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# BY COMMON CONSENT

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## APRIL CONFERENCE CRITIQUE

### **MORMONISM's MAIN PUBLIC RITUAL**

The Mormon Alliance's April 2013 Conference Critique will convene Monday, April 8, at 6:30 p.m. in Conference Room A of the Salt Lake City Main Library, 210 East 400 South. A stimulating couple of hours of vigorous discussion of trends, hot topics, overworn topics, theological innovations, and glimpses of little-seen Seventies will highlight the gathering.

Don't overlook the Young Women's conference session, Saturday evening, March 30 (live on KBYU-TV and the usual Church sites. Given the "new curriculum," designed to teach teens how to be effective discussion leaders coinciding with the drop in mission eligibility age for young women from 21 to 19, will we see a heavy "missionary prep" theme in the addresses to these young women? Reportedly, a majority of mission applications have been from young women. Will the doctrine (or policy) catch up to the demographics?

### **OCTOBER CONFERENCE CRITIQUE STIRS COMMENTS**

The October 2012 semi-annual conference critique hosted by the Mormon Alliance's focused in October on two obvious hotspots--the drop in

missionary age and Elder Oaks's stunning laundry list of social issues that he was newly defining as child abuse. But the discussion also managed to work in several warm spots and, as a very nice balance, some utterly cool ones.

As announced at the press conference, the quorums of the seventies, mission presidents, MTC presidents, and Church school presidents received no advance information about the option now extended worldwide for elders to be called at eighteen (and after graduation from high school) with a corresponding drop in age for sisters to nineteen. The one leak seems to have been Elder Russell M. Nelson, chair of the Missionary Executive Council, who had reportedly told stake presidents in the Denver area and elsewhere that President Monson had had a revelation that he would announce at general conference. "It's the first time in a long time," commented one participant, "that I heard a conference rumor that actually happened."

Elder Holland, at the press conference between Saturday sessions, had clarified that only the Twelve and First Presidency had been involved in the decision, leading another participant to point out, "This means that no women--not even the Young Women and Relief Society general presidencies--were informed about the decision, let alone asked for input." No surprise there, but it's possible that they might have been aware of some issues not apparent to the men who made the decision.

The press conference was the first time that some participants had "heard someone say in

public" that men over age twenty-five would not be called on missions, even though several of those present had had older converts as companions, including one who was forty-two. This policy was seen as a rough screening mechanism to exclude possible gays.

Among the consequences of the policy decision were:

1. Significantly, it was not called a revelation, either by President Monson or by Apostles Holland and Nelson at the press conference (or by William Walker of the Seventy, the managing director of the Missionary Council). Perhaps this terminology decision was a way of underscoring the often-made point that the age change presented an "option, not an expectation, an edict, or a mandate." It will, however, no doubt be treated as one.

2. It may make it easier for some elders to be awarded scholarships on the basis of their high school records but have them deferred for two years. On the other hand, it may make it harder, for those applying at some schools, to be admitted or awarded scholarships. The 120 days before the eighteenth birthday now allowed as papers-submission time may mean that the missionary processing will begin at the same time as early-admittance decisions.

3. Those financing their educations with government loans and Pell grants should exercise particular caution in their decisions, since only one deferral is allowed for loan recipients. "If women (or men, for that matter), take out a loan for their freshman year and then decide to go on a mission, the requirement kicks in that they must immediately begin repaying that loan," commented one knowledgeable observer. "As a second problem, no other deferments are possible. And third, missionaries who return home and live with their families are not eligible for Pell grants."

4. The fact that there is no upper age limitation for women is not a policy anyone wanted to change in the interests of parity, "but it does communicate that the Brethren don't believe in lesbians."

5. A more positive conclusion about lowering the age for women to nineteen is that "they've given up on the 'hang around and get married, sweetie' model for women." Most participants expected to see a bigger bump in women serving than in men.

The press conference had noted that, after President Monson's plea for more missionaries two years ago, the increase in elders had been 6%, in sisters 12%, and 18% in seniors. (As a side note, one participant commented on an article in the new issue of *BYU Studies* providing the first hard figures she'd seen on the gender proportion. For BYU students who were returned missionaries, 85% were men, and 15% were women--no information on returned missionaries outside the BYU pool.)

6. One participant pointed to anecdotal evidence that a lot of couples meet on their missions. It's an emotionally intense experience, a shared experience, and usually a good sign of shared values as well. "They keep the rules but three months after they come home, they're married. So a lot of women will go on missions as a form of husband-hunting, whether that's an explicit goal or not." Almost certainly these will be temple marriages, which the Church would encourage, but low age at marriage is one of the predictors of marriage failure. On the bright side, one participant currently predicts less emphasis on having children right away, which means that these couples who are finishing their educations together may sidestep that additional stress until after graduation. (This prediction counters the "do not delay starting a family" advice that has been coming over the pulpit since the 1960s with especial emphasis in the past decade.)

7. This "small step" toward gender equality of closer parity in ages still does not change the fact that sister missionaries have to turn their converts over to elders who will conduct pre-baptism interviews (will most adult converts willingly answer questions about their sexual histories posed by teenagers?) and also perform the baptisms.

8. The Young Women curriculum will probably "switch from marriage prep to mission prep." This may be a good thing, just in relieving some of the relentless stress on temple marriage as the only and ultimate goal.

9. Likely more missionaries who exercise the early departure option will be coming home early. Missions are high-stress experience; and younger missionaries will have fewer resources for dealing with that stress, homesickness, and companion compatibility. In contrast, at nineteen, most elders

have lived away from home for at least part of a year and dealt with roommates. One participant commented that about 50% of the missionaries in his ward are already coming home early. Another said that, in at least some missions, the chief responsibility of senior couples is to provide "counseling and cookies" for the missionaries--"basically babysitting the homesick and confused."

10. What about the maturity issue? The last time the age changed (from 21 to 19 for men missionaries, and from 23 to 21 for women missionaries) was in 1959. One participant could supply the date because he was on his mission when the change occurred. That age change seems to have worked well, and most mission presidents assign their most mature missionaries as trainers for new missionaries.

11. The "pendulum" has swung back and forth on whether the best way to teach language and culture is instruction or immersion. Obviously, cutting MTC time and telling mission presidents to provide twelve weeks of in-field training signals a shift in that pendulum.

What motivated this change? One participant who has a relative serving on a general Church committee studying activity confirmed that the age group with the highest drop-out rate is 18-30. This move is seen as a way of "keeping up the momentum" for teens who are involved in seminary and their YM/YW programs with heavy parental involvement. (He provided no drop-out statistics.) One participant commented that "fixing the numbers" may serve the institution, but it puts the Church's welfare above that of, not only the individual missionaries, but also the investigators.

The other high-comment talk was Elder Oaks's address. One participant who listened to it twice commented that it really needs to be read, rather than listened to. "It was very carefully put together and has a rigid structure. He was very carefully avoiding inflammatory language and casting his politicized views in terms of an outcome that nobody can be opposed to: child welfare." An unusual 100% of participants voted this talk as the worst of the conference. Participants took specific issue with several aspects:

1. His self-presentation (à la Elder Packer) that he was an apostle to the world and deserved to be

listened to on that basis.

2. His claim that not being born is a form of child abuse.

3. His flat claim of abortion as child abuse. This statement failed to allow even the three exclusions allowed by Church policy: pregnancy in cases of rape, incest, or endangering the mother's health. One participant also pointed out that girls as young as twelve can become pregnant. What are the physiological and emotional consequences for them of spending almost a year of their life pregnant, then giving birth, even if they place the child for adoption? "And all these infertile couples that he sees as eager to adopt ignores the studies showing that they usually want infants, usually same-race, and in good health--not those available for adoption after several years of abuse and neglect."

4. Oaks's dreadful claim that single parents and gay parents are bad parents. (See accompany article for one contradicting experience.) Acknowledging that the research is "controversial" brought universal agreement with one participant's comment: "I want to see his footnotes. If it's Dobson again . . ."

5. His oversimplified designation of abortion as the sole cause of declining birthrates. "There are many causes: older age at marriage, access to birth control, the declining economy, and low child mortality rates, among others."

6. His casting the argument in solely Mormon terms. "If he's speaking to the whole world, then he should acknowledge that society as a whole has an interest in solving the problems of poverty, hunger, education, and health that are underlying sources of child welfare issues. Instead, he was telling a Mormon story."

One participant commented wryly that, if the sole function of marriage is to produce children, an only slightly exaggerated logical extension of his argument, it seems odd that General Authorities in second marriages always choose never-married women.

7. Since Oaks was raised by a single mother, "I'd expect him to know better than to condemn single parents." As a related factor, another participant is aware of three gay men in Oaks's extended family and had the impression that Oaks

listened carefully and compassionately to them and their parents, who want them to have a place in the Church. This fact led another participant to speculate on whether, *because* Elder Oaks could be expected to be more supportive and is also “intelligent enough to appraise the literature,” he was “assigned to be the point man on this issue. He’s expected to close ranks, not be a dissenting voice.”

The final comment on Oaks’s talk had to be this one: “He’s using child welfare to push his social and political agenda, and I think that’s child abuse.”

The new Relief Society presidency, who spoke in the Relief Society session the weekend before, got high praise for speaking on the atonement. One man pointed out that, in Peggy Fletcher Stack’s interview with them the week before, they had identified their goals as the atonement, keeping covenants, and unity. “They know they’ve only got five years,” he commented. “I think we heard them address their first goal in this conference.” Another man said that he “felt the Spirit” as they spoke. All agreed that, in their use of personal stories, “they didn’t present themselves as morally superior to members. They seemed real.”

Janice Allred did her semi-annual classification of the talks given in the five general addresses--institutional, 13; Christian living, a surprising 13; and doctrinal, only two: Elder Craig Christensen’s address on the Holy Ghost, and Elder David A. Bednar’s “valid but inaccurate distinction between testimony and conversion.” One of the students of theology in attendance pointed out that, contrary to Elder Bednar’s statement, conversion CAN happen instantly, Alma and Paul being the classic examples. “You can have a testimony only of what you experience, including your conversion. What he meant was living a life of dedication, which most Christians call sanctification.”

Elder Hales “looked very frail” and also gave one of the few “old-fashioned” talks presented. One observer reminded participants: “Conference talks used to start with a dictionary definition of the topic under discussion, then string together a few scriptures. Also, they used to be addressed to a mythical nonmember audience that didn’t exist. Now, the typical conference talk begins with a meaningful personal experience, which the speaker

metaphorizes to produce a gospel principle, which he (very occasionally she) supports with relevant scriptures.”

Another participant, a research fiend, had listened to the first few October 1971 conference talks (the earliest videos available on the Church’s website) and said that the difference between the old-style and new-style talks were clearly apparent. President Joseph Fielding Smith, who died the next year, “just rambled and free-associated; his talk was long and tedious,” while Elder Packer was “almost folksy” by comparison.

Examples of the new style included:

1. President Eyring’s talk in the general session describing his own inspiration about refusing a lucrative offer that would have taken him away from Ricks College, where he was president, a month before the collapse of the Teton Dam, and also the consolation of the Spirit to his daughter-in-law who had been unable to have more than three children but whose prayer of relinquishment was answered, she felt, when her husband was called to be a mission president and she had two additional children. (One of the participants, who had talked to her father immediately after conference, mentioned that President Eyring had not asked her permission to share such a personal experience.)

2. Elder Larry Echo Hawk’s engaging story about being a young Marine whose sergeant-instructor switched from screaming profanity and obscenities when he saw Echo Hawk’s Book of Mormon to ask him if he believed it. Elder Echo Hawk’s identification of himself, Central and South Americans, and Pacific Islanders as descendants of Book of Mormon people was a reminder that such identifications have virtually disappeared since DNA studies have created a different genetic picture. “Maybe he feels that bearing such testimony is part of his mission,” suggested one participant.

As a bit of “conference esoterica,” one participant pointed out the inadvertent irony that Elder Echo Hawk and Elder Robert Gay spoke back-to-back. Elder Echo Hawk is the highest ranking General Authority with ties to the Obama administration, while Elder Gay was Mitt Romney’s business associate in Bain Capital. Furthermore, his father, Frederick William (“Bill”) Gay headed



what was popularly known as Howard Hughes's "Mormon Mafia," a phrase that saw a recurrence during Romney's campaign.

3. Elder Neil Anderson's talk was appreciated for the most part, but one participant pointed out that his stress on not leaving the Church during "the trials of your faith" fails to acknowledge "those situations when the trial of your faith *is* the Church." One participant said that a twenty-year-old man in their ward had committed suicide two weeks earlier. "Was he gay? I don't know. But surely there are some situations when leaving the Church is the right thing to do."

4. Technically, President Packer's talk also matched this new model, even though the story he told about a dangerous and stormy night approach to small island was one that he had told earlier. However, one participant commented, "His retelling, which stressed that he had refused to learn the names of the missionaries who had fallen asleep instead of tending the 'lower light' revealed that he still hadn't learned the lesson of forgiveness. A compassionate person would have *insisted* on learning who the missionaries were so that he could go to them and tell them that it was all right, that he understood how they could fall asleep after hours of watching."

5. Elder Shane Bowen's talk was built around his experience in having a child die. "He acknowledged that he felt negative emotions, he acknowledged that you don't ever really get over it, and he didn't claim to speak for his wife," said one participant who also nominated this address for "best of conference."

Elder Holland's talk drew fierce partisanship. "He created a monster," was one position, "by patronizing people who are less than totally committed all of the time. It was judgmental. It says that there's only one way." The opposite partisan countered, "Jesus was pretty clear that He *is* the way--the only way," then went on to praise the eloquence of the literary parallel in the narrative Elder Holland created. (Both partisans agreed that "Jesus is not the Church" and also agreed that the excellent delivery matched the eloquent message.)

Participants couldn't remember if released Seventies have been asked to give prayers in the past, but all agreed that Marlin K. Jensen's

"beautiful prayer," which opened the Sunday morning session, "cast a halo around the whole session."

One participant had done demographic studies based on the average age, predicted that, statistically, someone in the First Presidency or Twelve would die, on average, about every eighteen months. Their current average age is 72--but "it's only that low because of really youthful members like Elder Bednar, who turned 60 this summer." Nobody in the Twelve is under 60 now. He posed the question: "Who would you like to see as the next apostle?" The question drew the realization that hopes for a Hispanic or Asian apostle have actually receded in the past couple of years.

As always, President Uchtdorf's talks, which one participant characterized as "wisdom literature," were conference favorites. Participants generally agreed that President Monson no longer has the ability to provide more than ceremonial leadership, which means that his counselors are doing most of the administration. Of the two counselors, most participants seemed to feel that the vigorous, healthy-looking, animated President Uchtdorf seemed more likely to provide energetic leadership than frail and emotional President Eyring. One participant confided his hopes that President Uchtdorf, who has come into the U.S. political scene from a European perspective, may have the ability and will to move the Church out of the corner it has painted itself into on the gay rights issue.

This comment caused another participant to point out that President Packer's article in the October *Ensign* was a marked retreat from his previous hard line on gay rights. "Elder Packer quoted President Hinckley extensively--and President Hinckley, though not exactly liberal, was reasonable and compassionate--and then Packer underscored that President Hinckley 'spoke for the Church.' I think he has accepted the fact that he's never going to be president of the Church and he doesn't want to be identified as being on the wrong side of this issue for all time," summarized this optimistic listener.

Another related discussion was an analysis of the Brigham City Temple dedication, which many

participants had attended or watched via satellite broadcast, since services in Utah had been cancelled that Sunday. Sister Packer's talk was "inspiring," observed one participant. It has also been years since a member of the First Presidency has not presided at a temple dedication, so their assignment of President Packer to that responsibility was a way of honoring his service, not only because of the hometown connection but also because of his obviously failing health.

### **Elder Oaks and One Boy's Life**

*By Ron's Partner*

In January of 1980, a little boy was born to heterosexual parents in Chile. Because he had a cleft lip and palate, his parents handed him over to an orphanage where he survived his first two years of life. In 1982, this child was adopted, with the help of Catholic Charities by my partner, Ron, who then became a father to this boy, whom he named Timothy, and they began a father/son relationship

here in the United States. (Names and places have been changed to ensure privacy.)

Right away, Ron began initiating the many surgical procedures that would begin to correct Timothy's condition and permit him to lead a life somewhat closer to what the rest of us take for granted. Ron's ability at fathering and raising Timothy are what any objective, disinterested observer would have to appraise as stellar. Timothy was exceptionally well cared for, schooled, and nurtured. Now at age thirty-two, Timothy has more friends than anyone else we know and is the director of a 400-student preschool. A well-liked and hard-working fellow, Timothy is a wonderfully delightful young man who makes his father proud.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks condemned single and same-sex parents, observing that they are selfish and should put children's interests ahead of their own. I'm not sure where Elder Oaks gets his inspiration for such pronouncements, but it reassures me again that my decision to leave Mormonism was the right one.

Mormon Alliance  
1519 Roberta Street  
Salt Lake City 84115