
BY COMMON CONSENT

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EDITORIAL NOTE: We're experimenting with sending out the newsletter by email to those for whom we currently have email addresses. This issue's coverage of last April's conference is significantly longer than what will fit in the traditional six pages of the newsletter (and may be more than you actually want to remember about that particular general conference); but if you're interested in receiving an e-report, please send your email address to Lavina Fielding Anderson, lavina@elavina.org.

OCTOBER CONFERENCE CRITIQUE COMING UP

As burning issues go, there's obviously plenty of business, questions, and mysteries left over from April conference to engage the attention of conference viewers. the excommunication of Kate Kelly in June successfully created a climate of fear about feminism that slid backward the vaunted baby steps toward equality. No one expects the conference to address the topic directly, but some jaded feminists are based for an extra sugary dose of "weloveyoweappreciateyou" from the pulpit.

OrdainWomen is encouraging women to

attend the priesthood session's broadcast at their local stake centers but to keep the focus firmly on eventual equality for women, toward which such attendance is a step. Presumably women attendees will be permitted to enter after at least one reminder that they can watch the session on TV. Meanwhile, priesthood brethren who choose to attend the women's session broadcast in the same local venues on Saturday, September 27, will almost certainly be not only warmly welcomed but handed plates so they can join the line at the refreshment table.

The *Friend* published General Authority portrait cards of the First Presidency and Twelve in its pre-conference issue. Will they end up being traded like baseball cards? Will general auxiliary presidencies join the gallery? What about the Seventies?

To join in the discussion of trends, themes, and talking points at the Mormon Alliance's traditional semi-annual Conference, show up on Monday, October 6, at 6:30 p.m. in Conference Room A of the Salt Lake City's main public library, 210 East 400 South. This room 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. The entrance to the library's underground parking (pricy!) is available midblock between 200 and 300 East.

E-reports, responses, and reactions VERY welcome from e-observers. Please send to lavina@elavina.org by noon, Monday, October 6.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN APRIL ...

In a highly energized session of observations, opinions, and predictions tumbling over each other, the semi-annual Conference Critique met to analyze the just-past April general conference. Moderator Jennifer Bowen set a four-part agenda: trends, possible contemporary influences that may have showed up in conference talks, subjects that were *not* talked about, and the traditional nominations of most/least favorite talks.

Among the trends analyzed--some of them carried over from earlier conferences, but some of them new--were:

1. An emphasis on the Second Coming that dovetailed nicely with the traditional theme about the evils of the world.

2. This emphasis spun off its own subtheme--the need to defend religious freedom and the firm expectation that Church members would be persecuted for their beliefs. (Elders Holland, Nelson)

3. Pornography, which was, as usual, seen as an attack on the traditional family (code for "anti-gay rights") but which had the distinction of being the major emphasis of Linda S. Reeves, a counselor in the Relief Society general presidency, the first time a woman has addressed this particular topic. As usual, however, there was no definition of pornography, leaving listeners with no "official" way to differentiate between erotic romance, literary and artistic treatments of sexuality, and any other category. The example--a daughter

who was guilt-ravaged when she accidentally encountered a porn site--was, as one participant pointed out, only more of the Church's heavy-handed production of guilt about sexual practices. Related themes were the unchangeability of God's law and the evils of same-sex attraction.

4. A remarkable number of addresses to youth. At least seven speakers said they were speaking directly to youth and/or young single adults, even if their talks moved rapidly beyond the attention span of this audience. One participant commented that the "Church magazines emphasize that you're supposed to plant your kids in front of the TV set for ten hours of conference and you're going to get a lot of feedback about how boring it is. Maybe this lip service is a gesture of recognition about the audience." (It is true that all three March issues of the Church magazines offer lengthy lists of suggestions on how to make conference special and fun for children and youth.)

The motives behind these emphases was more difficult to discern. One participant commented that he found it "very unlikely" that the Brethren had "study groups" to discuss policy and doctrinal positions, because they were so absorbed with administration and financial decisions.

During the first stage of the Conference Critique, a rally in support of the federal court in Denver upholding the ruling that had briefly legalized gay marriage in Utah, a significant coincidence that Conference Critique participants enjoyed. The report from the OrdainWomen participants pointed out a number of significant problems with the Church's handling of the events. First, the gates to Temple Square were closed but not locked or guarded; so when the women marched over from the park, by coincidence someone was leaving, and they simply held the gate open, allowing the women to enter. They did not force

an entry onto the square. They were irritated at the characterization of the entire Temple Square as "sacred" ground and took umbrage as Michael Ottersen's sneering characterization that they were "posturing in the shadow of the temple."

Instead, said one participant, "we walked in, formed an orderly line in the space designated for those waiting for stand-by tickets, and waited patiently," in contrast to reports that "ushers" asked them to leave. Kim Farah, a seasoned Public Affairs representative, worked her way down the line, shaking hands with each participant, greeting each one warmly, listening to their briefly expressed hopes and descriptions of why they were present, and freely offering hugs. Ruth Todd, last October's Public Affairs representative, was no longer working for the Church. Was there a story there? Apparently not--she had simply received a much better job offer. Backing up Farah, however, was Jessica Moody, signer of the threatening letter that had disinvited the Ordain.Women to participate. "She needed a hug," observed one participant. She looked "extremely severe."

Participants unanimously agreed that banning the press from Temple Square was an ill-advised action on the Church's part. It resulted in negative editorials in both the *Deseret News* and the *Salt Lake Tribune* and also brought a request for a reversal from the national journalistic society pointing out that this was an "unannounced" policy and that, even if it had existed earlier, had not been enforced.

Another participant spelled out the complexities of the situation. A public affairs department is *supposed* to "minimize and marginalize" entities and activities that it sees as threatening to its mission, but that's not the job of a *church*. On the contrary, a church is supposed to offer inclusiveness, love, and acceptance. "So on the one hand, Public affairs was doing its job," summarized this participant,

"but on another, it put the Church in the position of being policeman, which probably accounts for its harsh descriptions, although that doesn't justify misrepresentations."

Since the numbers of participants had come up in both the media and as part of the Church's statement, participants explained that they counted participants carefully and in two ways: those who pre-registered and those who came to the park. Cards were passed out to those present, resulting in 510 present and 407 who were present "by proxy" with their names being carried by those who were present. In contrast, the Church statement estimated the crowd as about 200.

Ordain.Women was quietly claiming victory in another way. "The website was getting 2,000-2,500 hits a day, but after the Jessica Moody letter, it hit 20,000 immediately." Those submitting profiles ("I'm a Mormon and I believe in the ordination of women") was up to three hundred.

One long-time participant explained his conclusion that we were seeing "two churches in action." The first Church was the "Packerites," who was hard-liners and grimly determined to hold the status quo. "We heard from a lot of them on Saturday, including the "harsh and angry" talk by Jeffrey R. Holland. But Sunday's mood was completely different. He characterized it as "the Kumbaya session" of love, Jesus's grace, and acceptance of diversity. One woman, who had been dreading general conference, listened with deep pleasure and happiness to President Uchtdorf's Sunday morning talk on gratitude, and then "snapped off my TV set so I could keep that spirit all day." The "Uchtdorfians," in fact, formed the second branch of the power struggle--striving for a more liberal, accepting and, frankly, "smarter" approach to Church governance. The struggle between these two factions has history on the side of the Uchtdorfians even as the old school

apostles try to keep their hands on the buttons of power. "I think what we hear depends a lot on who is on which committees, and which policies they're in a decision to influence." This participant pointed to the history of mammoth and divisive struggles over the change in polygamy and in ordaining black men. "The struggle over polygamy largely occurred after the Manifesto, and we're still dealing with resistance to it," he commented. "The struggle over black ordination largely occurred before the revelation, so that transition was handled much more smoothly. But what gets covered up is how very bitter and divisive those power struggles were."

Since this conference was the second time women could listen (though not in person) to the priesthood session, participants discussed their reaction to it. One participant's octogenarian mother listened to the session and proclaimed, "Those were some pretty good talks!" Most listeners agreed. One participant commented, "It was really obvious to me that with a few changes to gender-inclusive nouns and pronouns, everything said in that session about service and taking covenant identity seriously could have applied right down the line to women. The only difficult talk was Elder Oaks's highly lawyerly approach to keys, powers, authority, and blessings that was supposed to explain why women couldn't have the priesthood, and what it came down to was 'because I said so and God agrees with me.'"

The discussion veered off into Oaks's very disappointing (even enraging) talk at several points. "Takes an attorney to split hairs that many ways," commented one. Another thought that Oaks had been sent in as the heavy hitter after Todd Christoffersen's attempt to establish an "almost-priesthood" category of "moral authority" for women in the October 2013 session had merely raised confusion to a new level.

One participant pointed out, that demographically we should be losing some General Authorities in the next few years, and posed the interesting question: "Who would you like to see as an apostle?" As usual, participants expressed bewilderment at the lack of a Latin American apostle. "Look at the demographics of membership, but the complete vacancy coming from south of the border." In looking among the Seventies, one person thought that Elder Michael John U. Teh, of a Philippines, was energetic and insightful and spoke with obvious compassion at the sufferings inflicted on that nation by the natural disasters. He told a moving story about the faithfulness of a tithe-paying Saint, even though she was elderly, made her living by doing laundry, and lived in a tent. Gerald Caussé of the Presiding Bishopric was another impressive candidate. He had recently spoken at the stake conference of some participants who said that Sister Caussé was also very impressive: "down to earth, realistic, well-prepared, and interesting."

Another candidate was Randell Ridd, who spoke with humor, irony, and to the "choice" generation. One participant pointed out that Ridd's "you know what I mean" was code, once again, for avoiding pornography, but liked his injunctions to be present--paying attention to driving when behind the wheel, listening to friends when you're present with them, etc.

When one woman asked if participants saw apostolic candidates among the general auxiliaries presidencies (despite their crippling status as "appendages"), nominees were Neill Marriott and Bonnie Oscarson of the Young Women's general presidency. "The fact that Sister Oscarson had asked women to 'treat each other with love and affection,' even when they disagree, had motivated some contributors to the Ordain.Women website to write apologies for being snarky and snappish. President Oscarson was also the only speaker who quoted only

women--no men.

Another candidate, who had thought through the demographics of the Twelve, pointed out that it currently counts no scientists, nobody with a technical background, no educators, and no psychologists. "We need to move past the businessman/financier/even lawyer model."

An important new development was, not just the evils of the world and the growing gap between LDS and "the world's" standards but the "almost eager" anticipation of persecution. Joseph Smith "invented the persecution narrative" because it explains so well why Mormonism generated hostility. It may be an identity issue, a way of Mormon teens separate ("and smug!") on the life-stage train: baptism, confirmation, ordination (for you know who), baptisms for the dead as a way of accessing the temple during the teen years, missionaries, temple marriage, and family formation. Given this renewed emphasis on persecution, listeners were not surprised to hear the literal revival of war stories--e.g., Mormon soldiers who courageously knelt and prayed in their barracks despite mockery.

Among linguistic oddities was President Monson's innocent use of "fellow travelers" to describe helping others through life--proof that the Cold War is not only over but forgotten. Another was President Uchtdorf's delightful slip of the tongue when he was announcing speakers in priesthood meeting -- that the third speaker would be the second counselor in the Young Women's general presidency. One man who had heard this remarkable statement with his sons was mightily disappointed when it turned out to be Randall Ridd's otherwise admirable address; but he also checked the recording he had made from his home TV. It was definitely "Young Women," but the website had already corrected it to Young Men's general presidency. One participant suggested wickedly, "What if President Uchtdorf did it on purpose?"

The moderator's question about "unaddressed themes" produced an extensive list. One woman prefaced her comment with the statement, about the women's general meeting, "I didn't disagree with one thing they said. Unity, not judging, love, spiritual power, and service are genuinely important. But look at what didn't even get mentioned": education, how to provide leadership to a mixed-gender group, financial planning for personal and family security, running for public office or seeking the kind of appointive positions that are policy-setters, research and publication as appropriate activities, developing creativity, and service above the level of a plate of brownies. Other participants added that Mother in Heaven was "among the missing," even when the repeated comments about "returning home to live with Heavenly Father and Jesus" and living together eternally "in families" made Her absence conspicuous. Again, singleness and childlessness were treated as tragic conditions that the atonement would compensate for. (President Eyring's "waves of loneliness" was particularly ill-received.) Also completely ignored was the global problem of warfare, human trafficking, and child sexual abuse "which didn't get even a prepositional phrase this time." Another participant was particularly uncomfortable with the video shown during the women's session in which women were shown repeatedly in interview settings with men.

Furthermore, despite the importance assigned to the policy essays, there seems to be a deliberate silence about them--perhaps another manifestation of the "two church" power struggle. One participant hypothesized that "slipping them on the website" gives the Public Affairs people a way to claim transparency but meanwhile to keep the information from anything like wide circulation.

Observers found it interesting that, not only did President Monson not announce new

temples but also explained that such announcements would not be made until a future date. With twenty-eight temples in the planning or incomplete stages, it was easy to deduct that "the Church is strapped to finish the ones it's already working on."

Among the most favorite talks were two of President Uchtdorf's. "After the disheartening hard-line talks," observed one participant, "he stood up and said, 'Don't sleep through the Restoration.' The message I got -- whether he meant it or not, was that change was happening and that more change was going to happen, so all those dreary mentions of how God's law never changes were automatically out of date."

Randell L. Ridd, counselor in the Young Men's general presidency, gave an engaging talk that spoke knowledgeably about the use of social media and made the anti-pornography point without spelling it out. Listeners found refreshing his pun on "the choice generation" with its double meaning and the serious point that success in life means making choices that bring one closer to Christ.

Elder Bednar, after a long series of strained and not very successful talks (e.g., the "pickle talk") turned in a solid hit with his story of the friend who got his pick-up stuck in the snow when he was trying to get a load of wood, but how the load was exactly what he needed to

enable the truck to edge its way out of the snow and back onto the road.

Another nominee for most favorite talk was President Monson's lively and energized priesthood meeting address, in which President Uchtdorf was also a candidate. "You know what I liked best about President Uchtdorf's story of sitting in the cockpit of Air Force One?" mused one participant. "It was that President Monson said, 'Dieter, don't even think about it.' I like it that they're friends who use first names."

Among least favorite talks, Elder Oaks's was so unanimously the winner that everyone else fell into a subcategory. "I like to see the Church painting itself into this corner," observed one satisfied participant. First, women had no priesthood--period. Then they had the blessings of the priesthood. Then they could exercise authority by borrowing (having bestowed upon them) priesthood keys, and finally they had real authority if they've received it from "properly ordained" priesthood holders. (The frequent repetition of "properly ordained" raised the question of whether rogue ordinations were occurring, but no one was aware that this movement had arisen anywhere.) The fact that only men have priesthood office seems to be the line-in-the-sand differentiation, since women now have both power and authority.

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