

Beauty and Communion

My wife, Lauren, and I had an incredible weekend at the Provo conference. Although the conference didn't seem to follow the "*Sermon at the Temple*" theme, the talks by Adrian, Jennifer, Mikah, and Denver were capstones to the topics we have been striving to study this year in preparation for the conference. They solidified and shed further light on many things we have been seeking to understand more deeply.

And we received a name! We all united in agreement when we stood up and unanimously said yes. Finally, we were one, even if just for a moment. Denver teared up. It was indeed a beautiful moment. There is beauty in unity. There is beauty in a name, which brings the many diverse parts together in purpose. Just as beauty is a bridge between heaven and earth, so too is a name (see Lectures 7 Notes).

That moment at the conference made me both hopeful and homesick.

Why homesick?

Homesickness is an interesting feeling. Have you ever been homesick for the home you never had? The home you have lost? Or the home you have only dreamed of?

My family underwent many drastic changes when I returned home from my LDS mission. We were all baptized, left the LDS Church, and began fellowshiping together. My parents and sisters moved to Texas, while I relocated to Utah. Due to all these changes, I had no sense of "home," even when visiting family in Texas, because I had no connection to that state. I had no good reason to visit my childhood city in Arizona since many of my friends growing up were LDS, and now there was no binding force strong enough to ground me there. I was, in a sense, "homeless."

Then I discovered a strange feeling as I made friends in the movement in Utah. When they invited me into their homes for family dinners, I felt very homesick afterward. Not for the home I once had in Arizona or my parents' home in Texas, but for the home I could one day have with my future family. That served as motivation to organize my life in a way that could make that dream a reality.

That is the feeling of homesickness I felt at the conference when we all stood and finally unanimously agreed on one thing. I caught a glimpse of the family and home we could one day have. I have also experienced this homesick feeling when I spend time with Orthodox Christians during visits to their churches. Although their home can never be my home, they possess a sense of unity in Christ through their liturgical worship and sacramental living with one another, which I yearn to share with my Covenant Christians. I desire a Temple and Zion, but the motivation behind this desire has evolved over the years. I don't want a temple so that we can accomplish another project. I want a temple because I long to go home. We're just not "there" yet; home is still far away.

What I am going to write next is not meant to condemn anyone; it is simply a cultural observation from the last conference that makes my wife and me sad. It indicates that we are not "there" yet. I will preface a quote from Hugh Nibley, which can be found on page 13 of *Temple and Cosmos*.

"I am reminded here of the marvelous book of Fourth Nephi, which describes the model society and how it disintegrated. And you retort, "My land, they lived in a happy time, didn't they?" And, of

*course, happy are the people whose annals are blank. Nephi doesn't tell us anything about it, because there was nothing to report. It wasn't catastrophic; there were no crimes, no wars. But why did they lose it all? Because it was too strenuous; it required **great mental exertion**: they spent **their time constantly in meetings and prayer and fasting-in concentrating on things** (4 Nephi 1:12). The exercise of the mind was simply too exhausting. It was less wearying just to give up and **let things drift, to go back to the old ways**. They had to work hard to preserve that marvelous order of things.”*

The sacrament was administered chaotically at the conference. I brought an investigator to our conference. He has been my friend for many years. We have done many scripture studies together, and he really enjoyed the talks. Now, he desires to fellowship with Covenant Christians in his area. However, he did share criticism about how the ordinance was administered in a disorganized manner.

The sacrament table was at the back of the room. I may have been the only person in the room who consciously thinks like this because of my exposure to liturgical worship, but by placing the emblems in the back of the room and on lower ground than the speaking pulpit, it communicates where our attention and value are. What should be the pinnacle that holds our highest attention at a conference? (See lecture 7 notes, Sacrament Joins Heaven and Earth)

There was no singing of hymns to prepare our hearts and minds for the sacrament. As the bread was passed and people lined up to receive the wine, they engaged in frivolous discussions, scrolled on their smartphones, and complained that there was only grape juice instead of wine. My wife and I agreed that the sacrament seemed to be treated more like a reunion rather than a communion. We lacked reverence and respect; instead of collectively gathering our attention to Christ in prayer and worship, it drifted in every direction. We observed this not in condemnation or anger; we were just sad. As a body of believers, we don't have a culture or know how to worship in such a large group. We just aren't "there" yet. But hopefully, as Covenant Christian, God will instruct and guide the culture of His people.

In the evening, after the conference, Lauren and I received a gift that further kindled our hope. That gave us another glimpse of the home we could one day have. We decided that since we are now Covenant Christians and no longer need to live under the oppressive shadow of the LDS Corporation, we could actually visit and appreciate the good aspects of our childhood church. We chose to explore Temple Square in Salt Lake City. While strolling the grounds, we encountered a long line waiting to enter the Tabernacle. After inquiring, we discovered that an interdenominational public event was scheduled for that evening to celebrate Palm Sunday. We decided to wait in line to join in the celebration.

The evening was wonderful and perfect! It featured a live orchestra and two distinct choirs: The traditional solemn LDS Choir and an upbeat Gospel Choir. Scripture readings of Christ's entry into Jerusalem were woven throughout the music of the night. About halfway through the event, palm branches were distributed, and we sang hallelujah hymns of praise with waving branches

Now, because we are in Utah, the majority of the congregation was stiff and overly formal Mormons. Despite the higher energy of the Gospel Choir, everyone remained seated while they timidly moved their branches in a rigid manner, awkwardly close to their bodies. However, when we began singing "*All Creatures of our King*," the energy in the tabernacle drastically increased. People began swaying more in their seats; branches bristling with escalating enthusiasm. Despite being surrounded by sitting and shy Mormons, this feeling came over me to rise to my feet so that I could more fully participate in Messiah's triumphal entry.

So I arose. Immediately, **everyone** around me followed this action and leaped to their feet. The whole tabernacle erupted in praise for the Messiah. We sang with all our hearts. We shouted Hosanna to Jesus Christ. There was such unity among these Christians. The rest of the evening was absolutely beautiful and joyous!

During that moment before I stood up, you could feel that everyone wanted to join in singing and praising with greater commitment, but almost all were apprehensive. What was needed was a few enthusiastic Christians willing to express their faith more openly to catalyze the group's potential energy. I have been to non-denominational churches that put on rock concerts with flashing lights and call it worship. This was not like that at all. This was not about forcing sentimental emotions while raising hands in the air, as the same bland chorus is repeated endlessly. This was liturgical; we were reenacting a sacred story. Although there was spontaneity in our rising in unity to praise Christ, it was ordered to the narrative we were participating in. This was a ritualized celebration.

Lauren and I recognized that, given all of the disunity and strife of the week, this was a tender gift from God to us. This was the capstone of our weekend anniversary trip. I consider this one of the most "spiritual" experiences I have ever had in a communal religious setting. I yearned for our Covenant Christian to be there with us; I wish we could learn to celebrate Christ in such unity. I caught a glimpse of the kind of home we could one day have.