
BY COMMON CONSENT

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OCTOBER CONFERENCE CRITIQUE

Note Room Change

This autumn's conference critique will convene, as usual, at 6:30 a.m., on Monday, October 7, Conference Room E at the Salt Lake Main Library, 210 East 400 South. Room E is inside the main library, just to the right of the children's library, on the lower level. Enter the main library and take either the stairs or the elevator down to the lower level.

Paul Tinker, retired attorney and long-time conference observer, will moderate the discussion, which is open to the public, and hints that some "interesting statistics" will open new perspectives on some of the trends that will probably be addressed by speakers.

Just fantasizing, but what themes might we expect?

First, feminist activism. Leaders of OrdainWomen.org have encouraged women to consider joining the lines of white-shirted men standing in line for entrance into the general priesthood session from which women are traditionally barred. Given the comparatively mild reaction to Wear Pants to Church (except for such outrage and even death threats on the organizer's blog that she took it down), is such an attempt likely to garner media attention and/or ecclesiastical discipline? No known policy forbids the presence of women, but the fact that it is the only session not broadcast gives it an air of "special secrecy." However, the press

attends and reports, and all of the talks are posted online at the same time as the other sessions. What if women showed up, not at the Conference Center, but at their stake centers? Would they be welcomed in the chapel? Isolated in the hallway but still able to hear? Physically ejected from the building as trespassers?

Second, increased concern about the gap between the "official" version of Church history and the complex and nuanced developments readily available on the internet. Swedish Area Authority Hans Mattson's resignation and disappointment at Church history "deception" highlights this problem. Elder M. Russell Nelson, delivering the CES fireside on September 8, 2013, listed eight important "choices" that young people must make. The sixth was: "Follow the Lord, not human philosophies, on `unemployment, choosing to not have children, questioning the definition of marriage.... If you have a question about the position of the church on...(any) important issue, prayerfully ponder it, then heed the prophetic messages at this forthcoming October general conference.'" (Marianne Holman, "'What Will You Choose?' Elder Nelson Asks," *Deseret News*, A2.) Holman's report may not be completely reliable since she said Perry was speaking at BYU, while anyone who saw the broadcast would have noted that the venue was unmistakably lei-laden BYU-Hawaii.

3. Church finances. Excerpts from the published financial accounts for the Church in the British Isles, an annual disclosure required by law, showed membership at 188,462 as of December 31,

2012, up slightly from 188,029 in 2011, organized in 335 congregations averaging 562 members each. It also reported 19 fewer building cleaners, 9 fewer "officer administrators"), and an increase from 7 to 10 of individuals paid £70,000+ a year. (The exchange rate is approximately \$1.00 = £1.58.) For humanitarian aid, incoming donations equaled £372,000 while expenditures were £1,000 with the remainder being transferred to the Corporation of the Presiding Bishopric at the year's end. To what extent does this pattern represent income and expenditures in the United States and Canada? Will we hear more about tithing and other donations at October conference?

4. Temple bingo. ldschurchgrowth.blogspot pointed out that President Monson has followed President Hinckley in announcing at least two, sometimes three, new temples since October 2008. Its blogger provided a list of the top ten countries and dependencies, without a functioning or announced temple, number of members in parentheses. (This blog also provides current information on number of stakes, districts, and congregations.) The ten temple candidates are Nicaragua (80,605), Zimbabwe (23,117), Russia (21,709), Papua New Guinea (21,265), Puerto Rico (21,174), Côte d'Ivoire (18,602), Haiti (18,165), Thailand (17,424), Kiribati (16,279), and American Samoa (15,629).

APRIL 2013 CONFERENCE CRITIQUE

"Baby steps, baby steps," though welcome, described the reaction of attendees at the Mormon Alliance Conference Critique following the April general conference. The closing prayer offered by Jean A. Stevens (second counselor in the Primary general presidency, benediction Saturday morning session) and Carole M. Stephens (first counselor in the Relief Society general presidency, invocation at the Sunday afternoon session) were announced blandly and routinely. But the media and blogs had been prepped for days that this is the first known general conference in 183 years where a woman has prayed publicly, even though women pray as routinely as men in ward and stake meetings and even though a twelve-year-old girl had opened the Young Women general meeting and an eighteen-year-old had closed that meeting a week earlier. Did the estimated 1,600 letters influence this historic deci-

sion? Impossible to say. Prayers had been assigned weeks ago, according to a Public Affairs spokesman.

"And that's why it's baby steps," pointed out one attendee. "The discourse may be changing, but there's no way to have a conversation about this change or others. There's no mechanism for getting people who are concerned about women's place in the Church in the same room with the decision-makers. The conversation has to take place in the newspapers and on the internet with one public relations effort followed by a change that is never explained."

Part of that conversation was the unusual resurgence of interest in women's ordination, a topic that flat-lined in 1993 after the disciplining of the September Six. Janice Allred, a trustee of the Mormon Alliance and president of the Mormon Women's Forum, recalled: "We'd struggled for years to get panels to talk about women and priesthood—even about why women don't want priesthood or possible areas of greater involvement for women that wouldn't require priesthood. People were afraid to talk about it in any terms. Now they aren't."

That's why the resurgence appears so remarkable. One of the organizers involved in the ordainwomen.org website commented, "The website started with a couple of dozen women, and we were thinking it would recruit the radical fringe; but instead we've got women across a broad spectrum, most of them deeply engaged and committed to Mormonism but who want ordination and don't see reasons not to extend it."

Social media played an obvious role in fostering the discussion and building unity in the discussion. A meeting on "Women and Priesthood 101," at which an open-mike period followed presentations by panelists, was timed to coincide with the general priesthood session and attracted reporters and TV stations. "An idea cannot enter the realm of the possible if it is not in the realm of the thinkable," stated this participant.

This interest builds on the grass-roots movement of "Wear Pants to Church" earlier in the year. Those who remember 1993 wonder: Has anybody been called in? Yes, but remarkably the bishop's response was to assure the woman, who had posted

her profile at ordainwomen.org that he had talked to the stake president and to the area authority and that her membership “was not in jeopardy”; however, he requested that she not use official meetings, such as Relief Society meetings, to discuss the issue.

Did speakers at general conference respond to this issue? It’s difficult to say, but the emphasis on “priesthood” may have been such a response. An “interview” with the three general auxiliary presidents the preceding week acknowledged that “some women” were concerned with the issue even while the concern was brushed away with the statement that women wanted the “blessings” of the priesthood, not ordination. Elder M. Russell Ballard’s rather confusing attempt to differentiate between priesthood “authority” and “power” seemed to be such a response. Participants appreciated that he clarified the common terminological mistake that conflates “priesthood holder” with “priesthood.” However, his equation of priesthood “keys” with priesthood authority, while women have procreative keys, was “just confusing, because men also have such keys.” One participant wryly pointed out that once again singles were “ignored” except for a couple of sentences that was supposed to “comfort their broken hearts.”

Another participant noted that the three women’s auxiliary presidents (Primary, Young Women, and Relief Society) said they had attended at least one meeting on the missionary age change in which each woman was asked individually to respond to the proposal; but the announcement of the change in October 2012 had stressed that only the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve had been involved. Did this famous “we were also involved” meeting actually take place after the decision had already been made by the fifteen men?

Participants noted that other churches have ordained women out of basic fairness and foundational beliefs in equality “but Mormons have *actual* theological reasons. Joseph Smith’s revelations have laid the most compelling foundation for equality of ordination—that God’s goal is the empowerment of his children.” However, ordaining women would require giving up the Proclamation on the Family, which has quasi-scripture status in Mormon discourse. By comparison, the “solemn declaration” of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve

a few years ago about a testimony of Christ (widely viewed as “we’re Christian, too”) has “quietly sunk out of sight,” while the Proclamation on the Family continues to be quoted several times in each conference.

For the past several years, the gay rights issue has been the hot-button topic at general conference, but it merged deeper and deeper into the coded language of “supporting the family and traditional marriage.” One participant commented, “I don’t know how they can say things like that with a straight face considering the history of marriage and even Mormonism’s history with plural marriage.” Thirty-eight talks (counting President Monson’s brief opening and closing remarks, the Young Women’s general meeting, and the general priesthood session but not the statistical and financial reports featured a variety of topics and speakers. Members of the First Presidency each gave two major addresses (one in a general session and one in the priesthood session), while President Uchtdorf also gave a major address at the Young Women’s meeting. Of these total talks, by one participant’s count, 17 (46%) dealt with the home, marriage, and proper gender roles.

One participant bristled especially at attaching Jesus’s teachings to marriage between a man and a woman. In fact, she pointed out, Jesus made only two recorded statements about marriage. One dealt with the Mosaic law of divorce, which is actually to protect women, and the other *reductio ad absurdum* case of the seven brothers married serially to one woman, is actually about the resurrection. “In short, neither one of these statements is about marriage.” This same participant also noted: “Jesus gets exactly one line in the Proclamation on the Family” and the New Testament records “radical views on the family: that all belong to the family of God, that biological kin are less important than spiritual kin, and that a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.”

Another important theme was finding peace in a wicked world, with some speakers emphasizing gospel peace (Richard G. Scott, Quentin L. Cook, and Stanley G. Ellis) and others stressing the evils of modern society (Robert D. Hales, L. Tom Perry, and Elaine S. Dalton’s Young Women’s address).

The Young Women’s presidency was released.

A hopeful sign about the newly installed presidency is that President Bonnie Lee Green Oscarson had a pinboard of posters and photographs so genuinely funny that participants passing around a print-out were laughing out loud at items like an earnest young man in a suit musing, "At general conference they told us we were all wonderful and doing everything right. Then I realized I was at the Relief Society session."

But an increasingly painful omission was the absence of Mother in Heaven as the rhetoric dialed ever higher about a "loving Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ." One participant singled out President Dieter F. Uchtdorf's otherwise encouraging address at the Young Women's conference. He described the "journey" of life in which the Young Women "depart from the arms of your Father" into mortality with assurances that they can "stand tall" because God "stands with you." When the journey is completed, "Heavenly Father will be there to embrace you. He will embrace you, and you will know once and for all that you have made it home safely." One participant commented wryly, "The one place we thought we'd find Mother in Heaven is *in* heaven, but she's not there. It's just Heavenly Father and Jesus."

This same lopsided picture appeared in Elder Bednar's claim, in discussing sexual morality, that Heavenly Father and Jesus "are creators and have entrusted each of us with a portion of Their creative power." Stressed one participant, "Since we're talking about human procreation, someone is really missing from this picture." Elder Christoffel Golden's theological analysis of the Mormon belief in God the Father and Jesus Christ as separate beings acknowledged that everyone is the "spirit child" of "heavenly parents," but added that "the doctrine of the Father and the Son is the doctrine of the eternal family." One participant asked rhetorically: "Are we supposed to conclude that families consist of fathers and sons? No mothers? no daughters? no sisters?"

"What would it hurt," proposed another, "to modify the Young Women's theme to say: 'We are daughters of Heavenly Parents who love us and we love them'"? (It is currently phrased: "... daughters of Heavenly Father who loves us and we love Him.") In fact, five speakers referred to "heavenly parents" (Elders Packer, Ballard, Bednar, Oaks, and

Golden).

Although a couple of talks were addressed to the hypothetical nonmembers who were listening ("Elder Oaks was talking to a nonexistent audience") L. Tom Perry's address had a particularly dated sound as he ran through a list of the Ten Commandments that were currently being disregarded on a wide scale. "It was a classic 1950s talk about the evils of the world," characterized one. Another participant pointed out that Elder Perry's attack on "secularism" seemed especially ill-informed. "Without secularism, Mormon missionaries wouldn't be in half the countries that featured in the numbers they were boasting about."

Although a predictable topic was encouragement to do missionary work, even as teenagers, the extraordinary response to dropping the age announced at the last conference generated some interesting statistics. The Church's press release of March 27, according to one of the most alert Churchwatchers, showed 64,373 missionaries; but President Monson stated that, as of April 4, there were 65,634, thus showing an increase of 1,261 in about a week. One woman reported that an eighteen-year-old in her ward had received his call "almost immediately" after he submitted his papers but would not report to the MTC until mid-July. Did it reflect a public relations effort to have an extraordinary number by general conference to show an enthusiastic response to the age change?

The statistical report for 2012, as of December 31, 2012, reported 58,990 fulltime missionaries and 22,961 Church service missionaries. President Monson also reported that more than 20,000 missionaries had received calls but had not yet entered a Missionary Training Center and that 6,000 more were somewhere in the process of interviews with bishops and stake presidents.

"It was also very noteworthy that since January 1, 2013, missionaries called consisted of 57% elders, 36% sisters, and 7% senior couples," commented this observer. "This is a big jump in sisters called, and it reminds me of some anecdotal evidence that sisters are responsible for a very disproportionate number of converts. On one of my blogs a poster said that in his mission sisters were only 10% of the missionary force but responsible for almost half of the baptisms." In any case, the sheer

increase in the number of sister missionaries will have interesting effects, not only on mission demographics but on future statistics about marriage, family formation, divorces, and education.

Our favorite statistician also noted after the discussion that membership growth took a slight uptick in 2012. The growth rate went from 2.2% to 2.4%, even with a 3% reduction in convert baptisms--strange and apparently contradictory. He proposed two or three possible explanations. Deaths may be down, unbaptized children reaching age nine may have decreased, or perhaps the surge in members resigning from the Church may be down.

As a historical precedent, in 1960 the age for male missionaries dropped from twenty to nineteen. "There was a big run-up, but it had dropped back down to the pre-change level by 1966, then started to creep up again."

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's talk, based on the New Testament story of Jesus's conversation with the desperate father seeking help for his epileptic son, drew high praise for its scriptural exegesis but also additional scrutiny since the "Let Women Pray" letters had been addressed to him. Was his counsel to members not to "hyperventilate" over issues a response to the women's issue? Possibly, but it seemed more likely to some attendees that he was responding to people who were leaving the Church as the internet made more and better information about Mormon history readily available. One cited John Dehlin's recent survey and lecture on causes of disaffection as a more proximate cause. To another participant, "Elder Holland wasn't urging faith in Christ as much as faith in Church life. He talked about his seed of faith sprouting up into his own tree of life, but I think it's really God's tree, not the Church's. It's the vine-and-the-branches relationship." A participant who had served part of his mission in Bordeaux's wine country in France noted that the vine-and-branches metaphor is a technically accurate description of grapevine culture, with the new branches producing the fruit each season but drawing their strength from their connection with the vine.

Elder David A. Bednar's "direct" talk about chastity "was the most sensible approach that I've heard recently that did not use guilt as a motivation," another participant praised. However, that talk

faltered before the demands of realism: "He talked about authorized channels of procreation; but in case he hasn't noticed, those channels work whether they're authorized or not." Another problem was Elder Bednar's equation of the Book of Mormon's "natural man" with temptations brought by physical bodies while, in fact, those "evils are spiritual: pride, competition, enmity, wrath, and coercive power. God created the physical world and it's good."

Another trend was a drop in the number of personal stories (18) and an even sharper drop in the number of illustrations that accompanied conference talks: a granddaughter's tomatoes, the "surprisingly modern" painting by Johan Bentin in President Uchtdorf's office, and the African couples who married so that they could then be baptized. No one could recall seeing posters of the scriptures being quoted, a marked change attributed to President Monson's reported dislike for the device.

President Monson seemed to be "sharper and more articulate" than at earlier conferences, but participants also noted that he made no off-the-cuff remarks and read all of his messages from the teleprompter. He mugged the camera as he told the story of igniting a field of June grass when he was eight (to kick off his main address about the importance of obedience), but the humor was welcome.

President Boyd K. Packer "gave his third farewell address," commented one observer. For the past year and a half now, he has reprised major themes of topics that are important to him. His warning about "the tolerance trap" was "about what you'd expect," said one participant, even underscored with the particularly nasty parable about snakes crawling through the ivy to devour hatchling wrens. In marked contrast to this position, both President Monson and President Uchtdorf urged members to treat family and neighbors with greater tolerance and acceptance, suggesting that they did not view this trait with the same negativity as Elder Packer. Furthermore, "although it may not be important," one observer watched the camera that remained focused on the stand for the first few minutes after the Sunday morning session ended, recording the movement of the First Presidency into the wings. "None of the First Presidency

shook hands with Elder Packer, who remained seated, although they shook hands with all of the other apostles on that side of the stand. A small, thin man--one of the clerks?--did stop and shake Elder Packer's hand, then two security men brought up Elder Packer's wheelchair and began moving him into it. At that point, the camera pulled back far enough that details could not be distinguished."

Participants speculated that President Uchtdorf was "running the Church" and that there were undoubtedly "power struggles going on." One observer suggested that "the more senior apostles probably don't appreciate President Uchtdorf's position" since he is a "middle of the pack" apostle. But President Monson, who has been in the First Presidency for thirty years, has apparently given his blessing to the charismatic counselor's activities. The real test will come when President Monson dies. Will President Uchtdorf be retained in the First Presidency? Hugh B. Brown, President McKay's counselor, was the last occasion when a serving counselor moved from that position back into the Quorum of the Twelve. "The difference between the Mormon and the Catholic models is that the First Presidency consists of three men, so you can be incompetent but still technically serve."

An observer with actuarial leanings pointed out that the First Presidency and Twelve are now "the oldest it's ever been, averaging age 85. You'd expect a vacancy about every two years but that sequence is overdue: President Hinckley and Elder Haight in 2008.

Janice Allred made her usual analysis of address categories: 14 on the institutional Church, 10 on Christian living, and 3 on doctrine (Cardon, Perry, and Golden). The October 2012 categories had been, respectively, 13, 13, and 2. Candidates for "worst talk" were Elder Oaks ("a lawyer gone wrong"), Elder Packer ("a concession speech that he's lost on all of the issues he's hated"), and Elder Perry ("the rhetoric of doom"). Candidates for best talk" were President Uchtdorf's talks in both the priesthood session and the general session. In addition to thoughtfully identifying masculine roles that will enhance Christian living, he praised diversity and specified that it included "cultural, social, and political" diversity." Other candidates were Elder Holland's passionate exegesis of the New Testament father who implored the Savior to "help thou mine unbelief," and Elder Craig Cardon's promise that the Savior is eager and willing to forgive.

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