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# BY COMMON CONSENT

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## October Conference Critique

### **Tuesday, Not Monday**

Thanks to Columbus Day, meaning that the Salt Lake City Library will be closed on Monday, October 8, the Mormon Alliance's traditional semi-annual Conference Critique will convene on Tuesday, October 9. The time and place are the same: 6:30-8:30 p.m., in Conference Room A, which is on the north side of the library mall, one floor down. These rooms can be reached from the main stairs or from the elevator on the north end of the mail hall, not from inside the library proper.

Lavina Fielding Anderson, a participant in critiques since the tradition began in 1994, speculated that "it may very well be a sign of the last days. This is the first time in eighteen years when Columbus Day has intervened with Monday programming. But what can we expect? Less than a month afterward, Americans will have a chance to vote for a Mormon presidential candidate, the first since Sonia Johnson--although, does she count?--being excommunicated and all. And of course, there were two or three others between her and Joseph Smith, although his candidacy went--er--into the ground, you might say. But even more indicative of our perilous times is the fact that BYU students may actually have the opportunity to choose between Coke and Pepsi, both of them caffeinated, as long as there's some righteous way to express--um--consumer demand, I think it's called."

After all, as one BYU faculty member (who

spoke on condition of confidentiality) pointed out, "When you've got a Coke go-cup half full of ice it's hard to call it a hot drink."

However, rumors swirl that dominant themes at general conference will lean heavily on scriptures about "not being commanded in all things" and following the spirit, not the letter of the law. Conference predictions foresee a theme of Word of Wisdom talks that will move ahead by calling into question the consumption of Arctic Circle combo meals.

And don't forget to listen in Saturday evening, September 29, to the Relief Society session, for instructions from the new presidency including, it is rumored, recipes for zucchini overproduction.

### **Follow-Up on April 2012 General Conference**

The Conference Critique of the April general conference began on a subdued note with a prayer of thanksgiving for the lives of three participants who have died since the last gathering: Paul Swenson, Sy Felt, and Richard Calder. Particularly prized was their good humor and their willingness to live "in" the tensions invoked by commitments to both the gospel and the Church.

Jennifer Bowen, a longtime participant whose background includes two years in the U.S. Army as a chaplain's assistant and who is now a librarian, moderated the discussion. The health of the General Authorities was a matter of some concern as Elder Robert D. Hales

Mormon. More disconcertingly, he accompanied it by shaking his finger at the congregation, a gesture that communicate admonition, not celebration.

Elder Holland's talk received several compliments for his interesting exegesis of the parable of the master of the vineyard, particularly in the fact that he emphasized the "grace" of the master's generosity and urged the discouraged to "come boldly to the throne of grace." However, there was considerable bewilderment about why he "stapled" a wake-up call to men in the Church to "arise from the dust and be men." The two portions didn't seem to fit, yet his energy and eloquence were engaging aspects of his talk. This talk, plus another themes voiced by several about the responsibilities of men, raised unanswerable questions about male activity and the need for better statistics. Another participant offered his anecdotal observations: "In my last three wards, our high priests' quorum has had about thirty members but the elders' quorum is struggling with eight to ten members. Of course, those men are being pulled out to teach Sunday School, Primary, and the Aaronic Priesthood, but it suggests a slump in the 25-50 age group."

The group commented on Spencer W. Kimball's advocacy for priesthood ordinary for worthy black men. Did the quorum contain a parallel advocate for women? One woman suggested, "I think Elder Holland could be, based on his understanding of the scriptures and his relationship with his wife. But he isn't an advocate. There isn't one."

Elder Neil L. Andersen had built his address around the specific example of the Haiti earthquake and the couple, both returned missionaries and sealed in the temple, who found their home, containing their three children, collapsed. Miraculously, all three children had survived. He got high marks for "acknowledging that really horrible things happen," pointed out one participant, "but it was really significant that he acknowledged that we don't know why those three children were saved by a miracle while other equally worthy parents lost their children. It was a more

honest approach. Disaster doesn't mean that they're being punished." Elder Andersen also stated that by Jesus's "grace, He will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves."

David Baxter's address was also praised for its focus on the efforts of single mothers ("single dads got a sentence") in raising children successfully. He asserted that single people are "not second-tier citizens" in the Church. His address was seen as a greater effort on the part of General Authorities to acknowledge "the unconventional, the diversity of members in the Church, the reality of people's lives."

Elder Baxter's address sparked a lively side discussion, particularly his observation that many General Authorities had been raised in whole or in part by single mothers. Is there a causal effect between men who are raised by single mothers and who then devote themselves to Church service? One participant, commenting on a young relative being raised by a single mother, said that this pattern was absolutely what was happening in his life. "He's finding his role models in the Church. He very much sees himself a valiant young man now who will be a leader in his family and in the Church."

The BBC special on the Church is not yet officially released although portions have appeared on YouTube. Elder Holland, who has apparently been assigned to oversee the Church Public Affairs Department, was interviewed but came across as "defensive, petulant, and poorly briefed," according to one view. For instance he was visibly irritated by the interviewer's question about why some view the Church as a cult and snapped, "We're 14 million strong. That's not a cult." He also admitted, reluctantly, the existence of the Strengthening Church Members Committee, which came to public attention in 1993 in connection with a wave of firings at BYU and several high-profile excommunications. He admitted its existence but said it existed as a "defense" against the "infiltration" into the Church of polygamists. This may actually be a more reasonable answer than that proffered in 1993: that it was obeying to the D&C

commandment to collect evidence to be used in seeking redress for the Saints' forced expulsion from Missouri in 1838-39.

Related to the media attention was the "hype" about conference in the *Mormon Times*, *Church News*, special inserts in both Salt Lake daily papers, and the Church's website, which encouraged members to twitter friends and acquaintances to attract them to tune in to conference. This development was seen in two ways: (1) as aggressively using social media as part of the Church's formal outreach, and (2) especially where children and youth were concerned, to integrate them into Mormon culture. One participant commented on the "Conference Bingo" game that her Primary played the Sunday before conference, but there was universal agreement that no speaker made any effort to speak as though children were part of the audience.

A couple of the participants had followed the real-time commentary on blogs, with responses ranging from the warmly positive to the disheartening. "Will this feedback get to the Brethren?" queried one observer. "I think it will. Ten years ago, General Authorities's friends gave them feedback--mostly what they wanted to hear--or if they created a real stir, they got a letter from somebody who either felt very helped or very hurt. But this feedback is spontaneous, instantaneous--almost like revelation!" Whether Public Affairs or any other department in the Church is set up to capture this feedback and pass it on is not known, but it seems very likely.

Elder Todd Christofferson's clear definition of what constitutes doctrine, including his caveat that what the prophet says does not automatically have the status of doctrine, was encouraging, even though one participant pointed out that his examples of prophetic statements that are personal experience "are always trivial. It's never anything significant that is a significant doctrine. His awkward quip in mid-speech was ill-advised. After mentioning hermeneutics and exegesis, he quipped, "Try to translate *those*," paused for the expected laugh, and then continued quickly, "Of course, we value scholarship." A clearer message was

not respect but rather anti-intellectualism. The conclusion of the group was that he had ad-libbed his comment and then tried to extricate himself by turning it into a joke. It did not appear in his published address.

A more egregious example, however, was Elder Russell M. Nelson's talk (he qualified as another General Authority who has not been aging well) in which he took a bizarre anti-evolution position that seems to have been influenced by the creationists, then compounded it by making a joke that life on Earth began with a "Big Bang." "Where do you start?" bemoaned one participant. "In about two sentences, he moved from cosmology to biology in a way that misrepresented both of them." Since he is a physician, it seemed, at the very least, like a counterintuitive position. Another participant found it particularly puzzling since he had been present in the hospital room of a third person who was resisting the idea of organ transplant, and Elder Nelson, then a recently appointed apostle, had explained "brilliantly" that a resurrected body is reconstructed, not by assembling the long-dissipated cells themselves but by each individual's unique DNA. "I was impressed at the time and had great hopes for a scientifically trained apostle. I was astounded at what he said this conference." This same participant had noted "with dismay" that the Old Testament Institute manual followed a very hard pro-young Earth line with material apparently borrowed from creationist writers."

One participant commented that her Sunday School class got derailed into a young Earth/evolution discussion. About a third were very ardent creationists. She reminded them that the Church's official position is that there was no position. "President Monson's son was our second counselor, and he agreed. But he did it in a way that communicated 'stop the argument' not in a way that provided any information. I think--I hope--we'll see a major change after Elder Packer dies. He's driven so much of anti-evolution stuff."

Elder M. Russell Ballard's talk was a relief in that it presented statistics to document the faltering of U.S. families (e.g., more than 50

percent of births to women until 30 were out of wedlock; and the number of singles preferring to live alone (not with their birth families and not with roommates) had reached 50 percent. "Devote yourselves to your families and every other aspect of lives improves," he urged. He also selectively quoted from the Proclamation on the Family to stress that couples should be equal partners in the family. He warned women that no career will bring as much fulfillment as raising a family.

Another participant, while also lauding the use of statistics, pointed to a general sloppiness in differentiating between correlation and causation. A third participant chimed in with the observation that it makes her very uncomfortable to have low economic and educational status attributed to marital status. The General Authorities' answer is "always to get the people married, not to improve the economy so that women are making more than 69 cents for every dollar a man earns. I predict we're going to hear more and more about this, because the Church is going through a real retrenchment, including silly things. If it's good for teens and adult women to wear clothing appropriate for garments, then you've got people roaring around saying two-year-old girls shouldn't wear sleeveless sundresses."

Dress standards, long a prickly point, seems to have attracted a new Phariseism, with the backhanded implication that only Mormons are modest.

Another possible misstatement was Elder Donald Hallstrom's statement that God "spiritually and physically bore Jesus." It seemed to the listener that he may have actually tried to exclude Mary's role in Jesus's birth and, more broadly, continue the omission of Heavenly Mother as a member of the godhead. One participant who had been listening to the countless mentions of "returning home to Heavenly Father" noted that once again, God was presented as a single parent. Only one speaker mentioned "Heavenly Parents" (Ulysses Soares) and none mentioned Heavenly Mother.

Church statistics attracted keen-eyed

scrutiny. Although one Saturday morning speaker (Donald Hallstrom) mentioned 56,000 missionaries, the official figure at the end of 2011 was 55,000. The birthrate of children of record has remained very stable for about three years at about 120,000. Membership goes up 2-2.5 percent annually, but this is a lower figure than the 4-5 or higher percentage of just a few years ago. Fourteen new stakes have been created, but the creation of the new Young Adult stakes have thrown off the usual correlation between unit growth and membership growth. "We'll have to wait a year for it to stabilize."

Elder Hallstrom received compliments on making the same point that Ronald E. Poelman had done many years ago to official alarm: that it was possible to be active in the Church but less active in the gospel because gospel achievement is "difficult to measure."

Nominations for favorite talks were (1) Mary Cook's (Young Women) who focused on the need for young women to get all the education they could. She used herself as an example, pointing out that she did not marry until she was thirty-seven, (2) Elder Holland's exegesis of the parable; (3) President Packer's talk, despite its much-repeated stories "because I don't think I'm ever likely to nominate it in this category again"; and Elder Larry Wilson's address that was firmly focused on unrighteous dominion--again a talk with a solid exegetical component. Listeners particularly appreciated that he and his wife allowed their daughter to make her own decision about playing soccer on Sunday and were present to support her during the game. "But what if she'd had a great experience and decided she could always play on Sunday? That would be a more complex story and require more complex responses from all of them."

Leading the nominations for worst talk was Elder Dallin Oaks. Specifically, "all of this praise for how much Mormons sacrifice and serve made me very uncomfortable. It should be other people who praise Mormons, not themselves." Another was particularly uneasy about Elder Oaks's repeated claims that he



knew no other church where such-and-such happened (lay officers, visiting and home teaching, etc.) Was this supposed to be the Church official defense against criticism for baptizing Anne Frank?

Outgoing Relief Society president Julie B. Beck would have "rated a C+ in a composition class," snorted one participant. "It had no thesis except her three key words: faith, family, and relief. And it had no examples, no illustrations, no application to real-life situations. Instead it was just one quotation after another by one prophet after another." Another participant noted: "She didn't name a single woman or talk about the experiences of a woman--not even Emma Smith. It was pretty much 'Relief Society is important because the guys say so.'" Even when she introduced an easy-to-read history of the Relief Society, *Daughters in My Kingdom*, she stressed that the First Presidency had authorized its publication and study.

Elder Scott got a mixed report: "It was the best of talks, it was the worst of talks." One

participant characterized his approach as "extremely creepy," his emphasis on receiving revelation through dreams, and what came very close to affirming that he received revelation from his dead wife, Janene. He advocated immediately recording dreams to retain their sacred feeling. Recording them also shows respect for receiving the message. Although he used the example of extending priesthood to black men, "he ignored the race issue. The pieces weren't connected." His denunciation of "loud laughter" also took that injunction out of its temple setting and seemed to apply it to all laughter along with other Spirit-offending behaviors such as haughtiness, arrogance, pride, and conceit. One participant appreciated Elder Scott's specific sharing of the steps he goes through while seeking revelation: first praying to find scriptures that will illuminate the problem, pondering after reading, and finally praying to know if he has captured all of the information the Lord wishes him to have.

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