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By Common Consent

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Again We Meet...

It's October conference (critique) time, and again we'll be meeting on Monday, October 4, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. in the Salt Lake Public Library. As usual, Janice Allred will moderate the freewheeling sharing of news, views, trends, and topics. We will, however, be meeting in the **conference room to the right of the children's library, downstairs.** You'll need to enter the main library and take either the stairs or the elevator down one floor.

Mormon women are again in the news. According to one blogger, Julie B. Beck, general Relief Society president, teamed up with Elder Jeffrey R. Holland at a regional meeting in Utah County to warn the faithful that trials and persecutions were going to hit a new high in the near future (Haun's Mill II?) and that women should get off their computers and take care of their families. Meanwhile, northern Utah has replaced Utah County for highest consumption of anti-depressants (20%). Could the triple makeover of Mormon sites ("I'm a Mormon" on Mormon.org), the online store, and the replacement "new.lds.org" that will replace the current lds.org be a coincidence. And Sister Beck wants women to get off their computers? Hmmm.

So don't miss the Relief Society general meeting Saturday evening, September 25 (broadcast on KBYU-TV). And will the priesthood brethren be getting the same message? Comments by email are also welcome and will be shared with the group. Send them to lavina@elavina.org.

April Conference Critique

A vigorous, though somewhat bemused, conference critique held on Monday, April 5, identified favorites, dominant themes, trends, and puzzling features in April 2010 general conference.

The hands-down favorite talk was President Deiter F. Uchtdorf's address about Christ. One participant defined it as "a great Christian talk, and it didn't imply that you had to be LDS to be Christian" so it lacked the patronizing or defensive tone that often characterizes talks that turn into "we are so Christians--in fact, the only real Christians." Other participants also appreciated that he talked about love as the core of the gospel and that without that core, the Church can have the form but lack the substance of religion.

Janice commented that she had recently attended a panel discussion on Truman Madsen, who often served as a de facto Church spokesman and who was known for his speaking ability. The question was asked, "Who will replace him as a Church orator? The answer was President Uchtdorf and Elder Holland." President Uchtdorf's speaking strengths include a clear and universal theme, the artful use of stories and personal experiences, a voice that projects enthusiasm rather than fatigue, and an optimistic, upbeat delivery. One participant noted that his story of the statue of Christ whose hands had been destroyed during a "bombing raid" has been around for at least fifty years but without the details of place (except for Europe) or even which war. "Well, it's a lovely story," declared Janice. "We can hope it's true."

A lively discussion followed of President Uchtdorf's priesthood session talk on patience in which he used the Stanford experiment in whether four-year-olds could delay gratification (eating a marshmallow immediately) with the promise of a greater reward (two marshmallows) if they waited fifteen minutes. The discussion concluded that delaying gratification was part, but not all, of a definition of patience and that, although President Uchtdorf stressed patience as an "active" virtue, sometimes it requires simply enduring consequences imposed by others, as Christ endured the events of His trial and crucifixion.

One single woman found the emphasis on family--and particularly on teaching children the gospel--to be "aggravating. I am no longer a child, I don't have children, I attend a student ward where there aren't even any children to teach." She found annoying statements that she was by "divine design" (a phrase used by two separate speakers) a "nurturer." Another participant noted that such statements are "supremely reductionistic" and was irritated at claims that little girls enjoying dolls constituted "evidence" of such innate ability.

A theme that seemed to be missing from the conference was the usual laundry list of worldly "evils" including the gay rights movement until another participant hypothesized that, rather than making a direct statement, the attitude had been "coded" into the pro-family language so that the being in favor of the family now includes the assumption that the family is "under attack" (another monotonously repeated mantra) from the "evil and wicked world."

Janice Allred, who classifies the conference talks (excluding the priesthood session) as gospel living, institutional, and doctrinal, noted that, of the fifteen "institutional" talks (up from twelve in the October 2009 conference), nine of them were about teaching children and youth. "It's clear from the approach being taken that the Church has very specific expectations, goals, and content," Janice observed. "The Church says you're a good parent if you do such-and-such and a bad parent if you don't. That makes parenting a Church job in my book."

The other classifications were nine on Christian living (down from fourteen in October, which was an anomaly), and three on doctrine (up from two).

One participant asked, "What's driving this emphasis on the family? What problem are the General Authorities trying to solve? Are hordes of teenagers going inactive? Is the world really so

quantitatively wicked?"

Another participant quickly hypothesized that a motive might be the possibility of holding the Republican National Convention in Salt Lake City and Mitt Romney's possible second bid for the U.S. presidency. The pro-family rhetoric may be an effort to find common ground with the Southern Baptists who scuttled Romney's last campaign. Another individual was likewise troubled by what seems to be the outcropping of the Republican agenda in the conference themes but observed that he had tracked KSL and *Deseret News* editorials during the legislative season. "They were actually quite moderate," he commented. A third participant had noticed the same disconnect and commented, "It's pretty frightening when the Church is positioned to the left of the legislature."

Also alarming evidence of rightist rhetoric was the stake fireside in Nevada at which Harry Reid was scheduled to speak on why he believed. Both he and the stake president received threats. One man said he would "punch" Reid if he ever saw him in the temple. Given the level of rage, the stake president cancelled the fireside. Would the few sentences inserted in Elder Quentin Cook's address on the importance of civility be seen as official disapproval of such attitudes and behavior? Probably not.

Aspects of the family-centered theme dominated much of the discussion. Other comments were that despite the steady drumroll of "teach," very few General Authorities were specific about how to do it, with the exception of Neil Andersen, the last speaker.

Surprisingly, "Elder Packer was on the right side of this issue," found one participant, because he emphasized the primacy of the father and, in his absence, the mother, over ranking ecclesiastical officers who come to the home to give a blessing. Ironically, however, his examples, which amounted to apostolic enforcement of the father performing an ordination in one case and giving a blessing in another, both took place in a Church setting and showed the apostle compelling "correct" behavior. Although both of his stories had a "happy" ending of a renewed father-son relationship, one participant remarked that he knew of other instances of similar situations in which "the father performed the ordinance all right but it led to years of resentment." A second participant, whose father had been inactive when he was growing up, was ordained a teacher

by the bishop and was startled to learn that his father was "really upset" that he hadn't been asked. What about other ordinations? The father did ordain his son a priest and an elder--"still wasn't active but at least he did the ordinations."

Janice, who had recently attended the Mormon theological conference at Utah Valley University commented that "our theology of the family is not worked out." David Paulsen had given a paper quoting what General Authorities had said over the past 180 years about the Mother in Heaven to show that it was not true that there had been restrictions on speaking about Her. "All of the statements occurred in a patriarchal context, and some of them were not even specific about Mother in Heaven but were simply quoting the sentence on Heavenly Parents' love from the Proclamation on the Family or that Heavenly Mother is a partner with Heavenly Father." Left unanswered were the fundamental questions: "Okay, She's divine, but is She God? What authority does She have?" If President Packer is correct that the Church will cease to exist in favor of a family organization in heaven, then what does that mean for Mother in Heaven's role in the current Church?

Another participant mentioned being "taken aback" by the numerous "jarring" references to "going home to Heavenly Father and Jesus. What's wrong with this picture? Who's missing?" A third participant recounted her distress at attending her daughter's seminary parent-teacher conference only to be greeted by a large banner running the length of the hallway quoting the scripture, "What manner of men ought ye to be?..." She said, "I sat down with the seminary teachers and pointed out that about 60 percent of those attending seminary were not men, would never be men, and didn't want to be men, so was this really the best scripture to greet them every time they walked into building when it would have been so easy to modify one word? They just looked at me."

A somewhat related address was that of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland against pornography. In general, listeners had enjoyed it because it was "energetic and passionate," a decided change from a long string of "droning addresses." However, these same participants found it troubling that he never defined pornography (is he including nude art? erotica? R-rated movies) or lust, nor did his talk provide any much-needed clarification on a Mormon theology of sexuality. Is the "highest and holiest" love really only between a man and a woman? What about parent-

child? What about friends? And is love really motivated by the desire to bring children into the world?

An attorney who specializes in domestic cases and, hence, does a lot of divorces, said she has noticed that probably 90 percent of her Mormon women clients claim that their husbands were "addicted to porn." She explained, "It's become part of the folklore. A dark, evil thing has invaded and destroyed their marriage. In reality, there are many reasons why a marriage fails, but pornography is the acceptable reason, the simple way out. In a few of the cases where I've been in a position to get the facts, there was no 'addiction' and it wasn't the root cause. And for my non-Mormon clients, pornography isn't even an element. It doesn't even come up."

Saturday had been a series of monotonous speakers to one discussant, so he felt "very energized" when Elder Holland began to speak. But he ended disappointed: "He raised important issues and gave us simplistic answers."

One of the men present offered another reason for the recent high-intensity focus on pornography, starting during President Hinckley's administration: "Pornography is a reason the bishop will accept without argument. And contrariwise, no matter what the cause of the divorce, the assumption is that the husband was involved in pornography. There's no attempt to get counseling, to try and define issues, maybe even to look more closely at the root causes and the shared responsibility." (Although it wasn't mentioned in the discussion, the Church has recently launched an anti-pornography website {www.combatingpornography.org}. Its effectiveness remains to be evaluated.)

Perhaps the most interesting talk, in terms of supplying new information, was Elder Rasband's description of sitting in with Elder Eyring during a day spent making missionary assignments. A summary of this process (worth reading) led to a discussion of a combination of missions in Europe, the expansion of missions in Latin America, and the "funny math" by which a "name change" for stakes made it appear that growth had occurred when actually their number had decreased. One participant commented that the St. George Mission includes the fundamentalist communities of Hildale/Colorado City and that there is a "ward about ten miles up the road" called Apple Valley.

Related both to missionary work and to the family theme was one woman's comment, "I've noticed that the Church does really well in countries

where women are subservient." Another discussant commented that this cultural insight had some historical grounding. The prime conversion territory in the early nineteenth century was Great Britain, Scandinavia in the late nineteenth century, Germany in the 1930s, and Italy in the 1980s. "Women really have been equal to men in Europe for at least fifty years," so perhaps there is a causal effect.

One participant recalled perhaps ten years ago when the three stakes in the Avenues neighborhood of Salt Lake City had been combined into two, and M. Russell Ballard had scolded the congregation for not being better missionaries and hence being responsible for the demographic drop that required the combination. Elder Faust, who lived in one of the stakes, was the final speaker and gave a very gentle talk that "perhaps we don't need to be better missionaries. We need to be better friends."

A strong candidate for the "worst talk" was Elder Russell Nelson's, characterized as "rambling, disorganized, and dull. It was so patronizing, as if he were speaking to a group of children." One participant found it odd that he showed photos of three generations--a daughter, granddaughter, and great-great-daughter--all at approximately the same age but not of their mother, his first wife. "And what about Wendy, his second wife? Is there a dotted line connecting her to this family chain?" A second participant nominated as "worst sentence in conference" Elder Nelson's statement that each human being comes from "a long line of progenitors." I thought, 'We're seeing revelation occurring before our very eyes!'

Another participant proposed another candidate for "worst sentence"--Elaine Dalton's characterization of the Young Women that they were like "the girlfriends of the stripling warriors."

This conference seemed to feature an unusual number of Brigham Young quotations. Speakers did quote President Monson, but less frequently and less substantively than the pattern of quoting President Hinckley.

The discussion also turned to President Monson's leadership, given that this was his second year as Church president. President Kimball had started the pattern of bookending the conferences by making an opening and a closing statement, a custom that both President Hinckley and President Monson have followed. However, President Hinckley always conducted at least one session and often two. President Monson does not--the counselors do. Is it a health

problem? Is this a step in the direction of democracy?

Several participants were puzzled by President Monson's spontaneous digression during his opening remarks to tell, for the third time, the story of his first date with his wife, Frances, and how warmly his future in-laws had received him when they learned that his great-uncle was the missionary who had taught them the gospel. Obviously the congregation greatly enjoyed this humorous story, but did these interjections require adjustments to the "timed-to-the-minute" schedule? "Maybe that's what accounted for the spritely, upbeat tempo of the hymns in that session," commented one participant.

Another participant commented about her disappointment that--during President Monson's Sunday morning address, the last of the session, which is traditionally the strongest speaking spot, and on Easter morning, he basically told the Easter story with a focus on Christ's resurrection but had "nothing personal" to add. "As evidence of the resurrection, he cited other testimonies and said he believed them."

One woman who had worked on the temple staff reported that she had attended one of the devotionals held in the solemn assembly room for staff at which President Monson, then an apostle, spoke and said that he had never had a vision, that his testimony was based on his good feelings.

"Maybe he's the Mother Teresa of the Church," countered one discussant. "Maybe he genuinely doesn't care about administration and would rather be visiting hospitals, blessing the sick. He's a genuinely kind person and that's better than mean." In addition to the chorus of agreement, one woman commented, "On the night my grandfather died, he came to the hospital. That meant a lot to my family." A third person added, "It was very kind of him to attend the funeral of Marie Osmond's son and by his presence comment on not making judgements about suicide." A fourth commented, in relation to the Osmonds, that "my feelings about Marie Osmond changed 180 degrees because she was so accepting of her lesbian daughter."

Other comments: The Saturday morning session had no visual aids, although the Sunday morning session did. A new trend?

It was nice that "Martha finally got her due." She wasn't inattentive; "she was multitasking."

Elder Dallin H. Oaks's talk on giving blessings was "probably reassuring" to those who felt hesitant