



TIMES AND SEASONS.

“Truth will prevail.”



NEWS AND POLITICS

Is Church Growth Declining?

by [Stephen C](#) • October 5, 2021 • [26 Comments](#)

I'm a Church growth amateur; occasionally I enjoy dropping by Matt Martinich's [blog](#) to look at the latest temple predictions, and I'll often skim through headlines about the latest data point on Church growth and what it means. However, for some time now I've been suspicious that we're reading way too much into the natural jitters in the data. Church growth was 1.2%, now it's 1.5%, what does that mean!? What gets credit?

In data science this is what we call “overfitting.” Sometimes there's a random blip in the data that we interpret as meaningful change when in reality, it's just a random blip. If we're oversensitive to variations we can read trends into the data that aren't there, and we're definitely at a high risk for this when we only look at the data once a year when the latest numbers are announced at spring General Conference.

In reality things like the growth of a relatively developed religion follow slow-moving, long-term patterns. To use a metaphor, some social phenomenon are like a large boat that requires a long time to turn left or right, and short of some nuclear level event like the President of the Church abdicating and declaring the Church a fraud, it is likely that growth trends won't drastically swing in a real, meaningful sense on a dime.

And even events that might be considered “nuclear level” don't turn out to be. For example, the Jehovah's Witness hierarchy predicted that the second coming would come in 1975, and put a lot of real energy into preparations. While my understanding of that event is that the hierarchy always technically maintained some plausible deniability in case it didn't happen, the fact is that it was a huge deal when it didn't, yet the aftermath of the “failed prophecy” event is [barely noticeable](#) in their growth rates.

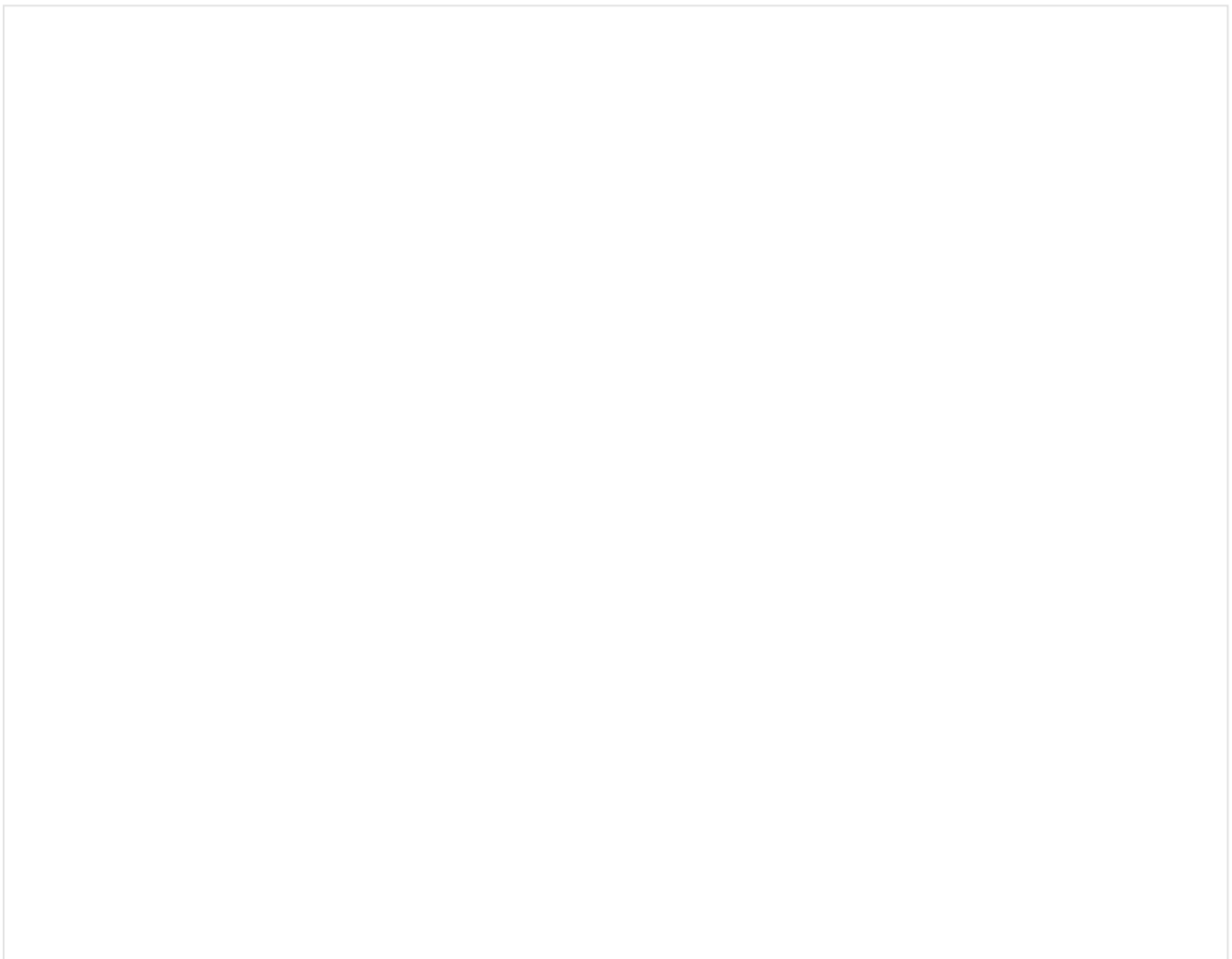
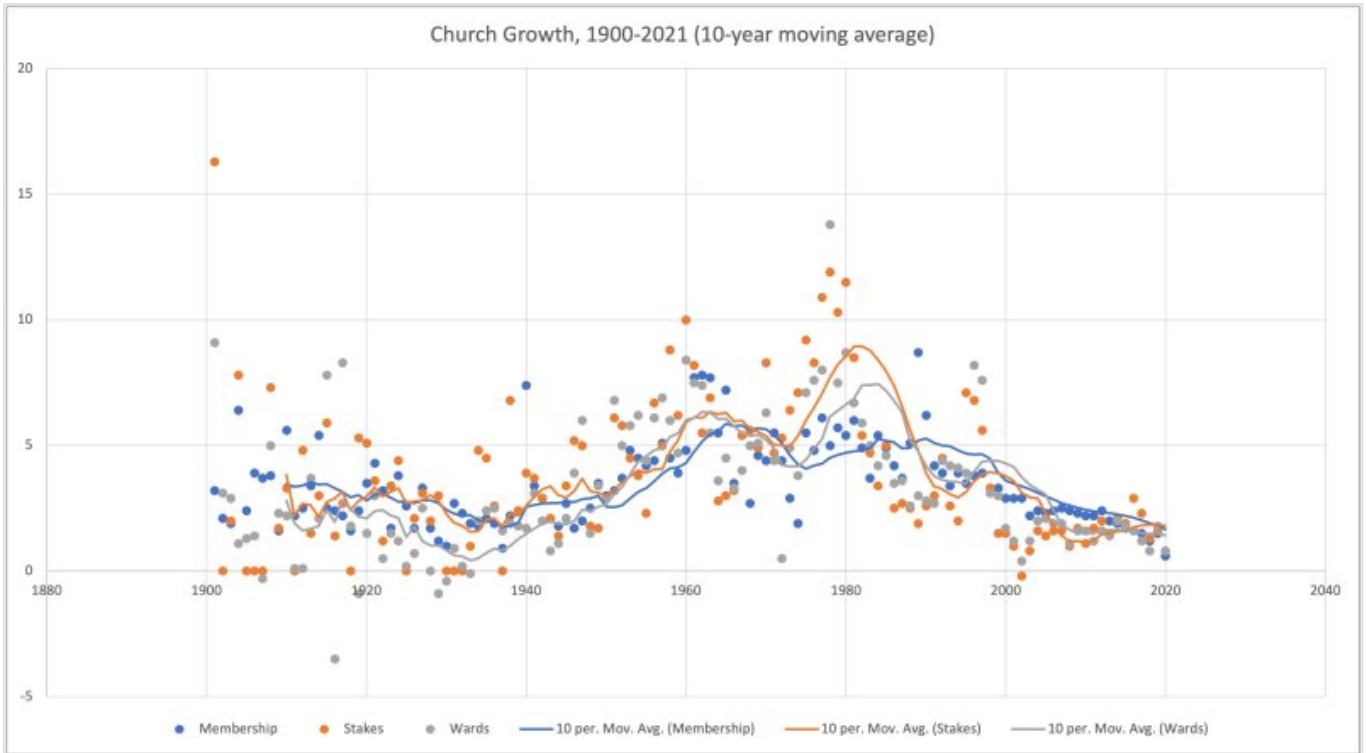
So what are the overall trends for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? To figure this out we need to ask questions about our measurements.

For some time now there's been chatter about how Church membership numbers are notoriously inaccurate because of people who are on the rolls but do not identify as Latter-day Saints, or who the Church has completely lost track of. If you've ever gone through the ward list A to Z in a non-US area, you'll find that these people constitute a significant portion of the Church membership.

Fair enough, but what about ward and stake growth? Wards and stakes require active members, not just members on the rolls, so they are going to be a more accurate indicator of church growth as a percentage than raw numbers of members. For a while now I've assumed that ward and stake growth tells a significantly different story because of baseball baptisms and the like, but I had not actually seen a data visualization comparing the different measures, so I made one (hat tip to [Clint Kimball](#) for compiling the data from the Church Almanac and other sources).

The data do indeed show bumpiness, but within overall trends. Here I took two different timeframes (1900-2021 and 1950-2021) and applied a variety of trendlines and smoothing approaches (technically speaking,

a 6th order polynomial and a 10-year moving average) to try to cut through the noise and uncover the real trends in Church growth post-1900.



As seen, when we cut through the noise, my earlier preconceptions notwithstanding, measuring stake growth and ward growth does not tell a terribly different story than raw, on-the-rolls, membership growth, which is that church growth was low during the Great Depression, picked up during World War II, saw its apex during the late 1970s/early 1980s, and has since declined rather steadily until now (with a possible plateau from 2010 on for ward and stake growth). For the wonks, when ward and stake growth is compared they correlate to a .59 level, with membership growth and stake growth correlating to a .51 level, so the two aren't synonymous, but they are similar. (I don't know how much the history of changing requirements for stake formation plays into all of this).

There are a few points that rise to the surface when the different timeframes are considered. For example, the half century trendline puts more weight on the abnormally low 2020 year, which is presumably why stake growth saw a downward decline that was not picked up when the whole century is considered (which actually shows a spike in stake formation near the very end). The next few years will tell us whether 2020 was just a fluke year and stake formation rates are actually trending upwards (likely, given COVID), or whether it portends a real change.

With the exception of the COVID-influenced 2020 growth decline, this suggests that the chatter one hears about a recent sharp decline in Church growth rates (whether due to the Internet or the particular social

hobby horse of the interlocutor) isn't really born out by the data (if anything the decline may have stalled out in the 2010s for ward and stake growth). Church growth rates are basically following a pattern that they've been following for several decades, and the story is basically more of the same whether we're talking about new wards, members, or stakes.

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26 comments for "Is Church Growth Declining?"

Ethan says:

October 5, 2021 at 11:28 pm

Thanks for this analysis. I think that the stake growth in particular hides some important numbers. It seems like stakes are smaller than they were 10 years ago. My current stake was formed from two other stakes 5 years ago. At the time each stake had 8 units, where the prior stake had 12 units (some large enough to split, but there was no building space). The growth in the stake was all from migration out of older areas into newer suburban areas.

Changes in ward and stake organization also means a stake can operate with many fewer active members. Elimination of high priest groups and YM presidencies requires 8 fewer MP holders per ward needed to staff presidencies. Elimination of stake YM and SS presidencies adds another 8 at the stake level. For a stake with 8 units, they can operate on 72 fewer MP holders than 5 years ago. Add in the family members of those men and it's a ward worth of active people.

We've seen a period where ward and stake numbers could increase without an increase in active membership. But it seems like that's largely played out now, kind of like the surge in missionaries after the age change that quickly reverted to a longer term trend.

Mario McCash says:

October 6, 2021 at 1:33 pm

I wonder to what extent Church growth varies between domestic vs foreign/overseas congregations? The demographics and overall dynamics involved must be very unique to the locales involved. To

bundle stateside growth factors with say, Slovakia, would certainly be apples and oranges, wouldn't it? Just a whole different ballgame in understanding, assessing & analyzing what's really going on in Church growth overall around the World, it is not a just a North American Church anymore. The statistics I imagine would include a bevy of its own independent factors not particularly relevant in the American part of the Church (especially English speaking). This then would report statistical trends not convenient to engraft together with the very large U.S. Church population numbers. You would think this would have a meaningful impact on any analysis one could make overall regarding Church growth.

S Cranney says:

October 6, 2021 at 2:18 pm

@Ethan I've heard some chatter about how stake requirements have changed, but I don't remember the particulars, and what you've said makes sense. I also haven't considered how the elimination of high priests groups and YM presidencies may play into requiring less priesthood holders per ward, even though I live in one of those quasi-branches that on the low parts of the ebb struggles to staff the presidencies needed for ward status, so I've experienced what you're referring to first hand.

@Mario I'm sure there are huge differences, and I assume they largely track the process of secularization in those respective countries. The Church Almanacs have time-trend, country-level data, so one of my get-to-it-when-I-retire projects is collate all those numbers and track the process of Church growth, plateau, and sometimes decline in each country and see what it correlates with.

JEN says:

October 7, 2021 at 8:15 am

Stake formation outside the U.S. has a low threshold of membership, requiring only 1800 members. What appears to be a growth in stakes may be mainly a shift to non-US stakes.

PassTheChips says:

October 7, 2021 at 11:32 am

At least in Arizona, stake and ward requirements have changed. Stakes used to be 10-12 wards and are now 6-8. Ward sizes used to be ~350 and are now ~250. At a stake conference in 2018, the presiding general authority whose name I cannot recall, stated that Arizona would be piloting smaller stake and ward sizes. I have heard anecdotally that similar things have happened in friends' wards in New Mexico, California, and Texas.

Stephen C says:

October 7, 2021 at 2:20 pm

Good points Jen and PassTheChips. Stake trends might be a function of 1) church internationalization, and, 2) gradual roll out of the smaller stake model. I'm a little surprised the ward/stake correlation isn't higher; which suggests that changing requirements for what constitutes a ward/stake, and how these changes have varied across time and space, may have caused the plateau in the decline for wards and stakes.

Ward Memb says:

October 7, 2021 at 8:28 pm

Seems the most important variable is the blue one – membership/people, and that indicator has a negative trend on all graphs.

The other variables can be sliced and juggled into various combinations to statistically show growth, ask any Analyst :)

Geoff- Aus says:

October 7, 2021 at 9:32 pm

In Australia the church claims there are 154595 members, but on 2016 census 61600 self identify as members. The church says there are 42 stakes so 1467 members/stake, and 232 wards which gives 5.5 wards/stake, and 265 members/ward. There were 76 branches so if a branch has 1/3 the numbers a ward does, that still makes average ward 240/ward.

There was a census this year but figures not available yet.

Brian G says:

October 8, 2021 at 8:27 am

Geoff-Aus I think those numbers fit what I used to see as a clerk in the Midwest of the US. We had average attendance per ward of 200-280. Most wards I have been in have at least twice that number on the rolls. The missionaries here continue to baptize new members every year, but very few stay active. And we continue to lose what were stalwart members – some to leaving the church, others return to the Mormon Corridor – Utah/Idaho/Arizona.

Old Man says:

October 8, 2021 at 9:11 am

Some anecdotal experience from an old membership clerk: Attendance in my area (Utah) has never been that high over the last few decades and has certainly declined over the last 4-5 years. This mirrors the data discussed in the op. My take on it is the relatively recent reduction in callings has left quite a few people with nothing to do and the reduced social interactions has encouraged many to seek social interactions and connections elsewhere, including on Sunday. Members, especially those struggling with any sort of internal conflict over social or political issues, are “bouncing” off of the church.

I know my experience is anecdotal, but in addition to the slow decline over the long term numbers addressed in the op, the pandemic and American political environment has devastated unity and curtailed attendance. My traditionally mellow Wasatch Front ward and stake wrestles with these pandemic and political issues and the fissures are now extraordinarily deep. Attendance has dropped 25-30% from where it was in 2018, members are attacking each other by name on social media, and half the ward can hardly speak to the other half. This is far worse than any other issue which has divided church membership during the course of my lifetime.

Roger Terry recently addressed this situation on the “mormonomics & mormonethics” blog. Many Latter-day Saints literally don’t trust or like each other. Hardly the Christian community we all aspire to be part of! It will take years for any sort of recovery.

Old Man says:

October 8, 2021 at 9:12 am

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Stephen C. says:

October 8, 2021 at 10:57 am

@ OldMan. That's absolutely tragic. I live in a fairly international ward, so I haven't personally seen what you're talking about, but I've heard through the grapevine that that's what's happening in the Mormon corridor (not to say it isn't happening elsewhere). Given their recent rhetoric on political discord, I think this is a big concern of the brethren.

@ Brian G: I do get a sense that a lot of the formerly very active are leaving, but I wonder how much of our perception is colored by "survivorship bias." The Church has always hemorrhaged members, but those of us with Latter-day Saint ancestry have this image of multi-generational, active membership precisely because we are the ones who are still left. However, I wouldn't be surprised if the rate of "stalwart member apostasy" is higher now than in the past. Also, ward and stake fortunes are undoubtedly tied to internal US migration; it's always been thus. For all the people who deprecate Utah/Idaho there sure are a lot of members trying to get back in!

@ Ward Memb: The membership numbers also have their problems. I assume that they modify the requirements for stakes and wards based on what would be best for keeping people active and engaged, and not to try to artificially inflate numbers.

@Geoff-Aus: Another when-I-retire project is to measure Church growth for countries that have a religion question on their censuses. There are a lot of them, but they don't all have specific enough categories to pick up Latter-day Saints.

Geoff - Aus says:

October 8, 2021 at 7:59 pm

We watch conference this weekend, because we are 18 hours ahead of Utah. Shall I look forward to the prophets telling the right wing nut jobs that believe trump, to get back to truth/reality?

Ward Memb says:

October 8, 2021 at 8:49 pm

@StephenC : thanks for your comment, not trying to be too cynical, but always good to think through all angles. Really interested in membership and how that stat is tracking. Thank you for your informative post. Keep up the good work!

@ OldMan : oh dear, thank you for sharing that, I greatly appreciate the anecdotal obs. Hoping things improve.

rogerdhansen says:

October 8, 2021 at 9:12 pm

It's my understanding that membership numbers in developed countries have flatlined and are experiencing growth in developing countries. There are several possible explanations for this. The most obvious is the Church's policy toward gays and women. The developed world has moved ahead without us. In the developing world, the treatment of gays and women has yet to become a major issue. But it will eventually.

The Church has a tremendous opportunity to make the world a better place. They have the finances and the personnel, but the leadership needs to develop a vision. Much greater humanitarian efforts might encourage members to stay.

My ward in Orem was recent dissolved. The membership was split up. There are probably several reasons for this. Foremost being the influx of Hispanics.

Travis says:

October 9, 2021 at 5:30 am

I wonder if Arizona's "experiment" influences its weight or representation in Church business. More Seventies [delegates]? I can see no useful reason for the experiment, except for strategy, even subversion. Let's keep an eye on the LDS Arizona faction...

"Growth" is a funny measure. In agriculture, any goofball can follow directions to run equipment, spray a field with poison, and "grow" a mediocre crop. The question isn't growth, unless we are in the multi-level-marketing business. The question should be about producing good seed. One great seed is worth more than a million mediocre. Zion isn't built: Zion is cultivated.

The pattern in these data show that something is amiss in the field. Something would point to 1985-1995 as a marked decline. More specifically, 1990. What happened in 1990 that shifted the seed stock of the Church?

What changed in April 1990?

What is the symbolic trajectory of the change?

The nature of the covenant shifted. Most of our congregations today are not able to articulate the difference between “commandment” and “covenant” because of the change. Pres. Nelson foreshadowed future temple changes as he spoke about the need to renovate the cracked foundation of the Salt Lake Temple.

Dogheart2021 says:

October 9, 2021 at 5:51 am

Geoff Aus

Shall I look forward to the prophets telling the right wing nut jobs that believe trump, to get back to truth/reality?

Charitable comment wouldn't you say?

rickpowers says:

October 10, 2021 at 4:59 am

Both this article and several of the above comments are excellent. ty

jc says:

October 10, 2021 at 1:34 pm

Travis, can you expound more on the nature of the covenant changing?

svbob says:

October 10, 2021 at 6:59 pm

What is amazing is that, in a time of declining growth, the Church has decided on a program of reducing its influence, as in Church supported home centered religion. It is so important to create a cultural Church with deep ties into the community and a fulcrum around which to socialize.... Nah, we come to Church less and less. We do not have cultural institutions to relate to. Especially for the youth.

I have begun to realize the power and depth of cultural relationships and the power of friendships fostered by the culture. Of course the culture began to be destroyed by correlation, of course. The culture could only have one root: the priesthood. This was a really bad mistake, to remake the Church into a complete top-down organization. And the destruction of women's culture when the

Relief Society was “integrated” into that top-down straight jacket.

So much of what is good about the Church is the association of the members. Was that not an advantage to be strengthened?

Zach says:

October 10, 2021 at 9:49 pm

I have often wondered if every member came to church with a battery type indicator on their foreheads that measured orthodoxy/testimony/belief what that would look like. While these statistics are fun to look at, the real story is told by how often 30-40 year olds are going to the temple, who is blessing their kids into the church, who is paying tithing, who is accepting/declining callings, students enrolled in seminary, people willing to bear their testimonies etc.... The church has a way to measure some of these and doesn't on some of them. If you could put a graph together that would summarize all of the above information, I'm afraid it would not look good at all for the church.

Geoff - Aus says:

October 10, 2021 at 10:57 pm

Watched conference this last weekend. There were 3 mentions of tying oneself to Christ with a covenant. Not from first presidency, but not something I had heard before. Can anyone enlighten me please?

The prophet did talk about pure truth, but if he was talking to trumper/antivaxers, was not specific enough for them to realise.

I live in a country where our most conservative political party, supports universal healthcare, legalised gay marriage, abortion up to 22 weeks, and assisted dying, and vaccinations, and masks, and until recently eradicating the virus. They are resisting on climate change, and hopefully will be replaced by the more progressive party I support. My state QLD has a progressive leader, and with a population of 5m, we have had 7 deaths from the virus. Pure truth?

I was disgusted that 80% of members would vote republican, let alone for Trump. What happened to their moral judgement? How can I be in any way associated with them? Does this apply to any of the 15? The choir? The chances of the church growing here disappeared completely with the Trump vote. There is no respect for Trump or anyone associated with or voting for him.

rk says:

October 13, 2021 at 6:26 pm

Hey Geoff,

You sound frustrated. The past year and a half have been hard on everyone.

I have learned the hard way that I should not expect or assume my fellow Saints including, local leadership and the brethren to mirror my own personal political beliefs. In the decades of my life I have learned that there are good faithful saints that fit everywhere on the political spectrum (including communists and national socialists). I remember learning from my father that someone's political beliefs are very personal and private. We should allow others to hold any personal opinion they wish without criticizing them especially if they don't bring it up or attack others that believe differently.

The US since its beginning has had a diverse multicultural non-homogeneous Here in the US among polite society there is an unwritten rule that you avoid discussing religion or politics with those you don't know well. It is very bad manners to ask who you voted for or bring up or force an opinion on controversial topics. Even then you would only discuss politics when you sense you probably share similar beliefs and there won't be contention. Other cultures I have encountered see things differently.

Church especially should be free of political conversations. Church and our relationships should be a sanctuary from contentious politics. Relationships with fellow saints should be much more important in the scheme of things than who is holding whatever political office. I have met wonderful brothers and sisters who are the opposite of me on the political spectrum, but that shouldn't change my love for them.

Good people will have different opinions. One should never say, "How can you be a true Latter-day Saint if you support or don't support x policy!" Such conversations destroy goodwill and unity. We can still share our love for the Savior. That is a wonderful thing to have in common.

I would encourage you to consider taking this approach when addressing your fellow brothers and sisters online. I wish you peace and love at this difficult time.

Travis says:

October 18, 2021 at 1:06 pm

Geoff-Aus,

During the past couple decades in the United States, the broadcasting arm of the institution that manages the wealth of the congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ, decided to invest in promoting "conservative" values over radio waves. The cultural Mormon corridor was showered by radio talk shows (Rush Limbaugh, Dr. Laura, etc.), who grew audiences by attacking anything "liberal." National media followed suit. So for more than a generation, the institution has indirectly poisoned the congregation with contentious polemic in the name of conservative values. The agenda-makers somewhere in the middle-administration of the institution that manages the

congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ, sought to employ state-department-like tactics [radio free model] fueled by conservative rhetoric to better align with the nutball evangelical right wing Christian prosperity gospel. The consequence is the cultural phenomenon you often write about—and yes, the middle-administration of the institution is a bit of a dust bucket: infiltrators wear white shirts and ties, Roman-shaved faces, and spend as much time combing their hair as their wives, so they tend to blend in, and are able to sow tares in sheepish cotton-blend without being noticed. The pollution of politic is so pervasive that many LDS in the United States today can no longer see, hear, taste, touch, or speak, outside of a “conservative vs liberal lens.” The gospel in the United States has been made to fit the politic, when it should be our politic that is shaped and made to fit the gospel. It’s a mess, and it is good that you notice.

Travis says:

October 18, 2021 at 2:43 pm

JC,

“Obedience is to Commandment as Responsibility is to Covenant.”

After all the dross is burnt from rusty ordinances, the “Masonic ascension” motif will ash away, and we will see in the temple the beautiful instruction laden in the “Wedding Banquet” (Feast) motif. The temple ordinances will express the union of Bridegroom and Bride more centrally and we will no longer be coerced to keep secret the fraternal emblems of Lamechian oaths. There are no handshakes, the symbol is an embrace. The theme is not “you’re in the club,” but rather, “you’re home.”

The nature of covenant, woman-to-man, and man-to-her-children, is echoed in nature and eternity. Man does not covenant to God hierarchically above the woman, as some men have supposed. Rather, God consecrates the union of equals. God moves to us when we take hold of each other, “leave father and mother and cleave...” Nobody is approaching the throne just yet.

A representation of independently-gendered covenant-making is patently false. It is an abomination to represent covenant in this way because it resembles premortal-Adversary’s “covenant-to-me” proposal. Eve chooses Adam because Adam chooses the children (responsibility). Eve usurps the serpent by choosing Adam. Sarah does the same in Egypt with Pharaoh. Moses 7 the same pattern: Enoch intercedes with Mother Earth on behalf of her children. In almost every scriptural interaction with “woman,” covenant is expounded for us. If we use the traditional Jewish Wedding as a template, we will better grasp the idea of covenant-as-responsibility.

In 1990, the symbolic representation of covenant shifted in such a way in an attempt to express gender-equality. In the process, we buried the importance of WHY woman covenants to man. The symbolic effect and trajectory of the 1990 change aligns with apocalyptic imagery of Wisdom fleeing the temple. I trust President Nelson understands this and I am looking forward to temple changes that will reveal a Wedding Banquet motif, and recognize Wisdom’s Return and Her Role in the Restoration.

See “Zion and Jerusalem as Lady Wisdom” by Samuel Zinner, in “Textual and Comparative Explorations in 1&2 Enoch” (2014), for eschatological dimension of the imagery. To go deeper, read Margaret Barker.

Travis says:

October 19, 2021 at 1:37 am

Stephen C,

As long as we LDS follow the charge of secular politic, we are being “handled” by some external faction through an intermediary of political conservatism.

Prop 8, for example, could be construed as an operation to gauge the political power and resolve of the LDS political faction by our adversaries. We openly demonstrated our strength over an issue that would not affect catholic or evangelical or masonic congregations, but which fractured ours. We got sucked in because leadership could not articulate the difference between sealing and marriage—because this key had been obscured by the change in the symbolic portrayal of covenant in the temple in 1990.

In the same vein, in 1990, by eliminating the image of the Christian evangelical preacher as an “adversarial likeness” in the temple, we have become blind from the fact that most of our conservative political beliefs now mirror those of That pastor at That pulpit, and that such beliefs serve to fracture relationships in the congregation.

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-05-05-vw-353-story.html>

<https://apnews.com/article/c71e227719e8e11546fa5eaedc0b6fd0>

What we do at the temple serves as a Form projected upon the Image of the Temporal world, so as to affect the countenance of the whole Creation. If we will reorient our expression of covenant in the temple, we will restore to the soil the conditions to produce good seed.

How careful we ought to be!

Comments are closed.

WELCOME

Times and Seasons is a place to gather and discuss ideas of interest to faithful Latter-day Saints.

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