

The Apotheosis Narrative

Musings on Mormonism, Religion, and Life

Counterprotesting a "Latter-day Saints for Trump" Rally... as a Latter-day Saint



Originally shared to Facebook on October 27th, 2020

I am sure some of you will be interested in hearing about how my peaceful counter-protest of the "Latter-day Saints for Trump" rally in Gilbert, AZ went today. To start out you should know that I was the only person present who protesting Trump. I stood completely alone the entire time. It was held at Discovery Park, a large public park with small lakes and spacious fields which sits across the street in the shadow of the Gilbert Temple. It was the place, for instance, that I joined many thousand Latter-day Saint youth back in March 2014, close to its formal dedication for our cultural celebration. For that reason, as well as the general local, the park is a favorite for Latter-day Saints in the area who might associate it with the temple and memories of its construction.

At this event, I'd say there were several hundred, if not nearing a thousand people present; no more than a typical stake conference. Likely half were wearing masks. This crowd seemed rather small given some of the speakers who were lined up. Speakers announced ahead of time included Sen. Mike Lee (UT), Sen. Rand Paul (TN), Rep. Andy Biggs (AZ), Rep. Matt Gaetz (FL) and Charlie Kirk of the conservative organization TurningPoint USA. They brought with them a surprise guest however whom I was not expecting: Nigel Farage, former leader of the UK Brexit Party. By the end of the rally, I had been able to stand within ten feet of every one of them, briefly speaking to several.

I arrived to the event about an hour early and —after calming my nerves a bit— picked a shady area several dozen feet away from the main event platform and proceeded to silently hold my three signs. The main one I held was the "Latter-day Saints for King Noah" sign, though I occasionally switched to the "Pardon my Mormon, but... FRICK TRUMP" which was met with a good number of smiles and laughs (I will circle back to this later!) and only pulled out my more detailed comparison of Trump and Noah when approached and inquired. After standing for half an hour, some event coordinators came and respectfully asked me to just stand probably ten feet away on the other side of the sidewalk, politely pointing out where the boundaries of their reserved area were. I assured them that I didn't want to cause any undue trouble and happily relocated to a place that I remained largely for the remainder of the event.



There was a certain strangeness to the event in the ways in which the dynamic between politics and religion were manifested. It isn't often that I see overt Mormon themes present at larger national political events for either party, and so the religious studies side of me was fascinated by what I observed. Like most campaign events, this one had some background prelude music playing as the attendees and speakers arrived. However, contrary to Bon Jovi, Cher, or John Denver playing in the background, the organizers played a series of LDS hymns, remixed into a pop/acoustic form, akin to what you might hear upon entering a Deseret Book store. This was

strange and set, well, a tone of reverence(?) as people began to fill the empty seats. Once the 2:30 pm mark arrived, the side conversations settled down and the event was initiated with a brief introduction of the schedule followed by a prayer. This prayer was overtly Mormon, and besides the explicit invocation of support so that Trump might be reelected, it might have fit in at any LDS sacrament meeting. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited and then the national anthem was performed by a young woman who was introduced to be leaving on her LDS mission to New York in 11 days from now *followed by much applause*

Conservative culture-warrior Charlie Kirk was the first speaker, who lauded the Latter-day Saints present on their values and faith (I seem to recall him describing Mormonism as a non-Christian cult following Romney's impeachment vote of Trump) and spoke glowing praises of the various Mormons he personally knew. It was also claimed (I can't recall if this was Kirk or in the earlier introduction) that the "lifestyle and values of the Mormon pioneers" represented the same lifestyle and values of the contemporary Republican Party. For those of you who know your 19th-century history—specifically the Republican Party's original attitude towards Mormons—this will likely cause you to cringe as I did and imagine the pioneer Saints spinning in their graves.

Next was Rep. Andy Biggs (AZ) who gave the most overtly religious and Mormon-themed talk—for it was more religious sermon than mere speech—of the entire event. It had all the trappings and characteristics of a testimony given on fast Sunday. He acknowledged this outright, saying that though he doesn't always do so, that he was going to "wear his religion on his sleeve." He drew the audience's attention to the beauty of the temple across the street, speaking highly of his mission, and saying that his faith makes this vote a deeply obvious one because "my faith doesn't allow me to vote for someone who supports abortion." He continued by pulling out and reading from scripture, specifically that of Alma 46 and the story of Captain Moroni rallying the people with the Title of Liberty against the invading Lamanites led by the wicked Amalickiah. He quoted from verse 12 specifically, reciting "And it came to pass that he rent his coat; and he took a piece thereof, and wrote upon it—In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children—and he fastened it upon the end of a pole." then proceeding to claim that just as the Nephites, the Republican Party is likewise fighting to protect Americans against the threats made to their religious beliefs, their families, their children, and their freedom. He pointed to the many MAGA and TRUMP 2020 flags in the crowd, identifying them as modern Titles of Liberty and encouraged audience members to wave theirs, which was met by much applause. He warned of the "flaxen cords" of the Democrats, who were seeking to bind and enslave the American people. In a moment seemingly overcome by emotion, Rep. Biggs's voice choked as he spoke for his love of liberty and freedom and his desire to protect it against such threats, claiming that "Our children will be in chains twenty years out if we don't vote for freedom this election" and that "if we don't win, twenty years from now our children will have to describe in hushed tones to their children what it was like to once live in a free country."

The rest of the speakers either spoke more generally (as they were not Mormons themselves) or I didn't have the opportunity to hear them as I was engaged in different conversations. Nigel Farage decried the "Russia Hoax", the "Impeachment Hoax", "Hunter Biden's laptops" though spoke warmly of the UK's "victory" through Brexit and of Trump's delivery on his campaign promises. Joe Biden, he said, represents a future of globalism and corruption. Rep. Matt Gaetz also spoke of the Biden's, describing them akin to a wealthy crime family and mentioning both

Hunter Biden's dealings in Ukraine and the recent laptop allegations that the "mainstream media" and "democrats" are seeking to completely cover-up. Sen. Rand Paul spoke warmly of Mormons and other people of faith, stating that such faith needs to be shored-up in the face of an increasingly secularizing and relativist American Left. He expressed his admiration of President Trump, though acknowledged that he's disagreed and voted against him on some issues. Perhaps most strikingly, and possibly only through sustained levels of cognitive dissonance, he said that "Our nation will only survive if we are a virtuous people who elect virtuous leaders."



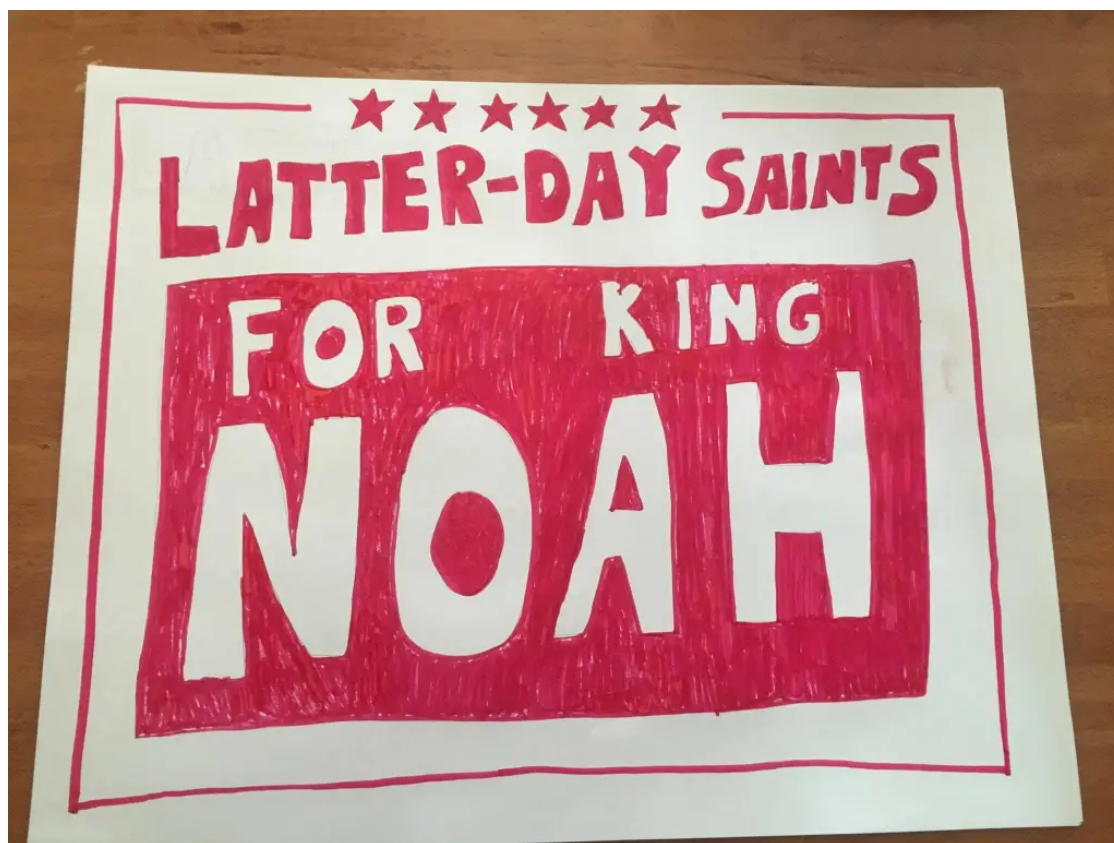
In terms of the conversations I had with people throughout the event, they were all more or less respectful and cordial; I didn't get physically assaulted and battered like I did by a white supremacist in Boise over the summer. This is where I believe that the event's religious dynamics and demographics played a strong role as Mormons generally hate and avoid open contention. Instead, as some did, we tend to settle more with polite passive-aggression and beneficent condescension. I was approached by a number of individuals, who ranged from bulky MAGA bros who likely do CrossFit, to MAGA mommas with their kids in tow, to young conservative teenagers, aged veterans, and at least one "QAnon Karen." Most who saw my "Latter-day Saints for King Noah" sign were perplexed, either because they didn't understand it was a joke and thus would ask me why, as a member of the LDS Church, I would openly support a "wicked leader" OR because they were trying to fathom how I might see Trump and King Noah in a similar light. And some came up to ask me, in which case I would give them the more detailed breakdown. What was remarkable to me was that on only very few occasions did someone voice disagreement with any one of my points against Trump. More often, they gave reluctant concessions but then sought to convince me, in no uncertain terms, that Joe Biden was just as guilty, if not more so, of every single one of the things I was critiquing Trump for (yes, including whoredoms, greed, gluttony, and authoritarianism).

One gentleman in particular, a fellow church member and one of the MAGA bros, asked me if I viewed Trump to be an immoral leader, to which I answered in the affirmative. When he asked for evidence, I brought up the rhetoric and language he has used throughout his candidacy and presidency which have played into historically racial tropes and sentiments of racial prejudice and hatred, thereby energizing and invigorating racist segments of the country. He sought to clear Trump of responsibility for such under the First Amendment, which I acknowledged were not "illegal" statements but instead "immoral all the same." Specifically, for instance, I shared how his generalizations of immigrant, minority, and undocumented persons have caused a spike in prejudice against them. Sadly, he and another individual told me that such things were not immoral if they were "true" and based on "statistical evidence gathered by the FBI". He claimed that the majority of undocumented persons coming from Mexico were members of the "cartel" and indeed were largely "rapists, drug addicts, and criminals" and said that, while pointing to the temple, "for the same reasons that the temple has a wall around it, we need to have a wall on our Southern border." I firmly responded to him that these generalizations reflected the racist ideologies that I had been speaking of, and the conversation quickly ended with him bidding me good day.

Though there are other anecdotes I could share, the rest of them pretty cordial and positive, there are a few other moments I want to briefly describe. For instance, some members who approached me took issue with my comparison of Trump to Noah, with many of them echoing the sentiment that a more apt comparison can be had between him and Captain Moroni (though I am pretty sure that Moroni was in much better shape.) No, the comparison that I heard which made me cringe the most was the individual who said that Trump is most akin to Alma the Younger, who gave up a life of sin to find genuine redemption in Christ while dedicating himself to the work of God. To think that anyone could read the absolute beauty that is the redemption story present in Alma 36 is far beyond me.

One woman, the "QAnon Karen" really sought to convince me that the Hunter Biden allegations don't fit the definition of a conspiracy theory, despite not being corroborated by any credible (neutral) media outlets or independent investigations. She said that the entirety of the media and the government is refusing to investigate them, though I replied that was more likely due to the lack of evidence than the abundance of it and that a collective collaboration on the scale she was insisting did indeed fit the very definition of a conspiracy theory. She wasn't pleased in hearing that.

A funny moment occurred after the event had ended. Standing in the midst of a large group seeking handshakes and autographs, the group of speakers that I mentioned earlier slowly made their way closer and closer to where I was located. Seeing through the crowd, Senator Mike Lee grabbed the attention of Nigel Farage, Rep. Gaetz, and Sen. Paul, pointed at me, and said "Oh my gosh, you have to look at this guy's sign. "Pardon my Mormon but...Frick Trump" that is amazing." They looked and smiled, though he laughed more than they did. I imagine he had greater cultural insight into niche Mormon culture.




Overall, I am glad things remained safe and peaceful. I had many members come express that though we disagree, they respect my right to be there and my right to hold a different opinion. While that sentiment is nice of course, I think on a certain level it can be problematic. For the majority of those I spoke to, this was simply a difference of opinion. They weren't desperately seeking asylum in another country, only to be separated from their families. They weren't worried about having "the talk" with their children of color regarding the state of race relations in the US. They likely weren't worried about losing their health coverage should the Affordable Care Act be repealed. Politics was less personal to them except where it served to shield them from terms which caused them fear such as "socialism", "liberals", "political correctness", and "antifa". These are the fears that the speakers played into, draped in Latter-day Saint imagery and buzzwords.


If anything, my biggest takeaway is that the free exchange of ideas should never come at the expense of the equally-important free exchange of the heart. There were genuinely good and kind people at this event, the sort of people that I share membership in the LDS Church with. While I deeply disagree with many of the views that were shared, I still have to believe in and appeal to their humanity in conversations with them. It's been largely through relationships and loving conversations with persons of different marginalized groups, for instance, that my own heart has been softened on various issues. In them, I have been able to step outside of my own experiences and privileged upbringing to consider why a given subject might be so important to another person.

I don't know how to fix or form the perfect country. It's possible that I didn't change a single person's vote today. But I am okay with that if I allowed them to see—for however briefly—an informed and respectful alternative from within the framework of their own religious community, debunking whatever preexisting stereotypes they might have held to.



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 27/10/2020

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