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# By Common Consent

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## Breathless Anticipation: October Conference

With the Mormon campaign for Proposition 8 accelerating in California to the point that, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, it may be supplying up to 40 percent of the funding (and don't overlook what's happening in Arizona either), conference watchers are speculating about just how much of October general conference will be devoted to anti-gay rights rhetoric.

One commentator, pointing to the polls suggesting that the passage of Proposition 8 is far from the "locked-down deal of Proposition 22" predicted that the General Authorities "will take the gloves off. It's going to be explicit and it's going to be a test of faith." Another knowledgeable observer disagreed: "It's still an American issue and not even an all-American issue. We're not going to hear anything direct. We're going to get coded messages about the importance of the family and 'follow the prophet.'" Another agreed. "This may be the conference in which they canonize the Proclamation on the Family, which has created doctrine to justify anti-gay rights. They won't say it's because of Proposition 8, but that's what it will

mean."

Well, we won't know until it happens; but join the Conference Critique discussion on Monday, October 6, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. in the Salt Lake Public Library, Conference Room A. As traditional, Janice Allred will moderate the freewheeling sharing of news, views, trends, and topics.

Don't forget to tune in to KBYU-TV Saturday evening, September 27, for the Relief Society general meeting to see what General President Julie Beck and her counselors do as an encore to "Mothers Who Know."

Comments by email are also welcome and will be shared with the group. Send them to [lavina@elavina.org](mailto:lavina@elavina.org)

## Report on April 2008 Conference Critique

*Note: The summer issue of the newsletter, which would normally have reported the April Conference Critique, discussed the launch of Proposition 8 instead. Here is the report of that discussion of April's conference..*

April general conference represented a highly ritualized transition: tributes to President



Hinckley, deceased in January, and an outpouring of support for his successor, Thomas S. Monson, whose presidency was inaugurated with the usual solemn assembly, the first to occur in the Conference Center.

Highlights of Gordon B. Hinckley's almost-thirteen-year presidency included: "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," the boom in temple building (75 at the beginning of his presidency, now up to 125), the construction of the Conference Center, putting steeples back on ward buildings, taking an active role in shaping Salt Lake City's downtown area, more attention to humanitarian service in general and to the Perpetual Education Fund, confirming the role of the Seventies as the Church's presiding quorums, and the calling of the millionth missionary. Over a third of the current Church members have known no other president.

Observations by participants on the funeral included the fact that President Hinckley picked own speakers (daughter Virginia, President Bishop David Burton, Seventy Earl Tingey, and President Boyd K. Packer, along with Counselors Henry B. Eyring and Thomas S. Monson) and that he saw that each of his other four children also participated in some way. Among the observations of those who had viewed the TV coverage of the funeral were President Monson's obvious uneasiness, and the fact that Elder Packer departed from his own rules that funerals should be occasions for preaching the gospel to talk about President Hinckley personally--"but it was an odd talk. He actually told a nice story about some other General Authority and then said something like, 'President Hinckley was that kind of man, too,' as though he had no personal information about President Hinckley at all."

This comment generated a vigorous but brief discussion about President Packer's role at this point. President Hinckley seemed to have been able to keep him "mostly" under control; but is President Monson strong enough to do that, given his reputation as a "touchie-feelie" president instead of the strong administrator, even "micro-manager," that President Hinckley was? Is President Packer, now eighty-four, still vigorous enough to pursue his own

agenda? Or is it even possible that, his son Allan was called to the First Quorum (therefore on a parity with President Hinckley's son, Richard), as a tacit bargain that President Packer would be cooperative? It's a question that only time will answer.

President Monson seemed "rattled" at both the funeral and the press conference: "The podium was too low for him to put his prepared remarks down and still see them, so he looked fidgety." Even though media representatives had been instructed that certain topics were off-limits and that only one question apiece would be allowed, the new presidency seemed "refreshingly open. Some of the questions were pretty nervy and they didn't always get answered--but at least they got asked." One observer commented that President Monson's ease and fluency in explaining why yellow was his favorite color contrasted sharply with more difficult questions, such as that asked by Peggy Fletcher Stack about political dissent.

A male participant commented that President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, the new second counselor, was "very astute" when asked what his appointment portended for the international nature of the Church. He simultaneously made it clear that he was not an American but also that apostles didn't "represent" world regions.

Participants generally agreed that President Monson seemed to gather confidence during the actual conference. The next topic discussed was reactions to the solemn assembly. Most participants felt that it was a good step forward to have the adult women and Young Women vote separately, in parallel fashion to the quorums (also a Hinckley innovation in 1995), but another sighed: "Yes, women have gone from being completely invisible to being shown their place--after twelve-year-old boys. Especially since the 'all members' group is a null category."

Others pointed out that one of the most important functions of ritual is to provide a reassurance of continuity--which the solemn assembly achieved. "I may not be particularly reassured by seeing a manifestation of hierarchy, but that would be important for many members of the Church."

No one could remember another solemn assembly at which the second counselor, rather than the first, had presided. President Uchtdorf also presided at most of the sessions. "So thanks to President Eyring's broken foot bone, President Uchtdorf got unprecedented exposure in his first general conference as a member of the First Presidency," commented one. "And he seemed very comfortable with it."

This was not the first general conference at which "sustaining" had been defined as a covenant to obey (about six years ago, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy who was being put on emeritus status, had delivered an address to that effect), but it received particular attention in this conference. Elder Robert D. Hales addressed the point directly, and Elder Marlin K. Jensen in a newspaper article preceding conference had made a similar point. "It's a doctrinal development for which there is no scriptural support, and the purpose of it is obviously to enhance the power of the institution." One participant commented on his negative experience when he had voted not to sustain a change in ward boundaries.

Janice's statistical scorebox showed a total of 28 talks (excluding priesthood meeting), of which an unprecedented 6 were doctrinal, 7 were Christian living, and 15 were institutional. "Even a topic like personal revelation makes the point that revelation helps you do your callings or chooses the correct officers in a unit; its main point is institutional." Janice contrasted the focus of President Hinckley and President Monson in their past conference talks. Out of President Hinckley's 49, 46 (94%) were institutional, two were doctrinal, and one was on Christian living. Since President Hinckley spoke four times per conference, he had spoken more times than President Monson (18), but the profile was exactly reversed: four of President Monson's talks were institutional (22%), three were doctrinal (17%), and eleven (61%) were on Christian living. Would this pattern change, now that he was the Church's chief administrative officer, especially given his business background? Would President Uchtdorf take over more managerial functions?

One participant commented that President

Monson's Sunday morning talk "sounded as though it had been ghost-written by President Hinckley," while others also used words like "more gravitas," and "presidential." This change from his usual "feel good" talk organized around a three-part list and illustrated with warm stories was conspicuous to most listeners, even "genuinely inspiring," but reactions were mixed about whether it merited the accolade bestowed on it by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of representing the conferral of the "prophetic mantle" by "the hand of angels."

The invitation that President Monson issued to "come back" both reinforced and contrasted with a similar message by Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin, who spoke sitting and using a supplementary microphone. Although both messages were welcome, Elder Wirthlin assigned very different causes to inactivity: those who were "weary," "different," or had "strayed." President Monson, in contrast, sounded "more blaming" with his categories of critics, transgressors, and the offended. Listeners praised Elder Wirthlin's account of defending, at age seven, a handicapped boy who was the target of teasing and shoving. "But that paragraph about 'we can't change doctrine' struck me as odd," commented one listener. "I just assumed that correlation wrote that one--especially since doctrine changes all the time." There seemed to be general agreement that the "unchanging doctrine" meant here was the possibility of less opposition to gay rights.

However, two straws in what may be a different wind are (1) the meeting announced between a Social Services representative at Church headquarters and representatives of Affirmation "at President Monson's request," and (2) Todd Christoffersen's mention in his "surprisingly high quality" Sunday morning address of the presence of all of his "brothers and their spouses." Tom Christoffersen, one of these brothers, has been in a long-term, committed relationship with his same-sex partner, according to one of the participants, "so presumably Tom and his partner were present. Furthermore, Elder and Sister Christoffersen attended an extended family event last summer also attended by Tom and his partner."

Are these signs of "a kinder, gentler" Church stance? [Note: Since the long-planned meeting was cancelled in August and Affirmation local officers who held a press conference to summarize the subjects they would have discussed were scolded roundly by Church Public Affairs spokespersons, the answer seems to be "no."]

A related topic, which may explain the "come back" message was speculation about inactivity statistics, which are currently not available publicly. When a reporter from BYU-Idaho asked the reorganized Young Women's general presidency what steps they were taking to deal with the fact that 80 percent of unmarried LDS women between ages 18 and 80 leave the Church, the new president, Elaine Dalton, did not challenge the statistic or seem surprised by it but explained that the Relief Society/Young Women "transition" program, which has been in place for at least a decade, would be receiving new emphasis.

Although talks of all three members of the Young Women presidency seemed more effective to listeners than the concluding talk for that meeting by President Eyring, some disappointment was expressed. One listener disliked the water lily image of Sister Mary Cook, since water lilies grow in calm but not stagnant or polluted water. Sister Dalton's efforts to illustrate the theme of being "steadfast and immovable" by her example of running a marathon was "too much of a stretch." President Susan Tanner's well-organized and commendable talk using all-women examples set a high standard that her emotional farewell address in a general session failed to match. Another woman was uncomfortable with the emphasis on using the Proclamation on the Family and especially the Young Women values statement to teach adolescent women "who they are. If you're trying to establish their eternal identity and you consistently omit the fact--just the *fact*--that they have a Heavenly Mother, what are you telling them about their eternal identity?" A second woman answered wryly, "That they're invisible and they should get used to it."

There was general consensus that Elder M. Russell Ballard "gave the talk that Relief Soci-

ety president Julie Beck should have given" at the last conference. He made it clear that he was talking to young mothers (not all women), that husbands, fathers, and children also shared the responsibilities, and that women should do something for themselves that did not involve mothering. Although everyone enjoyed the story of his failure to cope with their six children while his wife was singing in the choir, "the subtext is that men can't really do this job, so women have to" because of their "God-given instincts" as natural nurturers. One woman snapped, "I'm sick and tired of having my work as a mother discounted because women are supposedly natural nurturers. By damn, it was hard work and it takes years to learn how to do it."

Another participant commented that it would be interesting to put two separated items in his message closer together: first, the fact that he was in a bishopric for ten years while six of his children were born, and second, his counsel to bishops to not make heavy demands on mothers of young children. "Maybe the point is that fathers of young children shouldn't be called to bishoprics."

Another participant noted positively how many speakers, in referring to their wives, used "their names, not just their roles," and another commented that wives were obviously accompanying their General Authority husbands in traveling to far-flung places. "Obviously, that pattern represents a change in travel policy."

In the wake of the troubling suddenness of Craig Jessop's resignation, the conference music got special attention. Nobody missed the fact that all of the numbers were hymns (or Primary songs), although the arrangements were, for the most part, "excellent, with the exception of 'If You Could Hie to Kolob.'" It was also "nice to see two women at the organ." Even while liking the arrangement of "Called to Serve," one participant protested at the fact that it was for men's voices only. "Given the close association of this hymn with missionary work, it leaves the impression that only men can serve missions."

An important talk was that of Elder Richard G. Scott on sexual abuse. "He obviously got

better information this time than he had when he spoke on this subject first," observed one, "and solved several problems that he had created the first time around." Particularly important points were that he did not charge victims with having played a role in causing their abuse, he warned bishops that perpetrators were likely to lie and that they often presented a facade of piety, and he told perpetrators that they were not likely to change without professional help. Although holding up forgiveness of the perpetrator as an important goal for victims, he told them to wait to make the attempt if it intensified their pain.

Several participants mentioned the feeling of "liberation" in the conference--possibly because of the new voices. President Monson obviously felt comfortable enough to wiggle his ears during the priesthood session, an informal and hilarious performance. The congregation responded warmly to his personal tribute about his wife in his closing remarks. "But I heard two voices," commented one. "The first was a very personal voice, spontaneous and not perfectly polished and so all the more real. But when he returned to his scripted remarks, it was the President Monson we're used to: glib, with studied gestures."

In the "conference lingo" category were, again, "noble counselors," although they were now joined by "able counselors." The second coming got three mentions.

### **Probably Won't Be Quoted . . .**

*Note: The following quotations were recently posted on an email discussion list. It seems unlikely that we will hear any of them quoted during conference, but they're worth sharing:*

President Joseph Smith read the 14th chapter of Ezekiel [see, for example, verses 9-10: "If the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing...the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh unto him.")]...said the Lord had declared by the Prophet [Ezekiel], that the people should each one stand for himself, and depend on no man or men in that state of corruption of

the Jewish church -- that righteous persons could only deliver their own souls -- applied it to the present state [1842] of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints -- said if the people departed from the Lord, they must fall -- that they were depending on the Prophet, hence were darkened in their minds, in consequence of neglecting the duties devolving upon themselves." (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 237-38)

**President Brigham Young:** "How easy it would be for your leaders to lead you to destruction, unless you actually know the mind and will of the spirit yourselves." (*Journal of Discourses* [JD] 4:368)

"I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken the influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. This has been my exhortation continually." (JD 9:150)

"I do not wish any Latter-day Saint in this world, nor in heaven, to be satisfied with anything I do, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, the spirit of revelation, makes them satisfied.... Suppose that the people were heedless, that they manifested no concern with regard to the things of the kingdom of God, but threw the whole burden upon the leaders of the people, saying, 'If the brethren who take charge of matters are satisfied, we are,' this is not pleasing in the sight of the Lord." (JD 3:45)

"Now those men, or those women, who know no more about the power of God, and the influences of the Holy Spirit, than to be led entirely by another person, suspending their own understanding, and pinning their faith upon another's sleeve, will never be capable of entering into the celestial glory, to be crowned as they anticipate; they will never be capable of