples of the observation made by a participant in the October Conference Critique that "my husband is addicted to pornography" was the sure-fire way of winning the bishop's sympathy, even though "pornography is often a symptom, instead of the disease."

Those who viewed the Relief Society general meeting, found the "pastel" presidency very "sweet but patronizing." President Julie B. Beck's quotation of Barbara B. Smith's near-deathbed request to "honor and respect the women of the Church " failed to specify "actually listening to them or giving them real responsibilities." President Monson provided an inadvertent example by chuckling over the fact that his mother, as Relief Society president, had needed his father's help in making up the Relief Society budget.

President Beck's announcement of a new history to be ready next year brought no enthusiasm. First, it sounded as if it was "going to be an anonymous institutional history" with the result that the unrelenting emphasis will be on functioning under the priesthood. Second, it means that the fine professional 1992 history by Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, which "never had the kind of attention it deserved" has been officially junked.

President Monson's health and remarks came in for considerable attention, including his odd jokey characterization of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir as "my choir." One participant explained that Gordon B. Hinckley had been assigned oversight of the choir as a young apostle and had kept it right through all of his apostolic and presidential career, a precedent President Monson obviously followed for reasons of his own. Its singing of "Dear to the Heart of the Shepherd," right before his talk was "a subtle advertisement" of the brand-new Monson biography by Heidi Swinton, since the

title *To the Rescue* is a part of that hymn's chorus.

Again, President Monson conducted no sessions--a deliberate withdrawal from a visible leadership role. "President Uchtdorf seems to be moving into a role of greater visibility," and certainly has more charisma than President Eyring, commented one. Some observers reported second-hand comments and episodes suggesting some diminution of President Monson's functioning: a quip about the crowded chapel at Barbara Smith's funeral that seemed "off-key" for the meeting, the odd mismatch between his facial expressions and the words he was speaking, the fact that he does not give interviews anywhere near as often as President Hinckley (one woman had talked with a visiting scholar during the summer of 2010 who had interviewed several leaders; for President Monson, this scholar had had to submit questions in writing and had received written answers rather than an in-person interview). Another participant reported having lunch with two Church-employed attorneys who admitted that "they try to keep him on a short leash. He's a frustrated actor, and it's embarrassing to the Church." Another participant had seen him making a call from a pay phone in a 7-11. Seeing that he was observed, he quickly hung up and drove away. He had also addressed a genealogy meeting without ever mentioning genealogy except to jokingly complain that there were more Williamses than Smiths in the Church today. Participants agreed that some dementia is not surprising given President Monson's age. "We've just been used to how long and how well President Hinckley functioned, even when he was older."

"I had the feeling all through conference that we were seeing a parade of elderly behavior," lamented one participant. "Why do we have to hear about life on the farm? Why do teenagers need to know what a record-player is?" Another respondent saw in the "oldster nostalgia" memorats a contrast with the younger, more vigorous apostles: Elders David Bednar, Neil Andersen, and Quentin Cook. "Do they have a political/social agenda that we're going to see driving the Church?" Elder Cook's



address, with its emphasis on keeping the "religious voice" present in the "public square" suggested as much, although he received full marks for also stressing that religious values could not be imposed by law.

Priesthood meeting received praise for being genuinely inspirational. Observers were particularly impressed by two Seventies who were speaking for the first time: Patrick Kearon and Juan A. Uceda, both of whom "seem to be real comers." The missionary choir was also a highlight.

Top candidates for favorite talk was Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's Saturday morning talk expressing appreciation to Church members. "It was nice to hear him thank organists. They're so often overlooked," commented one participant. Listeners had found his personal stories about the kindness of ward members when his younger brother died and the sacrifices of his parents to pay for his mission without ever mentioning it to be "genuinely touching." "I genuinely felt thanked," said one participant. I just wanted to say 'You're welcome.'" Another had been moved by the sincerity of Holland's statement that the General Authorities need the members' support. "Expressions of appreciation have become so routine," commented one. "But expressions of need are rare. I don't think this has happened since President Hunter's 'We need you to stand with us' talk."

Participants had genuinely enjoyed President Uchtdorf's Saturday address as well, not only his perfectly set-up analogy of rings in trees that he deftly turned into a joke: "You are asking yourself, 'But what does this have to do with flying an airplane?'" The rest of the talk with its optimistic and encouraging message about high-quality relationships with God, family, others, and self was equally refreshing.

In the interesting facts department: With three "gringo" exceptions, all prayers were offered by international Seventies. The release of thirteen seventies but the callings of no new seventies brings the number in the quorums to the "lowest yet" after the initial years. One observer speculated that it was primarily to save money, continuing the policy of replacing

many formerly salaried positions with volunteers.

The "tie" report by Janice Allred found solid colors disappearing (only two this conference), dark colors dropping, yellow increasing, and blue on the rise compared to the "always predominant" red.

Janice also reported on her classification of the twenty-eight (excluding priesthood meeting) talks: institutional 14 (compared to 15 in April), Christian living 10 (9 in April) and doctrinal for (compared to three in April).

Before the meeting began and after it concluded, several intriguing discussions continued:

\*What is the importance of the developing trend to which the "really significant talks" are being given in other venues. "Conference talks are predictable, general, and short." Brigham Young University has been an important alternate forum for at least a quarter century, but firesides, televised regional meetings, and, intriguingly, e-venues such as Elder Cook's short essay posted on a website exploring religion recently.

\*The Church has undertaken rapid and major make-overs of three of its websites. Observations on this phenomenon, its possible motivations, and its success or unintended negative side effects welcome!

\*Another topic that was slighted in the discussion is the new dictum by Elder Larry R. Lawrence that parents of preteen and teen children should consider sleepovers a slippery slope to drugs and sex.

\*Elder Gerrit Gong evocatively sketched his 35 generations of Chinese genealogy (dating back to First Dragon Gong) and his description of the three weddings he and his wife had: a Chinese wedding for family, an American ceremony for friends, and a temple wedding. Could this approach resolve the agonizing decisions forced on non-Mormon or inactive parents (and younger children) who are excluded from the temple weddings of devout children?

Needless to say, conference watchers will be alert to follow-ups on these topics or brand-new subjects.

## PERHAPS AS CONTEXT...

The Church is back in the news for sex-abuse-related items. In mid-February, the Church settled a lawsuit (sum undisclosed) over charges that it had heard but ignored fourteen complaints of "hundreds of" episodes of fondling, oral sex, sodomy, and masturbation by the Mormon leader of a Boy Scout troop in Portland, Oregon, in the 1980s. Attorney Kelly Clark has filed a separate suit against the Boy Scouts of America for \$5.2 million on behalf of victim Paul Mones.

In late February, Arturo Tenorio, the brother of Elder Octaviano Tenorio of the First Quorum of the Seventy, was charged with forcible sexual abuse after two Mormon women complained to the police that they drank water after he put a powder in it; one had a headache and the other could not remember what happened. Tenorio, who says he is innocent, is not a licensed marriage counselor but allegedly recruited clients from Mormon congregations. His attorney subpoenaed a bishop in Saratoga Springs who had referred Church members to Tenorio; but Dan McConkie, a Church attorney, advised the bishop not to appear and argued that his testimony might be privileged. The judge agreed to hold a private hearing to determine whether the bishop should testify. When Tenorio was arrested, the Church Public Affairs Department issued a statement condemning abuse and asking victims to come forward.

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## ORGANIZATIONAL STATEMENT

The Mormon Alliance was incorporated on July 4, 1992. Its purposes are to identify and document ecclesiastical/spiritual abuse, to promote healing and closure for its survivors, to build more sensitive leadership, to empower LDS members to participate with more authenticity in Mormonism, and to foster a healthier religious community.

*By Common Consent* is the quarterly newsletter of the Mormon Alliance. Comments, articles, and items for inclusion are welcome, if they are submitted thirty days before the mailing deadlines, which are the last weeks of December, March, July, and September. Please send all correspondence about articles and subscriptions to Mormon Alliance, 1519 Roberta Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84115.

Subscriptions are \$30 for each calendar year. At any point during the year that a subscription begins, you will receive the four newsletters of that year and the *Case Reports* volume for that year. Copies of Vols. 2 and 3 of the *Case Reports* (1996 and 1997), are available from Signature Books for \$20 apiece (price includes shipping) at 564 W. 400 North, Salt Lake City, UT 84116. The order line is (801) 531-0164 or 1-800-356-5687. Volumes 1, 2, and 3 are also posted on the organization's Website: [www.mormonalliance.org](http://www.mormonalliance.org).

To report cases of spiritual and/or ecclesiastical spiritual abuse, contact Lavina Fielding Anderson, <[lavina@elavina.org](mailto:lavina@elavina.org)> 1519 Roberta Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84115, (801) 467-1617.