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Delicately Balanced on the Covenant Path: General Conference Rhetoric under LDS President Russell M. Nelson (2018–2025)

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This article presents a stylometric analysis of rhetorical change in Latter-day Saint General Conference addresses under the last three church presidents. During the four decades in which most current apostles have served in senior leadership, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has moved from growth trajectories consistent with emergence as a global religion to near-zero net growth—though notably without the absolute decline seen in many other American denominations. This period coincides with multiple external pressures: the erosion of confidence in traditional apologetic arguments (e.g., Book of Mormon genetics), rising cultural commitments to egalitarianism amid persistent church positions on gender and sexuality, public scrutiny following revelations of vast institutional wealth coupled with limited charitable expenditure, and struggles to adapt to international membership.

Against this backdrop, quantitative linguistic evidence reveals a marked rhetorical reorientation. Leadership discourse increasingly emphasizes distinctive yet affirmative features of LDS religious life (living prophets, temple worship, covenantal belonging, divine love, and psychological/spiritual benefits) while simultaneously reducing overtly authoritarian, juridical, and judgment-focused language (hierarchical titles, specific sins, and patriarchy). These findings suggest a strategic softening of tone without an explicit doctrinal reversal. The durability of this rhetorical posture remains uncertain, particularly as leadership transitions toward figures associated with more legalistic interpretive frameworks.

When Russell M. Nelson took over the presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in January 2018, he had many reasons to be optimistic. The faith was one of the few branches of Christianity that was still growing abroad if not greatly at home, it commanded tremendous financial resources, and after nearly two centuries of political marginalization it had finally made common cause with powerful evangelicals and the political right. Moreover, unlike his frail predecessor Thomas S. Monson, Nelson had numerous plans for change and the energy and full-voiced support of the hierarchy to enact them (Park 2024).

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Yet Nelson faced serious challenges as well. The principal one was church growth, which had slowed for over three decades from apparently dizzying heights in the 1980s to what would soon be its lowest rate since the 1850s (Stewart 2023). The reasons for this decline were manifold but were influenced by (1) the collapse of traditional apologetics, (2) increasing egalitarian sensibilities, (3) embarrassing publicity about the church's financial resources, and (4) a slow and uneven redistribution of resources and cultural flexibility to the international membership. All these challenges indirectly shaped the rhetoric of Nelson's presidency.

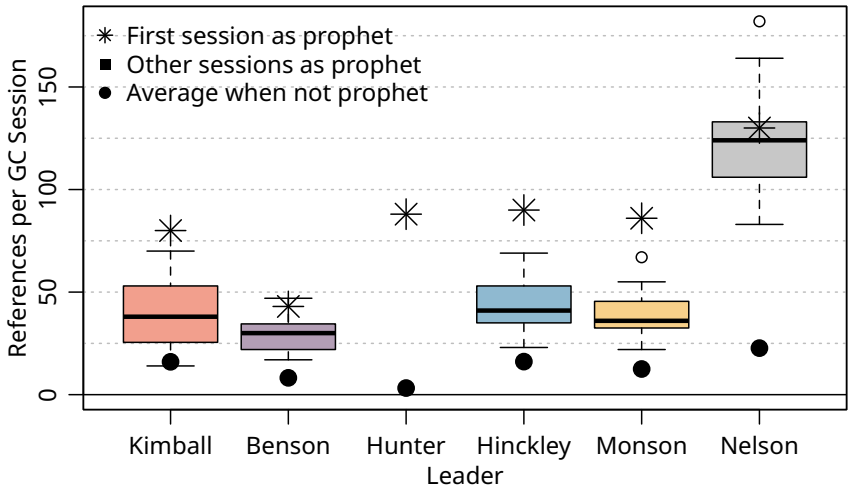
Because they were rarely addressed directly, the rhetorical response was often influenced by all four factors at once. Below, I present seven shifts in General Conference rhetoric under Nelson. Following these results, rather than tying each rhetorical trend to one factor, I will discuss how each challenge influenced many of these trends at once.

Seven Themes

Though initially held irregularly and serving more of a governmental/judicial function, General Conferences evolved into a twice-yearly multi-day sermonizing event. The corpus of collected General Conference addresses serves as a useful barometer of shifts in leadership concern as "the paramount source of authoritative and continuously available Mormon leader rhetoric" (Armstrong 1997, 167) and "the documentary source that provides the most comprehensive and meaningful record of Mormon rhetoric over the entire course of Mormon history" (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984, 3). The rhetorical shifts are verified by comparing differences between General Conference texts published on the church's website (lds.org when the author began collecting them, now churchofjesuschrist.org) under the presidencies of Gordon B. Hinckley and Thomas S. Monson (1,589 talks of at least 5,000 characters from April 1995 to October 2017) to those delivered under Russell M. Nelson (488 such talks from April 2018 to April 2025). The length threshold excludes financial/statistical reports and the sustaining of church officers, but includes all devotional sermons.

The texts were downloaded using a self-authored web-scraper, and included both text and footnotes. I deployed Contrastive Analysis as implemented in the stylo (v 0.7.5) package (Eder et al. 2016) of the R computing environment to ensure no major shifts in word frequency were overlooked. This helped limit potential author biases, allowing the themes to surface emergently rather than from my personal prior beliefs.

Figure 1. *Rise in mentions of Nelson compared to other prophets*



1. Follow the Prophet

Perhaps the most remarkable rhetorical trend in the Nelson presidency was the astounding increase in the frequency of references to Nelson himself.

Through his 14 conferences as prophet, Nelson held the top 13 spots for most referenced prophet, and averaged 125.8 citations per conference. This tripled the rate of the previous two prophets (Hinckley 42.5, Monson 41.2, both p<.0001). Though many of these references were "unvoiced" (i.e., in the footnotes rather than the spoken word), there was a 125% increase in affectionate modifiers ("our dear prophet" and "beloved prophet") and how frequently members were enjoined to "follow the prophet" (5.9 vs 2.6, p<.0001).

The number of times "revelation" was mentioned (excluding the biblical Book of Revelation) also saw a modest but statistically significant increase under Nelson (+40%, 40.7 vs 29.1, p=.04). Nelson frequently used the term somewhat idiosyncratically to describe policy changes rather than spiritual visions (Stack 2018).

The references to Nelson were not evenly distributed among speakers. There was about a five-fold difference between low-citers like Elders Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Jeffrey R. Holland, M. Russell Ballard, Gerrit W. Gong, and Nelson himself, and high-citers like Elders Ronald A. Rasband, Neil L. Andersen, and Quentin L. Cook. This was not purely a factor of some speakers using quotations or speaking of authorities by name more often. Uchtdorf and An-

Figure 2. *Increased use of prophetic endearments and the word "revelation"*

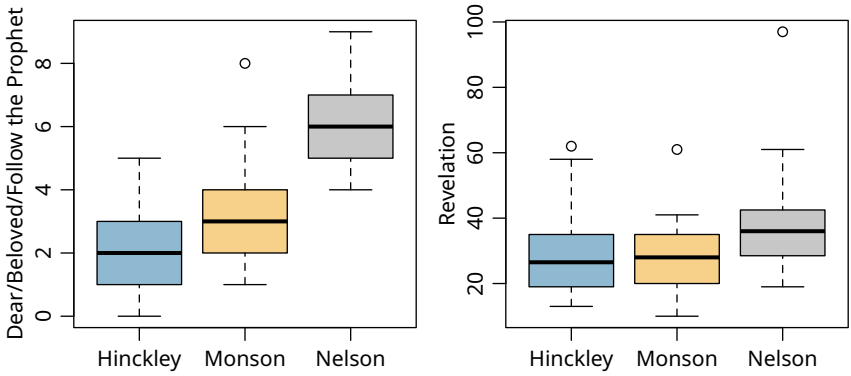
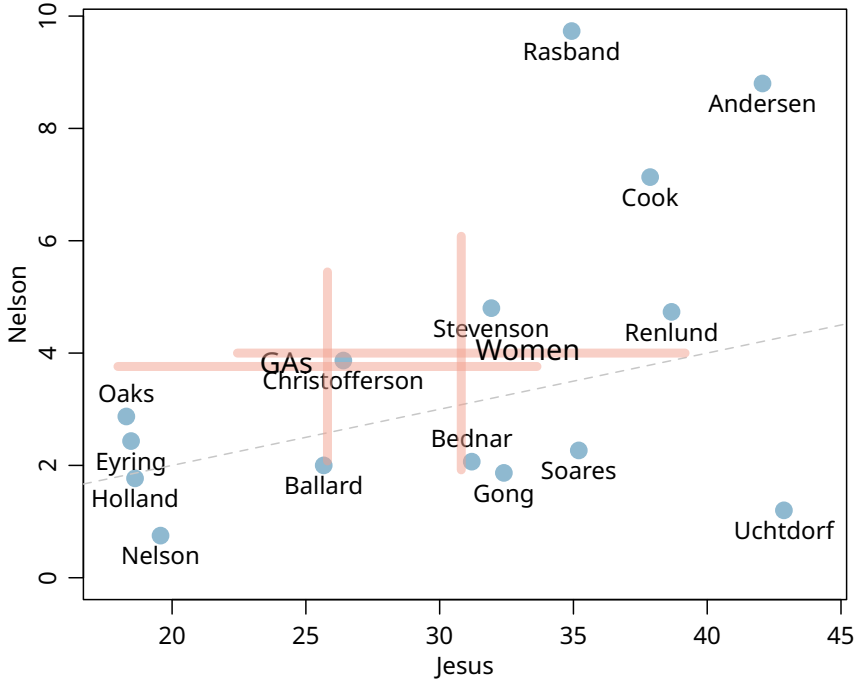


Figure 3. *Mentions of Nelson and Jesus by LDS apostles*

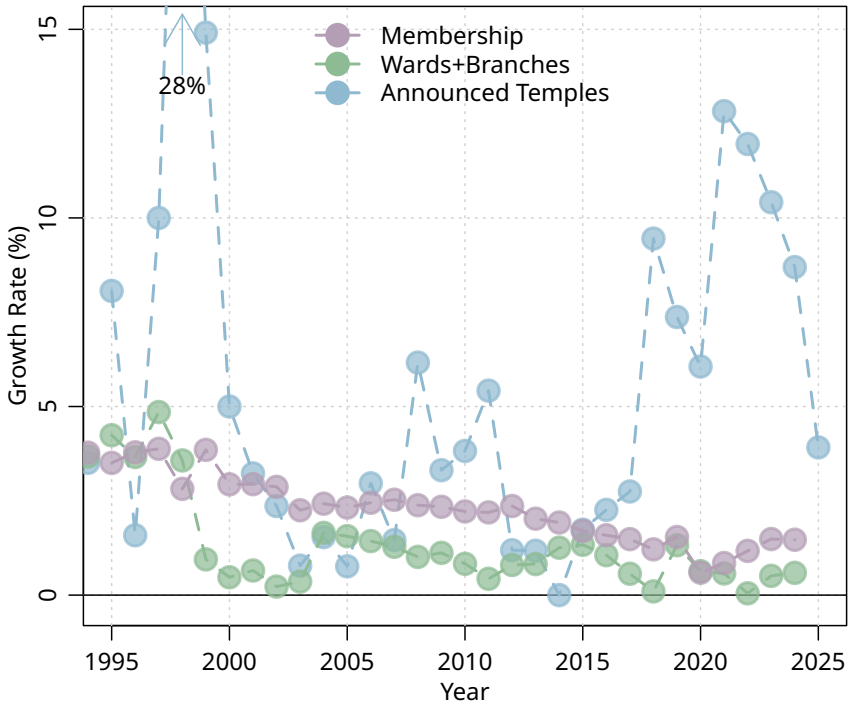


dersen mentioned Jesus the most often of any of the common speakers in the Nelson era, but were on opposite ends of the Nelson-mentioning spectrum.

2. Temple Covenants

Temple building has formed a significant part of LDS leadership's preoccupations since the 1830s. All three of the most recent church presidents had periods where their rate of announcing temples outstripped the rate of membership or congregational growth with Nelson's surge being far higher than Monson's, and far more sustained than Hinckley's. Figure 4 shows that membership growth has decelerated steadily for decades (mauve dots). A decline of 0.09% per year explains 88% of the variance in growth rates since 1991. Membership growth briefly dipped below 1% in the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, the lowest growth rate since the 1850s, but has since increased for three consecutive years for the first time since 1973–77.

Figure 4. *Percent growth of LDS membership, units, and temples, 1993 to April 2025*



Some scholars feel that the percent-growth of units is a better indication of true church health, since wards and branches only divide when there are enough participating adult members. The "participating adult" category is a smaller number than members of record, which includes many who no longer self-identify as LDS (Martinich 2014; Stewart 2023). By this measure, church growth has been below 2% for 25 years, and below 1% for six of the last seven (green dots). A 2023 policy lowering the number of members required to start a new stake (from 3,000 to 2,000) or ward (from 300 to 250) in the US has yet to markedly increase unit growth (Jensen 2023).

By contrast, the rates at which temples have been announced and built have seen surges that are far higher. Hinckley's decision to build large numbers of smaller temples resulted in an astonishing surge in announced temples of 38.6% in 1998 (from 70 to 97). This is represented in Figure 4 by the blue dots. This includes all temples from fully dedicated and in operation to temples that were announced but for which a site had not yet been selected.

Monson's peak years saw a more modest 6.6% increase in announced temples in 2008 and a 4% increase in operating temples in 2016. Both figures were still substantially higher than the maximum membership growth of 2.4% and unit growth of 1.3% during his 10-year tenure.

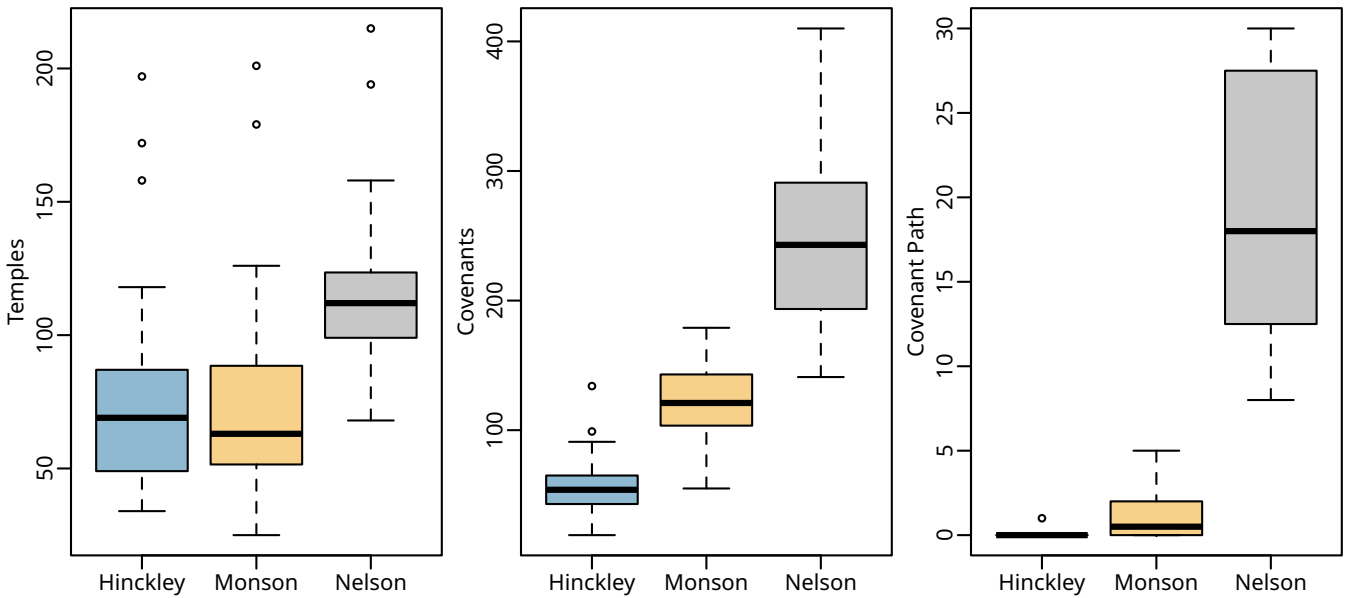
This was nothing compared to Nelson, whose first year in office saw a 10% jump in announced temples, and never dropped below a 6.5% annual increase. For the entire period from 2018 to 2024 church membership increased by just 7.3% and congregations by 3.7%. By contrast, operating temples increased under Nelson by 30.8% and announced temples by 110%.

This 30-fold disconnect between ward/branch growth and temple growth was mirrored by an increase in references to temples and covenants in General Conference (Figure 5). Though temples were certainly a primary focus of Hinckley's presidency,[1] they were discussed 53% more often under Nelson (78.2 vs. 119 hits per conference). Similarly, references to covenants (excluding the canonical "Doctrine and Covenants" text), many of which happen in temples, nearly tripled (46 vs 124 hits per conference). This works out to well over three mentions per address for both "temples" and "covenants."

This focus is perhaps most apparent in the emergence of the catchphrase "the covenant path," a shorthand for full engagement with the church. The term concisely simplifies the ideal trajectory of a member's spiritual life to a

[1] The increase in temple building is, for example, the first accomplishment mentioned on Hinckley's current Wikipedia page after his vital statistics.

Figure 5. *Mentions of temples, covenants, and "the covenant path" in Nelson's presidency*



sequence of priesthood ordinances. The phrase did not occur in General Conference texts from 1851 until it was introduced in April 2007 in Elaine S. Dalton's talk "Stay on the Path"(Dalton 2007). It occurred in just four talks over the next 14 conferences (two of them also by women) until then-senior apostle Nelson used the phrase in two different talks in 2015 and 2017.[2] Following this, the phrase became much more common, rising from a maximum of five uses in Monson's 20 conferences to being used 20+ times in seven of Nelson's 14 conferences.

In 2018, apostles Renlund, Oaks, Cook, Gong, and Elder Dean M. Davies all quoted the phrase but attributed it not to Dalton or one of the sisters who followed her, but to Nelson. Oaks did so three times, and all attributions were in the text of his talk rather than just a footnote. This parallels the boardroom phenomenon of "he-peating," where a higher-status individual receives praise for an idea that was earlier expressed and largely ignored by a lower-status individual (Horisk 2021).

Nelson also managed to repurpose the gospel concept of "the gathering of Israel" to support this temple emphasis (Figure 6). Before his presidency, the gathering was commonly used as a metaphor for missionary work. For example, in Bruce R. McConkie's April 1977 talk "Come: Let Israel Build Zion," he used it in this sense 11 times (McConkie 1977). Nelson himself used it in this way in six talks between 1987 and 2004. But in 2006 he suggested that the gathering happens "on the other side of the veil [among] those who died without a knowledge of the gospel" (Nelson 2006). After a few more references to gathering as missionary work, in his first conference as president he again emphasized the duty of members to "enlist in the Lord's youth battalion to help gather Israel on both sides of the veil" (Nelson 2018). Many other speakers picked up on this during Nelson's presidency and routinely used the phrase as a synonym for vicarious temple ordinances. This caused a spike in the word "gather" (and its conjugations) of 101% (33.4 vs 16.6, $p<.0001$). Usage of "Israel" increased by 183% (33.1 vs 11.7, $p=.0001$), but the specific references to "gather[ing] of [scattered] Israel" surged by an astounding 1170% (11.7 vs 1.0, $p<.0001$).

3. Home and Family

Family has been a central focus of LDS theology since Joseph Smith (Brown 2011) and has received a great deal of attention during more recent culture

[2] Anecdotally, active members in Utah, Idaho, and California recall the phrase being widely used locally during this time period.

Figure 6. *Mentions of Israel and the Gathering in Nelson's presidency*

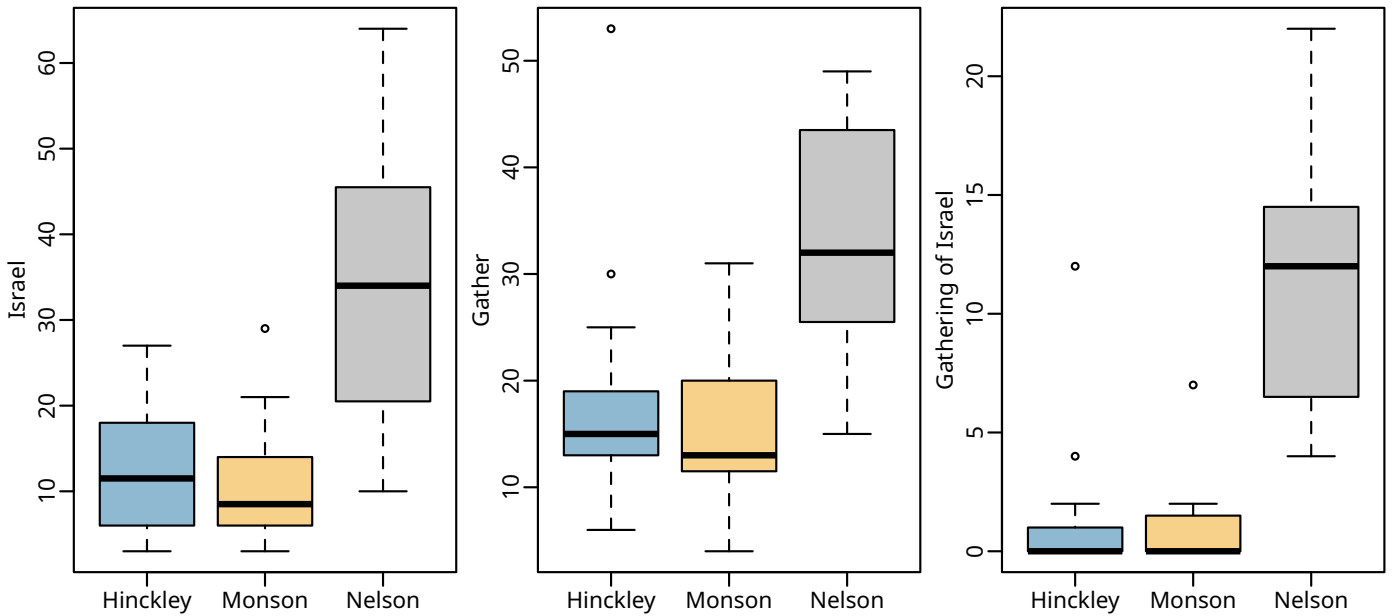
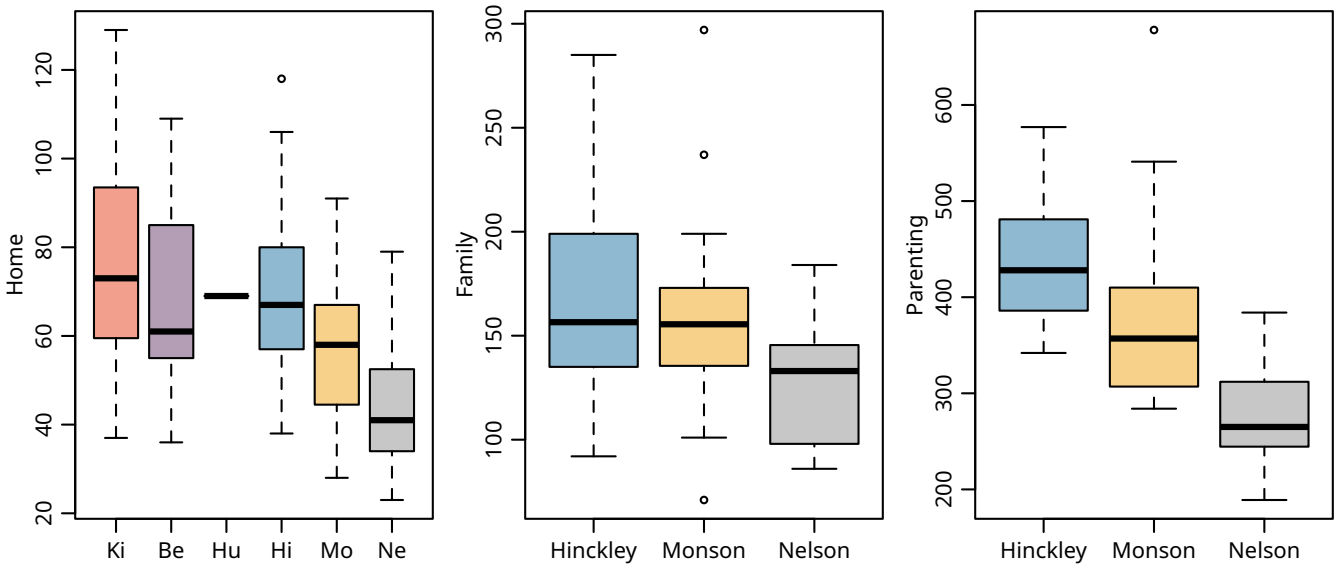


Figure 7. *Declining references to home, family, and parenting in General Conference*



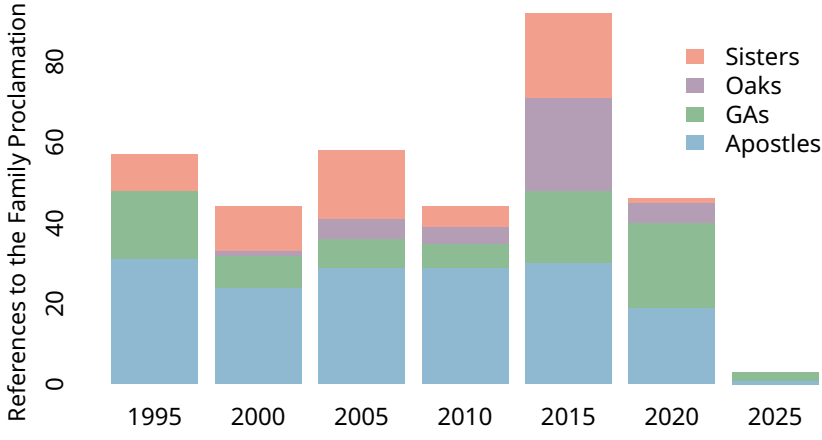
wars over issues like the Equal Rights Amendment, gay marriage, and LGBTQ rights (Williams 2011). Emphasizing the positive aspects of strong and eternal families has become something of a clichéd public relations tactic, drawing wry commentary on "the tendency of Latter-day Saints to claim a patent on the family" (Swenson 2009, 198). It is therefore no surprise to find that terms like "home" and "family" and references to relationships within heterosexual marriages appear hundreds of times per conference.

However, the frequency of such references has been steadily decreasing for decades, as Figure 7 shows. The decline in the term "home" began under President Kimball. It was initially counterbalanced by an increase in "family," but since Hinckley's presidency, both terms have decreased. "Home" declined 24.1% under Nelson (95.9 vs 72.8 per conference, p=.002) while "family" decreased by 19.9% (123 vs 98.9 per conference, p=.005).

Words related to home and family relationships were also down under Nelson. Among words significantly more common in the Hinckley/Monson era were "father," "mother/s," "boy," and "young." Combining these along with "parent" and "girl" (and excluding references to "Heavenly Father") showed that family relationships were named an average of 412 times per conference until Nelson, when they dropped to 277 (-33%, p<.0001).

Use of the 1995 document "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" also shifted during Nelson's tenure (Figure 8). While speakers discussed it most during the late 2010s in response to the US Supreme Court's ruling on gay marriage as a classic example of a totemic identity marker invoked by an

Figure 8. *Decreasing references to the Family Proclamation during Nelson's presidency*



embattled orthodox community (Hunter 1992 esp. ch. 8), use subsequently fell off. Particularly noteworthy was the decrease in quotations from Dallin H. Oaks, who would succeed Nelson. Oaks was responsible for 25% of the quotations from 2015 to 2019 (23 of 92) despite delivering just 4.4% of the talks in that time period. However, he was responsible for just 11% (5 of 46) of references to the Proclamation from then until 2025 despite delivering a higher 5.3% of the talks as a member of the First Presidency. This represents a decline in Oaks' above-mean-use of the Family Proclamation from 5.6- to 2.0-fold more than other speakers.

Women leaders ("Sisters" in Figure 8) declined even further in their use of the Family Proclamation, from 91% higher than average (23% of quotes in 12% of talks from 2015 to 2019) to 78% less than the average (2.2% of quotes in 9.8% of talks from 2020 to 2024). By contrast, General Authorities, who were responsible for less than 20% of the quotations in all four of the five-year periods from 2000 to 2019, had a 45% plurality of the quotations over the last five years.

This retreat from maximal family-respectability rhetoric extends patterns already visible in Shepherd and Shepherd's 1980–2009 data, where marriage and children themes begin a modest post-2000 decline while remaining rhetorically central (Shepherd and Shepherd 2015, 204–208).

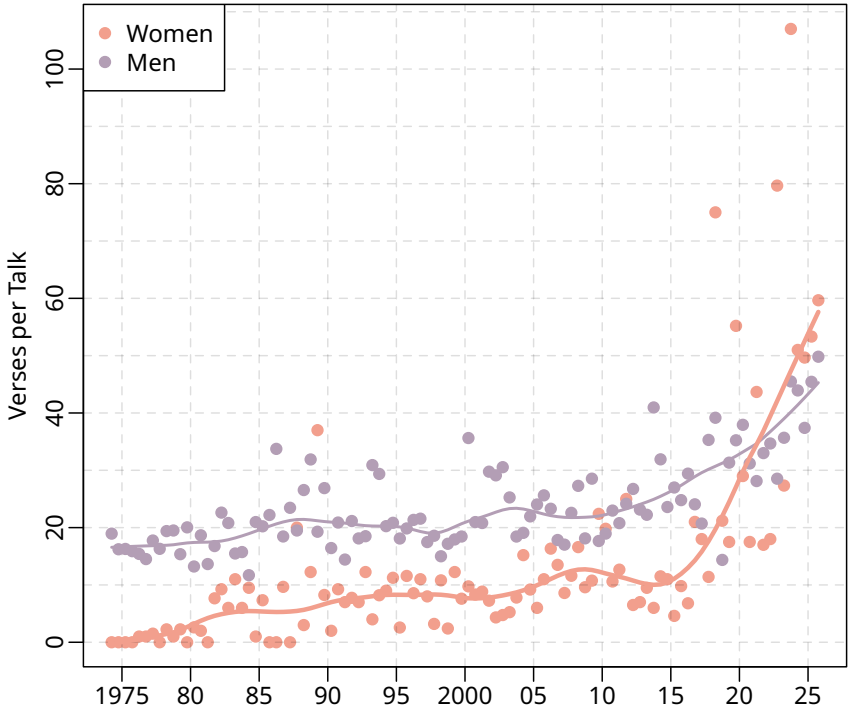
4. Women

There was little stylometric change in the discussion of women under Nelson. Both the use of the term "sisters" to refer to female members and references to specific female leaders (e.g., "Sister Arden"), slightly decreased (52.4 vs 50.7, p=.69; 11.8 vs 8.7, p=.046). Meanwhile, the words "woman" and "women" were down significantly (86.0 v. 58.1, p=.006) despite more speakers using gender-inclusive scriptural quotes (e.g., "Men [and women] are, that they might have joy").

Some of this may be due to speakers avoiding gendered language altogether, as it can sound archaic. The use of the word "brother" increased (30 vs 42, p=.0002), likely as an incomplete replacement for "brethren," which decreased by two-thirds (31.1 vs 12.0, p<.0001). This decline in "brethren" continued a decrease from 48.0 under Kimball and paralleled a similar drop in mentions of "mankind" (from 9.1 to 2.9, p<.0001).

However, outside of stylometry, women breached a barrier as General Conference presenters. When Hinckley became prophet in 1995, women had

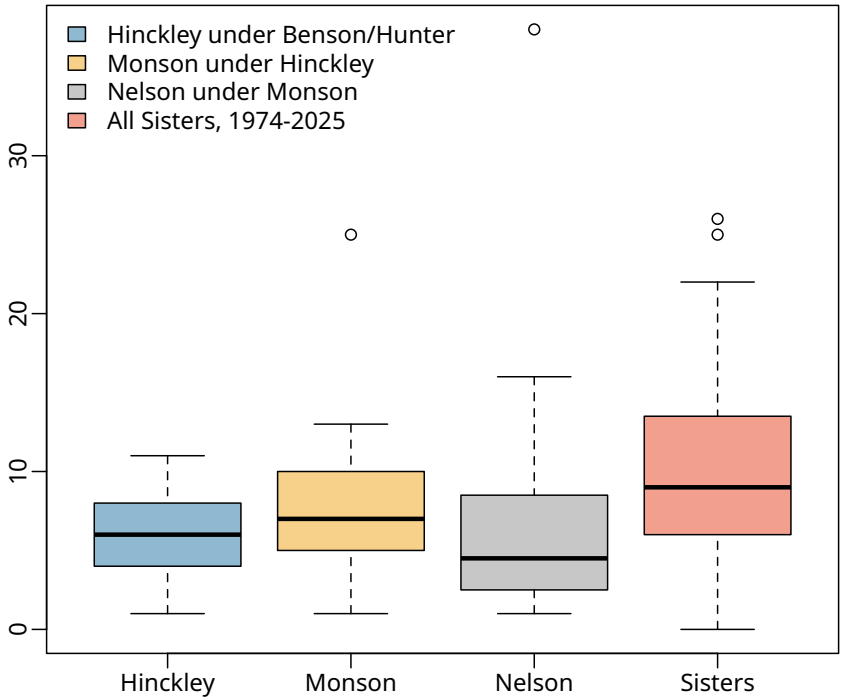
Figure 9. *Increase in scripture references by female speakers during Nelson's presidency*



only been speaking regularly on General Conference weekend for seven years.[3] While three women and three men spoke at a special "women's conference" on a weekend before General Conference, between 1988 and 2018 people who attended every session of Saturday and Sunday conference would hear either one or two women and between 33 and 40 men. Women began to be allowed to offer prayers in conference in April 2013. In Nelson's second conference, he replaced the Saturday evening Priesthood Meeting (no women allowed) in October with a General Women's Session (for women ages eight and up, but both genders were allowed to attend). In 2023, the church abandoned the gendering of Saturday evening meetings altogether. The upshot of all these policy changes was that almost no women spoke on General Conference weekend

[3] Prior to April 1988, the only women to speak in general sessions of Conference were Joseph Smith's mother Lucy Mack Smith in 1846; auxiliary presidents in 1929, 1930, and 1984; and non-member Ruth Pyrtle of the National Education Association in 1930. Zina Diantha Huntington Young spoke at the Priesthood/MIA meeting in October 1879, and sister missionaries were allowed to bear testimonies to overflow crowds in 1908 and 1909 (Reeder and Holbrook 2017: Appendix A; Anderson 2024).

Figure 10. *Number of times all women combined were mentioned by name in General Conference in comparison to just one non-prophet male leader*



prior to Hinckley, on average 2.0 spoke during the Hinckley/Monson administrations, and 3.5 spoke under Nelson.

Women responded to this increased visibility by becoming more assertive in their use of scripture (Figure 9). While the number of verses cited by women (including in women's sessions meetings, not just General Conference talks) had been about 15 verses per talk lower than the number of verses cited by men since the late 1970s, starting just before Nelson this gap closed and then reversed, led by Relief Society Second Counselor Reyna Aburto (2017–2022) and Young Women President Emily Belle Freeman (2023–present).[4]

As noted above, this increase in airtime and scriptural implementation has not led to more references to actual women or their talks (Figure 10). For

[4] These are verses referred to in both text and footnotes, not necessarily quoted. For example, a footnote noting that the full text of a paraphrased story can be found in 1 Nephi 3:8–28 would count as 21 verses. Different methods of counting verses may lead to different conclusions.

example, there were only four mentions of a "Sister [Name]" in April 2024, the lowest since 1991. It comes as no surprise that the 10.5 times all women combined are mentioned by name is far fewer than references to the current prophet, especially under Nelson. However, it is interesting that it is also not statistically different than the 7.0 times Nelson was mentioned when Monson was president, and Nelson was not even a member of the First Presidency. By this metric, it could be argued that all women combined had the same collective influence as Mormonism's fourth-most-important man alone. Underlining this point, Harvard sociologist Eliza Wells found in her random sampling of General Conference quotations between 1971 and 2020 that those attributed to church leaders skewed male by 1,104 to 18, a 61 to 1 ratio (Wells 2022). As Shepherd and Shepherd note (2015, 218–221), women in the LDS Church are simultaneously being accommodated and punished behind the scenes, yet these dynamics remain largely invisible in conference rhetoric.

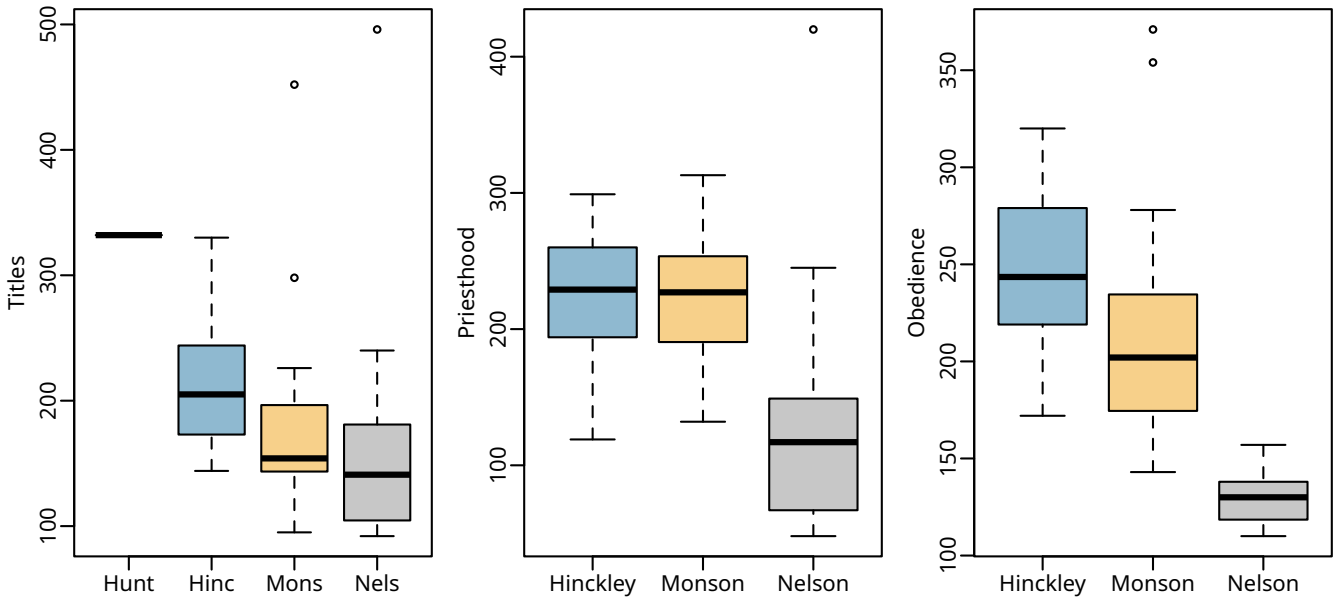
5. Less Emphasis on Control

During Nelson's presidency, references to hierarchical office (Quorum, Twelve, Presidency, Counselor, Seventy, Apostle, Bishop) dropped by 29% (204 vs 143, p=.025). This followed a longer-term trend that had been occurring since Hinckley's administration (Figure 11). The one exception was the term "President," which held steady at least partially due to increased references to "President Nelson" and "President Oaks" compensating for a decreasing number of references to the office of Church President.

Even more dramatic was the fall-off in references to "priesthood" itself and related words, which decreased by 42% (215 vs 125, p=.0017). This included the terms priesthood, Aaronic, Melchizedek, deacon, teacher, priest, called, and ordained. All of those terms decreased individually with p<.05 (Figure 11).

Authoritarian rhetoric (that is, calls for obedience to authority rather than inner spiritual guidance) is difficult to quantify. However, under Nelson, highly significant decreases were seen in nine authoritarian-adjacent terms: "obey/obedient/obedience" (12 vs 28, p<.0001); "doctrines" (but not "doctrine" singular, 1.7 vs 6.4, p<.0001); "responsible/responsibility" (21 vs 35, p<.0001); "duty" (4.8 vs 13.7, p=.0001); "must" (38 vs 73, p<.0001); "worthy/worthiness" (15 vs 25, p<.0001); "clean/cleanliness" (13 vs 22, p=.0002); "virtue/virtuous" (8.3 vs 16.9, p=.003); and "righteous/ness" (29 vs 38, p=.001). Combined, these authority-related terms dropped by 45% under Nelson (143 vs 258, p<.0001; Figure 11). Even the root "authorit…" had a near-significant decrease (22 vs

Figure 11. *Declining references to church titles, priesthood authority, and obedience in General Conference*



30, p=.050), despite Oaks twice giving talks with "Authority" in the title under Nelson.

It is worth noting that these changes were in excess of what Nelson did himself. While he decreased his use of titles and priesthood words per talk by about 25% relative to previous prophets, he used authoritarian words slightly more than Monson, though less than Hinckley.

By contrast, Nelson-era speakers were far more likely to emphasize servant leadership (Figure 12). This can be seen in the increase in words like invite/s/d/ing/ation (69 vs 36, p<.0001); serving, minister/ing and include/s/ing (59 vs 42, p<.0001); and referring to congregants as "brothers and sisters" or disciple/s (78 vs 48, p<.0001). All these examples increased significantly individually (p<.05 without Bonferroni correction), in addition to the collective statistics listed.

Note that the increased use of "serving" may be misleading, as the words "serve" and "service" have not increased, though these words are used more commonly in contexts other than leadership.

With this decreasing emphasis on obedience to authority for its own sake came a decrease in discussion of specific sins (Figure 13). Words relating to sexual sin ("sex…" [excluding navigational sextants], "porn…" and "adulter…") or health practices ("Word of Wisdom," "alcohol," "beer," "wine," "coffee," "caffein…," "smoking," "cigar…") dropped a combined 45% (143 vs 258, p<.0001) in Nelson's tenure. An exception was temple "garment" wearing, which remained statistically constant throughout the study period. Explicit discussion of tithing and financial donations ("tithing," "money," "pay," "order," "giving") decreased by 44% (37 vs 66, p=.0001).

If speakers dwelt less on particular sins of commission or fiscal omission, the general concepts of repentance and growth were heard more often in General Conference. While "sin" and "sins" stayed constant at about 30 references per conference (not shown), terms like "repent," "strive," "holier," "change," "overcome," "focus," and "becoming" all saw significant increases. Together, those terms increased by 53% (180 vs 118, p<.0001).

Nelson's presidency also saw changes in the practice of bearing testimonies at General Conference. It is commonplace for speakers to end their talks by bearing a testimony, i.e., unequivocally asserting some of the church's truth claims. The rhetorically definite "I know" has been in a highly significant decline for 50 years (IK=154-1.01*Y where IK=# of "I know" statements per four conferences, Y=years since 1974, r2=.524, p<.0001). While the less dogmatic

Figure 12. *Increasing emphasis on service and ministering during Nelson's presidency*

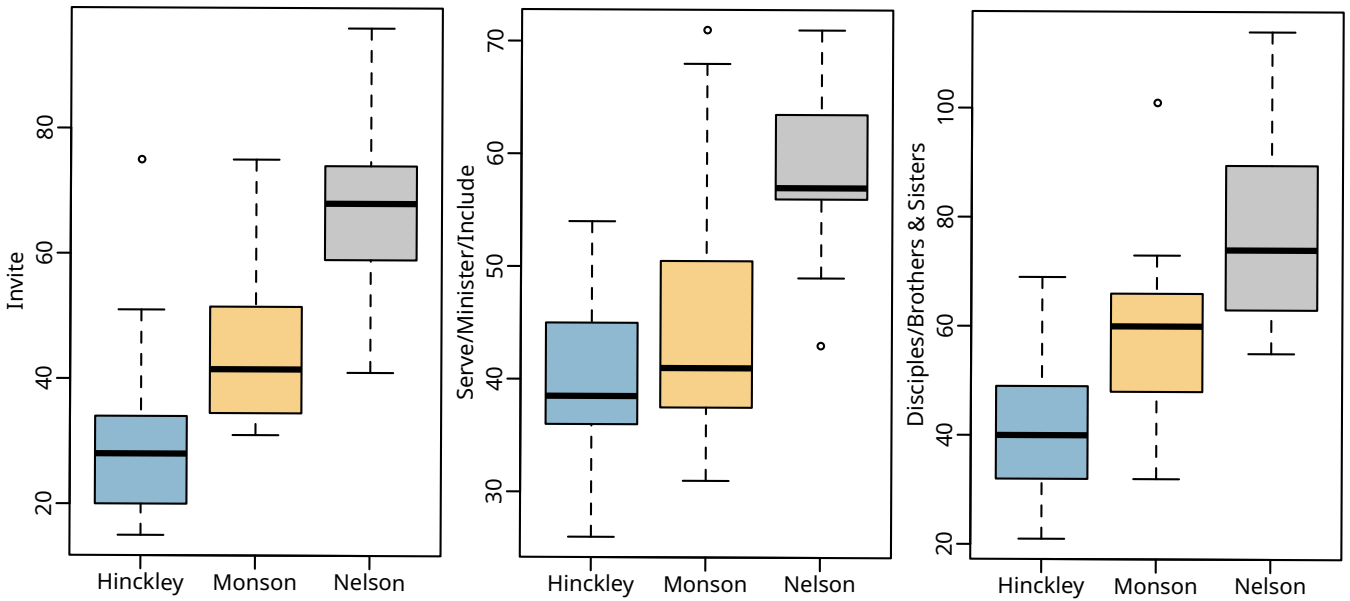


Figure 13. *Declining references to sins and tithing; increasing mentions of repentance*

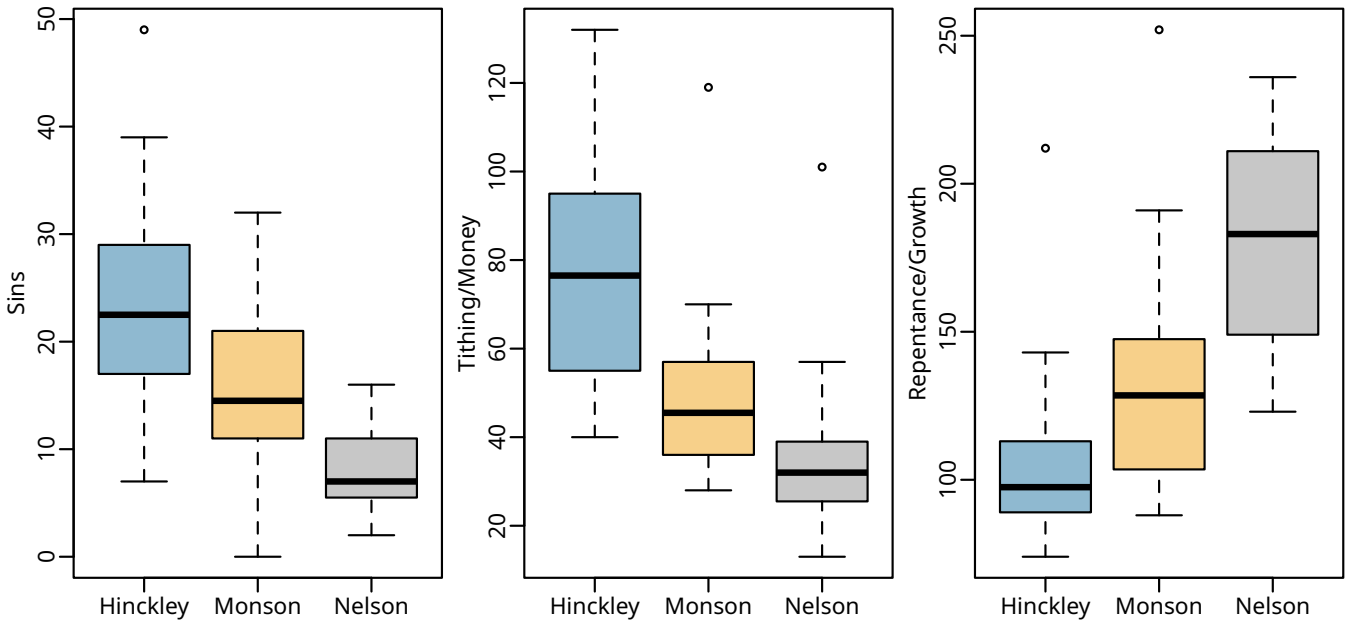
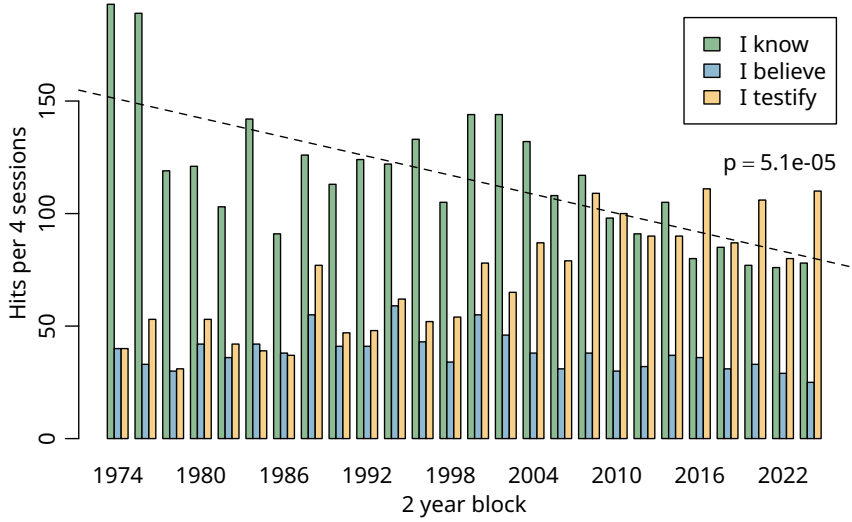


Figure 14. *Declining "I know" language in General Conference testimonies*



"I believe" has never gained much popularity, it appears that the epistemologically neutral "I testify" has replaced both as the phrase of choice. This formula for any form of testimony-bearing appears to be slightly less obligatory under Nelson than prior prophets (50.8 vs 58.2 total "I know/believe/testify" statements per conference, p=.058).

Intellectual diversity is also being marginally more tolerated or at least discussed openly. As shown in Figure 15, words indicating something less than complete mental certainty in doctrine are also increasing, with "questions" up by 38% (15.6 vs 11.3, p=.032), "seeking" by 35% (10.3 vs 7.7, p=.007), and critical thinking words "consider" and "perspective" together by 42% (31 vs 22, p=.0002). The increase in "seeking" is a good example of one man's legacy, since James E. Faust was responsible for most uses prior to his death in mid-2007, but it was used by many speakers and overall more frequently after. Though these remain rare, the fact that they are increasing at all represents a belated acknowledgement that skepticism cannot be ignored and an attempt to absorb it into a supervised developmental arc, which contrasts with the "universal lack of attention given to" independent scholarship up in the 1980–2010 time period (Shepherd and Shepherd 2015, 223).

Figure 15. *Increasing references to questioning, seeking, and thinking*

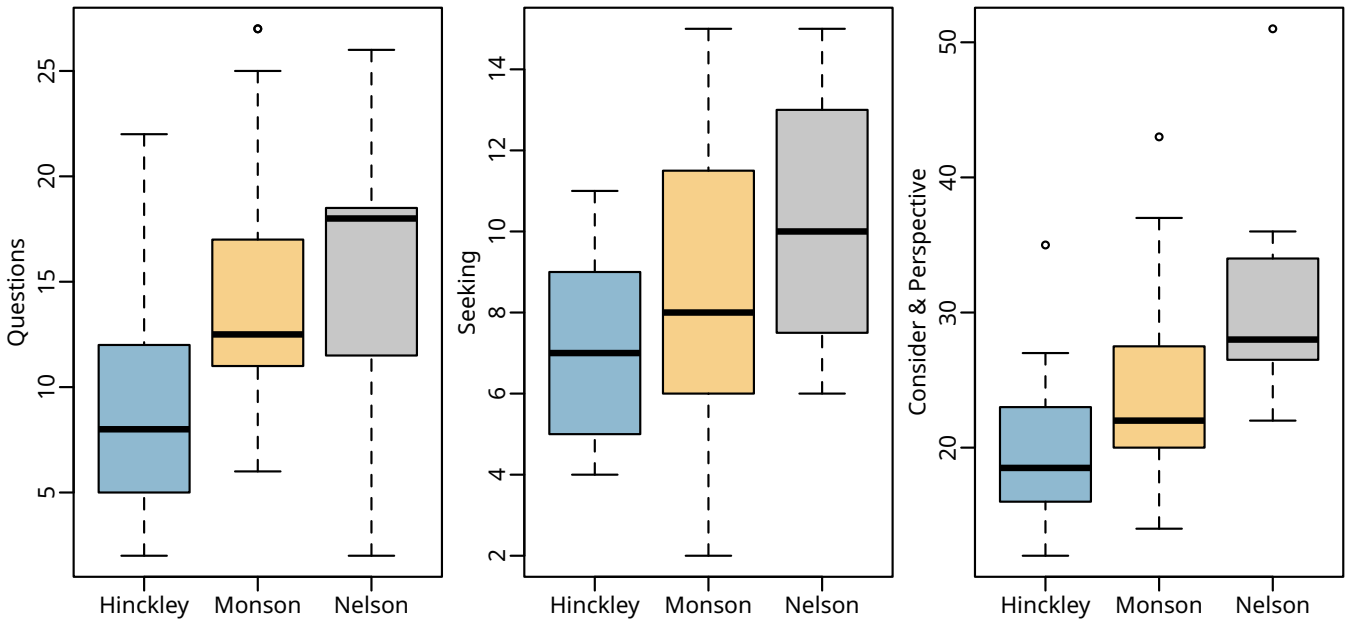
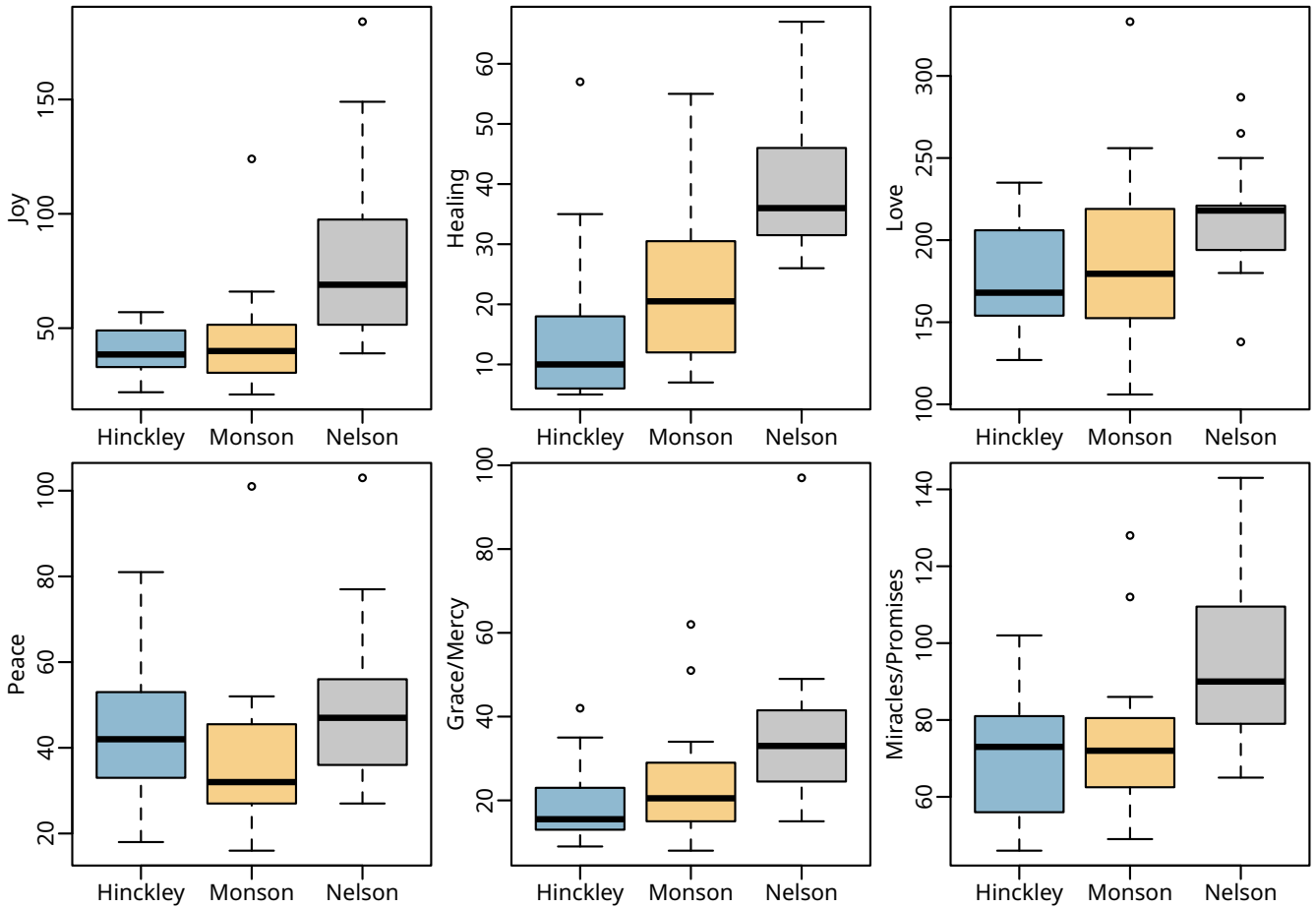


Figure 16. *Growing emphasis on the positive benefits of the gospel*



6. Blessings, God and the Adversary, and the Second Coming

During Nelson's presidency, speakers were quick to point out the benefits of following the gospel (Figure 16). While word roots like "love…" (together with "embrace" 213 vs 181, p=.007) and "peace…" (49.4 vs 40.5, p=.14) only saw significant increases in certain conjugations, the roots "heal…" (40 vs 18, p<.0001) and "joy…" (85 vs 42 p=.002) significantly increased in many grammatical forms and doubled overall (Figure 16).

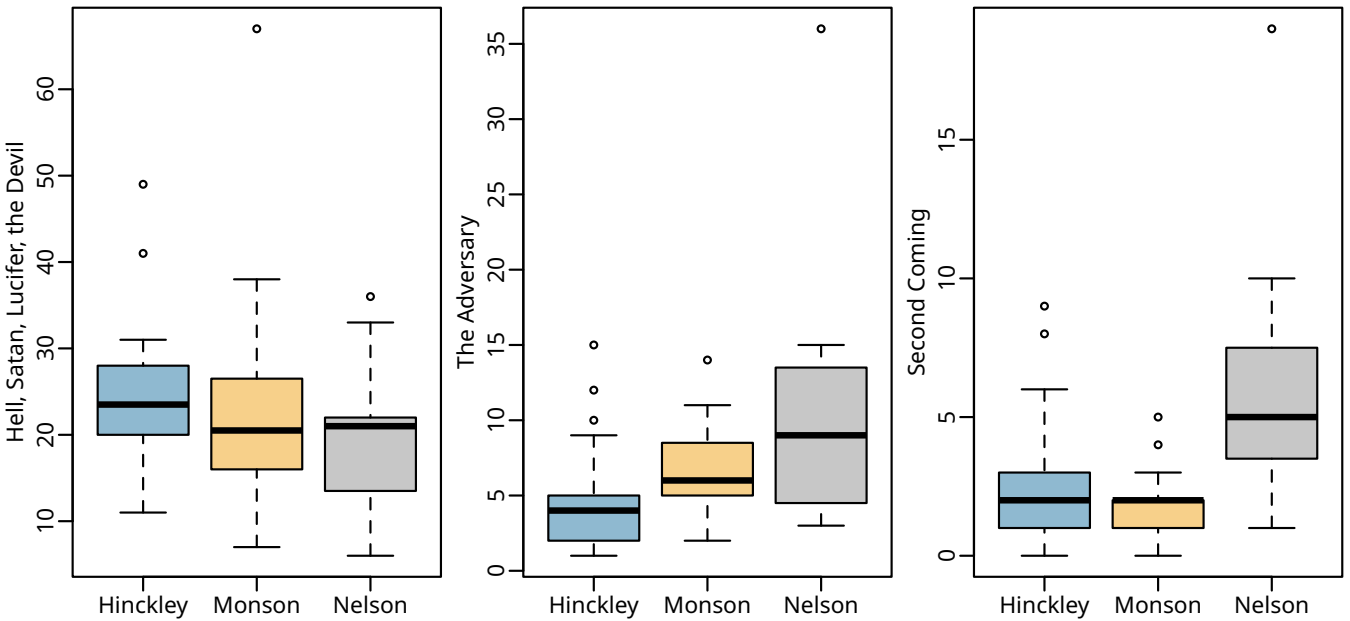
Also, "grace" and "mercy" nearly doubled (36 vs 20, p=.008) despite being most frequently used by Monson and Hinckley themselves. The words "miracles" and "promises" (95 vs 72, p=.0015) also increased, but not as sharply. The focus on grace is perhaps most typified by the restoration of the beloved hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" to the official hymnbook in 2025. Its evangelical-flavored second verse emphasizes grace (O to grace how great a debtor / Daily I'm constrained to be), but apparently that is no longer a theological barrier.

It is worth noting that while speakers were roughly twice as comfortable promising "joy" to their audience, there was no such increase in promises of "happiness" (39 vs 46, p=.12). Though many LDS and non-LDS writers (e.g., evangelist Billy Graham and youth minister Mel Walker) have drawn a distinction between the eternal and inward-looking nature of joy compared to the circumstantial and fleeting nature of happiness, it is possible that Nelson's last talk before becoming prophet (Nelson 2016), which heavily emphasized this point, may have solidified this distinction for speakers ever since.

There was a non-significant decrease in references to Satan (20 vs 24, p=.14) as anything other than "the Adversary" (Figure 17). Use of "the Adversary" increased by about as much as the other terms decreased together (10.3 vs 5.7, p=.054). This shift is ongoing, will probably become statistically significant in the next year or two, and is consistent with the secularizing process whereby supernatural beliefs are retained but de-specified and de-personalized.

Meanwhile, references to the Second Coming more than doubled (6.2 vs 2.2, p=.004), but even under Nelson, remained at quite low levels for a church that calls itself "Latter-day." This somewhat reverses a long-term trend reported by Shepherd and Shepherd, whose coding of selected General Conference talks going back to 1830 found that rhetorical emphasis on eschatology peaked in Mormonism's second generation at a salience of 0.30 from 1860 to 1889, but

Figure 17. *Increasing references to "the Adversary" and the Second Coming*



plummeted to 0.05 or less from 1920 to 1979 (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984, 192–195). Because they coded entire talks based on close reading (salience = paragraphs mentioning a theme divided by paragraphs in the talk), there is no direct conversion factor between their salience metric and my word counts, but I too find that the 104 references to the "Second Coming" or "day of the Lord" in the 1870s was much higher than other decades from 1850 to 1949.

However, I disagree with their findings about the postwar period. Rather than fading, Second Coming rhetoric peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, with 137 references. After a brief lull, it surged again, setting a pace for roughly 125 references by the close of the 2020s. Scholars note that these changes in frequency were accompanied by changes in rhetoric. The 1830s understanding was biblically literal. Soon, the Saints would "literally tread upon the ashes of the wicked [meaning anyone not baptized into the LDS Church] after they are destroyed from off the face of the earth"[5] while living in the literal kingdom of a physically present Christ. This gradually morphed into a contemporary understanding where Satan would be bound soon-enough-to-matter, allowing Saints to carry on temple ordinances and missionary work among the righteous gentiles (Underwood 1981; Erickson 1997). The fact that even such toned-down rhetoric has seen a resurgence (87% "Second Coming" under Nelson compared to 71% "great and dreadful day of the Lord" in the 1850s) without the existential political threats of the 1870s or 1960–70s implies a shift toward supernatural urgency at odds with the secularizing trend of much of developed Western religion (Fenn 1978; Berger 2011).

Speakers during Nelson's presidency often referred to God as Heavenly Father or (far less frequently) Heavenly Parents (Figure 18). While this paper focuses on changes under Nelson, it is more accurate to characterize this rhetorical shift as occurring under Monson and being maintained by Nelson (67 vs 43 under Hinckley, $p<.0001$).

While there was only a tiny increase in references to Christ's role as "Redeemer" (14.7 vs 13.6, $p=.43$), there was a large increase in the word "Savior" (164 vs 104, $p<.0001$). Moreover, Nelson's presidency saw a growing emphasis on Christ's attributes including "glory" ($p=.027$), "divine" ($p=.002$), and "infinite" ($p=.002$, collectively 71 vs 51 $p<.0001$).

References to the Plan of Salvation also increased (Figure 19). As with "Heavenly Father," references to the "Atonement" (+44% $p=.0001$), "Plan" (+22% $p=.014$), and "Return" (+26% $p=.0034$) are most significant when con-

[5] Quote from the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, 1 (Jan. 1835): 58.

Figure 18. *Increasing references to God as Father, Jesus as Savior, and their attributes*

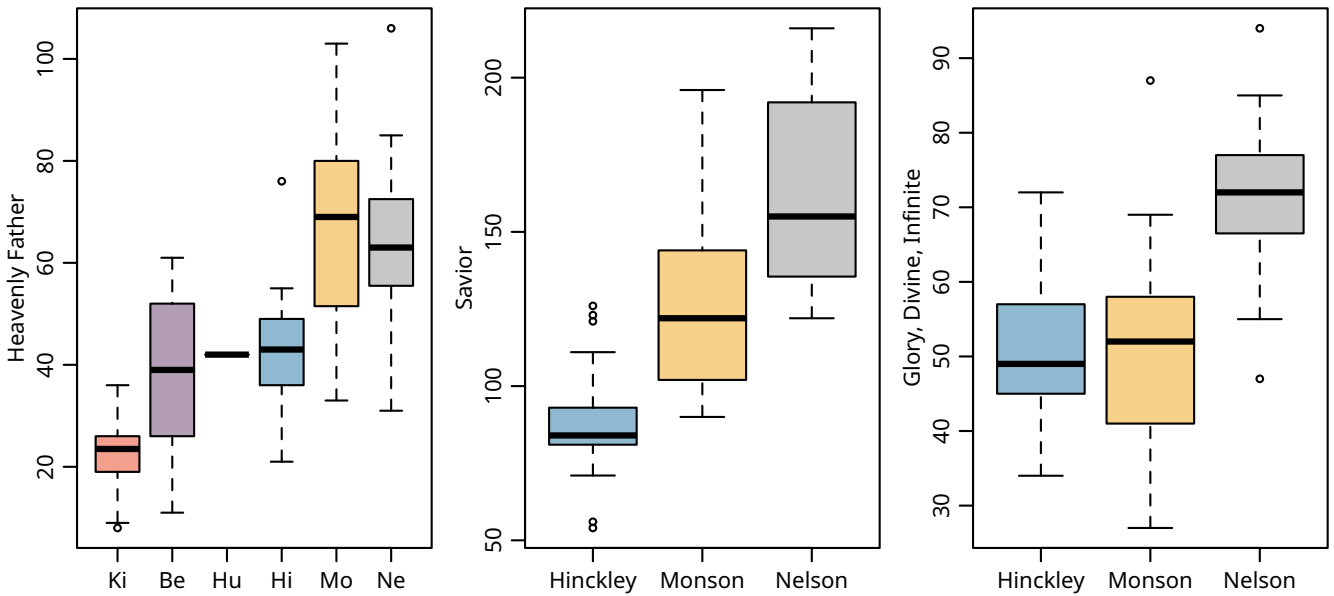


Figure 19. *Increasing references to the Plan of Salvation*

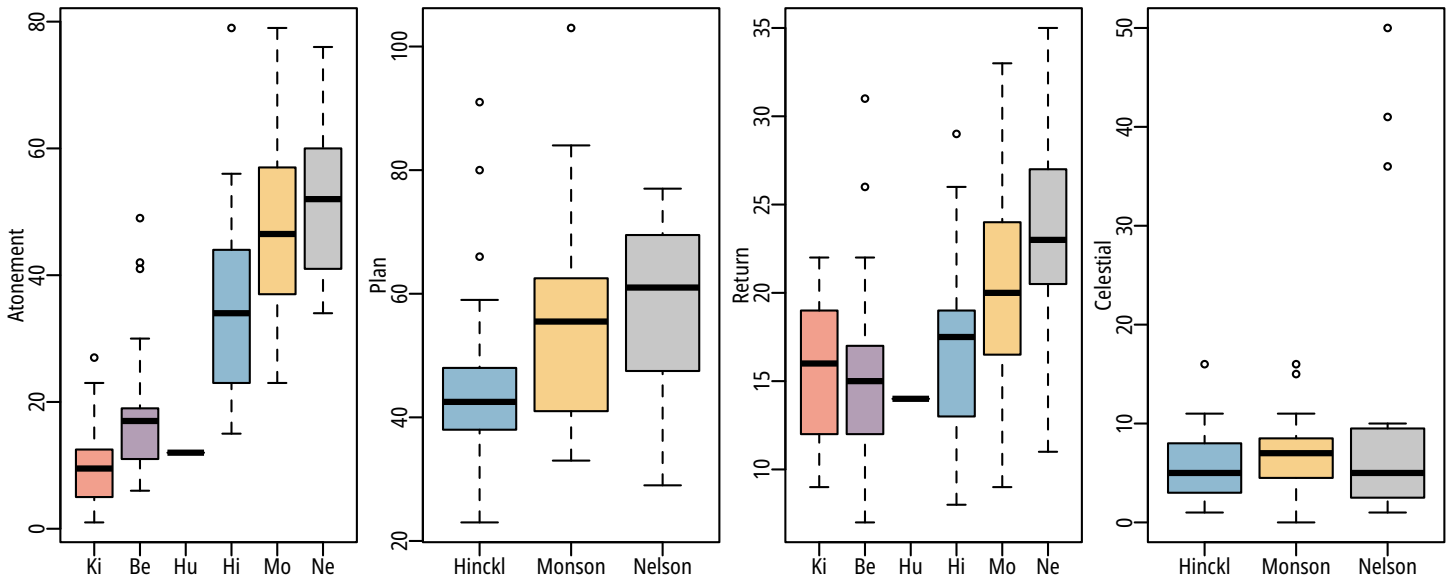
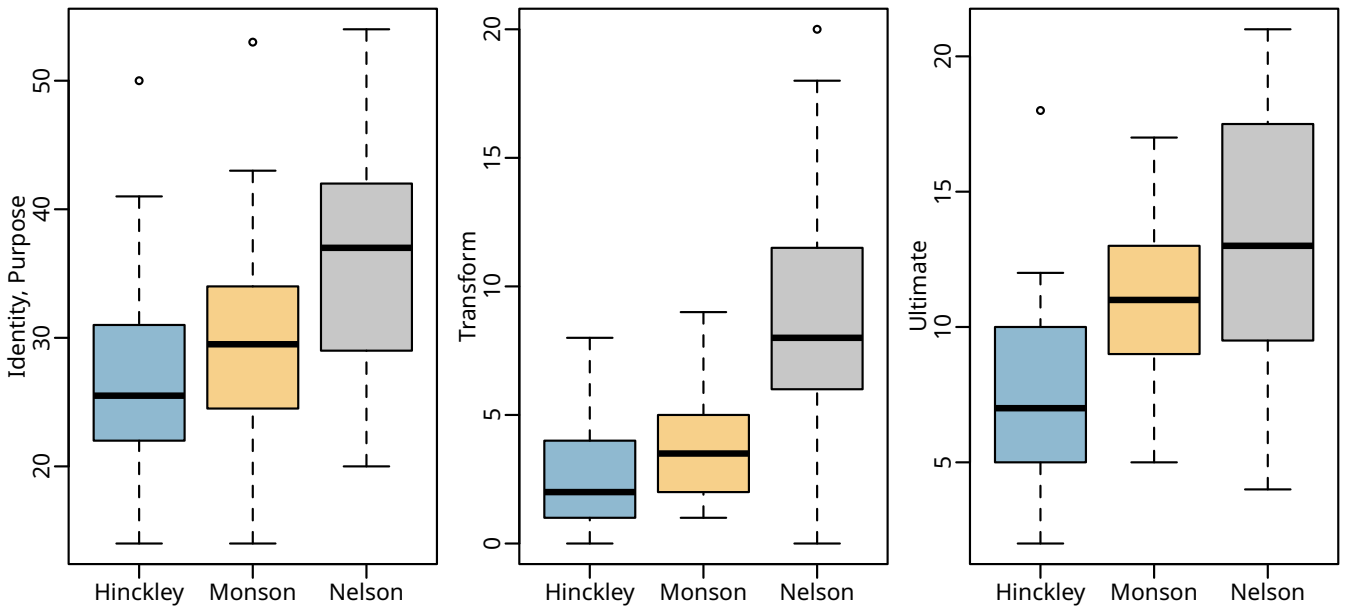


Figure 20. *Growing emphasis on individual purpose and transformation*



trasting Hinckley against Monson and Nelson together, though all three terms continued their increase under Nelson's tenure.

Notably, "celestial" had not increased until Nelson's talk "Think Celestial" in October 2023 introduced a new catch phrase. This produced rather extreme outliers in Nelson's final three conferences. It remains to be seen how long this phrase will remain popular.

7. Existential Meaning

Finally, the Nelson era was marked by an increasing movement toward ontology and questions of meaning. The terms "identity" and "purpose" increased individually and together (36 vs 28, p=.007, Figure 20). Discussions of the gospel's transformative power and the disciple's inner transformation also nearly tripled ("transform…" 9.2 vs 2.9, p=.0005). Moreover, the question of life's "ultimate" purpose and/or what "ultimately" matters also got nearly 50% more mentions under Nelson (13.4 vs 9.1, p=.006).

Though General Conference shies away from formal theological or philosophical terminology,[6] a preoccupation with absolute meaning is being increasingly acknowledged, albeit using non-technical vocabulary.

Rhetorical Changes of Individual Leaders

Appointments to the LDS apostleship (a title generally held by 15 men, since three of the ordained apostles leave the Quorum of the Twelve to serve as the First Presidency) are lifelong, and so LDS leadership changes relatively slowly. Unlike Seventies and the women leaders of the Relief Society, Primary, and Young Women organizations, who have limited tenures and may speak only twice in General Conference (64% of the 458 individual speakers since 1991 have done so), apostles speak in every conference at least once unless prevented by health. As such, they can influence overall rhetorical patterns far more than other speakers. This raises the question: Did some speakers shift their rhetorical patterns more under Nelson than others?

To answer this question, I took all 65 terms that increased and all 142 terms that decreased under Nelson (as determined by Craig's Zeta), and created a Nelson-Era Index for each talk:

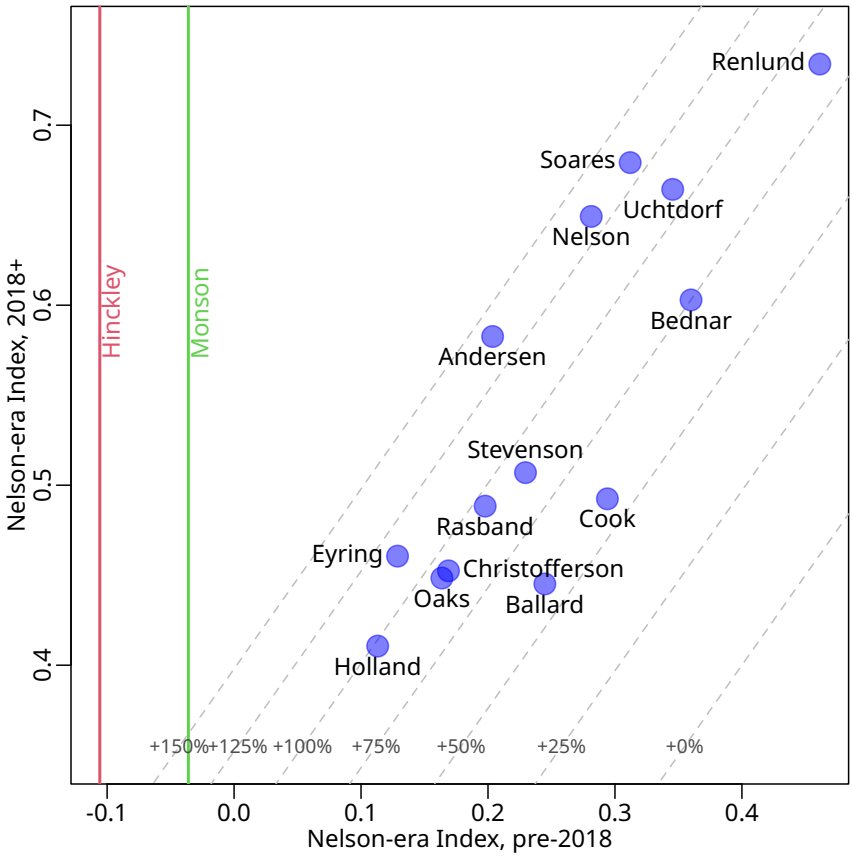
$$\text{NEI} = log_{10}\left(\frac{\#\text{ of increasing terms} + 1}{\#\text{ of decreasing terms} + 1}\right)$$

[6] The term "metaphysics" was last used by David O. McKay in 1953, while "metaphysical hunger" was used twice by Holland in 1997.

Thus, a talk with the same total count of increasing (e.g., "covenant") and decreasing (e.g., "brethren") terms (or none of either kind) would have an NEI of 0, while a talk with 10x more increasing terms would have an NEI of +1, and vice versa for an NEI of -1. I then averaged these talks for the 14 speakers who delivered at least five addresses both before and during Nelson's tenure. These results are displayed in Figure 21.

I find three notable things in this analysis. First, the 14 men include all current apostles except Gong and Patrick Kearon, the most recent additions before Nelson's death, with Ballard the only former member. Yet all were using Nelson-Era terms far more than either Hinckley or Monson prior to 2018. For example, while Hinckley was prophet, he used Nelson's rising/falling terms

Figure 21. *Rhetorical shifts of all apostles during Nelson's presidency*



3,176 and 4,390 times respectively, for an NEI of -0.14. By contrast, Ballard anticipated the shift in rhetoric by using rising/falling terms 3,072 and 1,828 times respectively prior to 2018 for a pre-Nelson NEI of +0.22. Because the index is log-based, a score of 0.18 means using 50% more Nelson-era rising than falling terms, and 10 of the 14 speakers were already above that mark during the previous administrations.

Second, while all the speakers were leaning slightly into Nelson-era terms prior to 2018, they increased their NEI by an average of +0.3, almost exactly doubling their already elevated ratio of rising to falling terms. Ballard and Cook shifted the least (about +60%), while Soares, Andersen, and Nelson himself shifted the most (about +110%), a fairly narrow spread. The ranking of speakers by Nelson-inflected rhetoric therefore changed little between eras (Spearman $\rho = .82$, $p = .0005$).

Finally, despite this shared direction and pace of change, there has always been a wide spread in how strongly individual speakers display Nelsonian rhetoric. Holland was the least Nelson-inflected both before and after 2018 (from 1.3× to 2.9× more rising than falling terms), while Renlund was the most, again both before and after 2018 (from 2.6× to 5.4×).

The average NEI per conference was remarkably stable under Hinckley, averaging 0.08±.04, but then increased consistently under Monson from the mid-teens in 2008 to about 0.40 in 2018 when it underwent a frameshift to 0.55-0.66, where it remained every conference under Nelson. While this is a limited sample, it suggests that Nelson's presidency had an immediate impact on rhetoric that had nearly as large an effect in a matter of months as Monson had over the course of 10 years. Whether rhetoric will stay there for another decade or erode back to baseline remains to be seen, but Oaks's rhetoric has followed the same trends. Even his October 2025 talk emphasizing traditional fatherhood and large families still included 95 rising and 25 falling terms for an NEI of 0.57, almost exactly the April 2025 Conference average NEI of 0.58 (Oaks 2025).

Four Challenges

The results above demonstrate clear shifts in LDS General Conference rhetoric during the 2018 to 2025 presidency of Russell M. Nelson. Explaining why these changes occurred is a far more complex and uncertain task. In what follows, I explore four emerging institutional challenges that may inform these rhetorical developments and propose a tentative model for how church leadership may be responding to them.

This interpretive section is not a direct inference from the data, but an exploratory framework. It submits one possible narrative consistent with the stylometric findings, but not the only one. I offer these reflections not as established causation but as food for thought: a sketch of plausible correlations between rhetorical evolution and institutional stressors. My hope is that future research, with broader data and more rigorous causal inference tools, will sharpen, support, or supplant this early framework. In developing the model, I have tried to adhere to the following principles of explanatory clarity: (1) be parsimonious (2) without being reductive, (3) be falsifiable, and (4) seek to illuminate related phenomena beyond the immediate scope (Deutsch 2012; Einstein 1933). Still, it should be read as provisional, exploratory, and descriptive rather than determinative.

These challenges parallel the pressures identified by Shepherd and Shepherd in their analysis of Mormon accommodation (2015, ch. 7). Drawing on Zald and Ash (1966), they argue that early Mormonism existed in unsustainably high tension with American society because it combined extreme exclusivity with an outward orientation aimed at social reconstruction rather than individual moral reform. The church survived by selectively managing four persistent pressures: external hostility, addressed through a gradual pivot toward inward moral formation and more sophisticated public articulation; internal instability, mitigated through routinized succession and bureaucratic consolidation; the pressures of success, relieved by political accommodation and respectability; and leadership pressures, resolved through centralized authority within a conservative gerontocracy. Though these pressures were never eliminated, they were rendered manageable. Moreover, they reappear, in updated form, as the four challenges confronting the Nelson era: scientific challenges to literalism (external), member agitation around gender and equality (internal), the moral justification of vast institutional wealth (success), and the governance of a global church led by an American hierarchy (leadership).

1. Apologetics and Literal Belief

The church has a longstanding tradition of allowing history to substitute for theology and basing truth claims on the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the canonized versions of Joseph Smith's visions rather than on theological propositions (Bushman 2007; Bowman 2009). Hinckley denied the validity of nuanced belief as recently as April 2003, declaring: "Each of us has to face the

matter—either the Church is true, or it is a fraud. There is no middle ground. It is the Church and kingdom of God, or it is nothing" (Hinckley 2003).

In the recent past, church leaders have acted decisively to silence narratives that would challenge traditional understandings of its history. This included closing archives to scholars for all but a brief "Camelot" period under historian Leonard J. Arrington in the 1970s and excommunicating sympathetic and loyal scholars such as David Knowlton, who proposed ways of reconciling the Book of Mormon with a lack of historical evidence and higher criticisms (Madsen 1997; Murphy 1997; Patterson 2023). The church effectively declared entire swaths of doctrine out of bounds to scholarly inquiry (Knowlton 1997; Olaiz 2010) or simply denied that contradictions existed, utilizing a framework of defensive literalism (Cummings 1982).

These tactics had already begun to erode before Nelson took power in 2018. For example, in 2013 the LDS Newsroom began quietly publishing a series of "gospel topics essays" that acknowledged difficult issues in church history including polygamy, the racial priesthood/temple ban, the origins of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham, and many more. While these essays received some criticism for not being entirely objective in their handling of arguments and evidence, the fact that they existed at all meant an orthodox position on these topics was possible, itself a huge step forward from the "silence and deny" tactics of the past (Bringhurst et al. 2017). The moderate general authority Marlin K. Jensen, who was made the church's official historian in 2005, reopened the archives and became a voice for responsible scholarship. The "inoculation" model—exposing youth to controversial aspects of church history in a normalizing context—gained traction with the incapacity of hardliner Boyd K. Packer. Also, the belated acknowledgement that the internet made it impossible to hide difficult doctrinal issues from young people triggered wider acknowledgement of thorny historical issues. The apostle M. Russell Ballard (who served as Nelson's president of the Quorum of the Twelve until his death in early 2024) encapsulated the sea change when he told a conference of seminary teachers: "Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, 'Don't worry about it!' Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church" (Prescott 2016).

One of the biggest problems the apologists faced was DNA evidence against an Israelite–Native American connection, as posited by the Book of

Mormon. Though the church had funded extensive archeological digs in Latin America and kept abreast of the findings of independent researchers since the 1950s with limited success (Smith 2023), the traditional understanding of Lamanites as the ancestors of native peoples continued to be widely promoted (Mauss 2001; Crowfoot 2021; Call 2021; Harris 2021). As late as 1976, Spencer W. Kimball was asserting in great detail the migrations of Hagoth's descendants across Polynesia without acknowledging a mountain of linguistic, botanic, zoologic, and sociologic counterevidence, much less suggesting a possible reconciliation (Clement 1980). But in the early 2000s, improved DNA technology made this position "simply implausible," as scholar Thomas Murphy has stated. Indeed, by 2003 at least eight of the leading apologist scholars agreed with critics that Israelites could not be the primary ancestors of Native Americans (Murphy 2003; Southerton 2004; Wang et al. 2007; Southerton 2020; Raff 2022). Despite continuing rearguard action by apologists, in 2007 the leadership bowed to the inevitable and changed the introduction to the Book of Mormon from stating that Lamanites "are the principal ancestors of the American Indians" to stating that they "are among the ancestors" (Lobdell 2006; Mikita and Adams 2007). While this stopped short of changing scriptural text itself or even fully conceding defeat, changing the official interpretation that had been printed millions of times and distributed around the world represented a major shift in the leadership's exegetical flexibility. Once this first concession was made, others seemed more possible.

2. Egalitarianism Rising

The centerpiece of Hinckley's administration was certainly the Family Proclamation, read in the women's session one week before General Conference in the fall of 1995. It has since been quoted directly in General Conference 341 times, more than double any verse of scripture. (The closest was 148 references to "This is my work and my glory," Moses 1:39.) The document articulated the leadership's position that heterosexual marriage was central to LDS theology and that conformity to mid-century US gender roles (a mother responsible for child-rearing and nurturing, a father responsible for breadwinning and "presiding") was expected of every member worldwide.

The title was carefully phrased as a "proclamation" rather than a "revelation," thus bypassing the need to be canonized by common consent (Doctrine and Covenants 26:2). Labeling it a "proclamation" imparted sufficient cachet for it to be used as an amicus brief, which it was in seven anti-gay marriage

court cases over the following decade (Hansen et al. 2015; Petersen 2015). Despite having only quasi-official status, the Family Proclamation has been framed and mounted on the walls of countless LDS homes worldwide, whether or not those families conform to its restrictive definitions of acceptable and eternalizable relationships (Palmer 2023).

The Family Proclamation is hardly the first time the church has taken a hardline anti-feminist stance. Joseph Smith's theology envisioned an afterlife where a man acquired glory in proportion to his property, including a plurality of subordinate wives and children. Though debate has raged over how much priesthood authority Smith intended to give women in the Relief Society, Brigham Young disbanded this organization shortly after Smith's death without any serious challenge to his authority to do so (Madsen 1987; Newell 1992; Quinn 1992; Toscano and Toscano 1990). (This lack of challenge may have been because its president Emma Smith hadn't held a meeting in over a year after discovering her husband Joseph's polygamist relationships included both of her Relief Society counselors and her secretary [Rich 2022]). While women in Utah were the first to vote in U.S. elections in 1870, their first-wave feminism was constrained to a context limited to supporting male priesthood authority (Compton 1997; Ulrich 2018). Today, it is underappreciated just how firmly opposed the church was to feminist issues in the twentieth century, particularly to birth control, which many leaders declared was such a profound sin that it was hastening the apocalypse (Olaiz and Farnsworth 2004). Considering the firmness of leaders' statements, it is remarkable that feminism had gained some traction among LDS women in the 1970s. As of 1974, LDS legislators in four states had voted to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, and 63% of Utah church members favored it, but that was before the church condemned it in 1975 (Young 2007). In the years that followed, the church used massive resources to campaign against it, organized Relief Societies to block its passage, and excommunicated people such as Sonia Johnson who supported it publicly. Other prominent feminists in the church were excommunicated in 1993 and 2014 (Quinn 1997, ch. 10; Patterson 2023, ch. 3).

If the church has been resolutely anti-feminist for two centuries, its official opposition to homosexuals and their rights has been outright bellicose (Swedin 1998). In 1970, Ezra Taft Benson contended that a war was being fought against the family, the fundamental unit of civilization, and that its collapse would bring about the end of the world (Olaiz and Farnsworth 2004). "The Lord knew that in the last days Satan would try to destroy the family

unit," he fulminated (Benson 1970). In 1984, the year Oaks was called as an apostle (the same day as President Nelson), Oaks authored a 21-page internal memo outlining strategies for opposing gay rights (Oaks 1984:5). He included combat metaphors employed by earlier church leaders, such as "Homosexuality can be defeated if the battle is well organized."

The church's opposition continued into the twenty-first century. LDS leadership organized an outsized proportion of human-hours and financial support for opposing gay marriage in California's Proposition 22 (2000) and Proposition 8 (2008). The church received a formal rebuke for claiming to have contributed only $2,000 to the latter when the independent Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) determined donations were at a minimum $180,000 (Crapo 2008; Thurston et al. 2013; Jennings 2016; Petrey 2020). The public backlash the church faced once this interference became common knowledge, along with rapidly changing public opinion on gay marriage, caused General Conference speakers to moderate their language. Where previous leaders like Spencer W. Kimball had written that "as an extension of homosexual practices, men and women have sunk even to seeking sexual gratification with animals" (Kimball 1969:78), and others emphatically denied the possibility that homosexuality could be genetically determined as recently as 2010 (Stack 2010), most speakers avoided the subject altogether. The terms "same-sex attraction," "homosexual," and "gay" did not appear in General Conference between 1999 and 2012, and the word "pervert" was abandoned long before then. When they did reappear in the mid-2010s it was in terms of admiration for those who remained faithful despite the "trial of faith" heavy enough that "the world protests, how can you ask so much?" (Andersen 2012). Oaks was responsible for eight of the ten references to "same-sex marriage/attraction" during the Nelson era.

Despite the church's strident anti-feminist and anti-homosexual rhetorical stance, the attitudes of members themselves shifted quickly. The membership remains convinced that women's ordination to the priesthood is less likely than a return of the entire LDS population to Jackson County, MO (Cragun et al. 2024), but data from the Next Mormons Surveys show that support for egalitarian marriage (where both parents have jobs) versus traditional marriage (where the mother stays home with the children) is on the rise. Between the 2016 and 2022–23 surveys, support for egalitarian marriage increased from 40% to 50% among self-identified LDS Americans (Riess and Knoll 2024). This finding is in line with national trends that have seen such attitudes

go from a large minority in the 1970s to a solid majority today (Donnelly et al. 2015).

By contrast, current Mormons maintained their opposition to legalizing gay marriage in all 50 states near 73% across the surveys, but this opposition was weaker in GenZ (59%) and members with at least one homosexual acquaintance (66%). Both are fractions of the LDS population likely to increase in coming years, assuming those sympathetic to LGBT issues don't simply sort themselves out of the organization. Education reliably predicts increased support for gay and egalitarian marriages among Americans (Meagher and Shu 2019), but Mormons are a notable exception (Heaton 2023). This marks a costly cultural tension that may be at a breaking point on gay marriage, and already past it on egalitarian marriage. These changes have happened largely due to social context and are not clearly led by specific advocates who can be the targets of church discipline as in previous generations.

One of the more surprising aspects of Nelson's presidency was the number of policy changes he implemented early on. On the day he took office, Nelson replaced the popular and centrist Dieter F. Uchtdorf with the older, conservative, and anti-LGBT hardliner Dallin H. Oaks as his First Counselor. In their initial press conference, both made comments about how valuable women were, but only in their role as helpers of men (Stack et al. 2018). To many, this signaled a retrenched conservativism for a First Presidency that was older on their first day in office (87.8 years) than any other for all but 130 days of church history.[7] Yet within four years, Nelson signaled his willingness to not only change but actually break with political conservatives on numerous fronts. He reversed a policy that excluded the children of LGBT couples from baptism, slightly expanded the role of women, balanced youth spending equally between young men and young women, called the first Asian American apostle and the first South American apostle, closed meetinghouses early in the COVID pandemic, encouraged vaccination, and continued to position the church to the left of not just the GOP but its own US members on immigration issues (Riess 2022; Welch 2024). He also lessened the demands of full church involvement by cutting Sunday meetings to two hours, replaced by-

[7] The only time a First Presidency was older was the end of the Hinckley-Monson-Faust tenure from late May 2007 through Faust's death on August 10, and up to the appointment of his younger replacement Henry B. Eyring on October 6. The Hinckley-Monson two-man presidency reached a maximum age of 88.68 years on October 5, a record broken by the Nelson-Oaks-Eyring First Presidency on November 5, 2018, and exceeded by nearly seven years (95.50) when Nelson died on September 27, 2025.

the-book visiting teaching with a ministering program, and allowed missionaries more contact with their families.

Though incremental, these changes were generally in a liberal direction and can be seen as a response to Challenge 2. Leaders may have been concerned about pushback from a church membership that is among the most conservative in America and includes a large alt-right population (Greenhalgh and Chapman 2024; Shrum 2024). This may help explain why Nelson was referred to by name and affectionate title so much more than prior prophets: it may have been a way to remind reluctant conservative members to follow the prophet toward more centrist positions.

3. LDS Corporate Investments

LDS finances have long been a source of discomfort for the institution. Joseph Smith was the equivalent of an executive or board member in over fifty financial enterprises during his short life, few of which prospered, and one of which (the Kirtland "Anti-Bank Society") failed so spectacularly it led to 10% to 15% of members leaving the church, including a third of the leadership (Backman Jr. 1983, 328; Turner 2025, 191–195). Despite near-total control of the local economy after Smith's death, Brigham Young died both three times wealthier than the next-richest man in Utah Territory and with his personal finances so deeply enmeshed in the church's finances that it took years to separate the two (Quinn 2017, ch. 1). The late 1800s saw the church facing increasing government harassment and the constant threat of seizure of its assets. Even post-Manifesto, many leaders personally made bad investments in the mining industry and involved the church, which teetered on the edge of bankruptcy from the late 1890s until apostle J. Reuben Clark brought discipline to spending in the 1930s.

However, when President David O. McKay turned finances over to Elder Henry D. Moyle in the 1950s, the church returned to shaky financial ground. A man of inflexible convictions, one of which was that Mormons were destined to become a major percentage of the European population in the near future (Larson and Poll 1997), Moyle embarked on a building program that burned through the church's cash reserves in four years and was incurring debts equivalent to $32 million annually before he was succeeded by the more responsible N. Eldon Tanner in 1963 (Quinn 1997, ch. 2; Bergera 1997; Quinn 2017, ch. 3). This history helps explain why leadership ceased making detailed annual public financial disclosures in 1959 and shifted toward consolidated re-

porting ("Latter-day Saint Economic History," n.d.). The LDS Church remains the only top 10 American religion that does not openly report its expenses (McKnight and Dodge 2018).

The church's finances, particularly its "rainy day fund," came to public attention after whistleblower David Nielsen disclosed details of the church's massive investment portfolio in 2019. Nielsen, a former portfolio manager at Ensign Peak Advisors, alleged that the church was improperly using its tax-exempt status to accumulate wealth, possibly in violation of IRS regulations (Swaine et al. 2019). This led to heightened scrutiny of the church's financial practices, including a 2023 *60 Minutes* segment, which explored the church's purported $120 billion fund and raised ethical concerns regarding its use of tithing money. Later analysis of public documents estimated the total wealth of the church to be $293 billion by year's-end of 2024 (Semerad 2024; "Widow's Mite Report, 2024 Update" 2024). This staggering total is, for example, nearly six times the size of the largest US college endowment—Harvard's at $53.1 billion (Rosenberg 2021)—and nearly triple the largest cash reserves Apple Inc. has ever had (Macrotrends n.d.).

Critics argue that the church has failed to use its vast resources for charity, as required by law in many jurisdictions (Schneiders 2022; Angelovski et al. 2022). Members donate tithing without knowing how those funds are being allocated, though a book-length treatment of LDS finances by historian D. Michael Quinn concluded that this secrecy is unnecessary since it doesn't conceal anything particularly objectionable (Quinn 2017). The church faced a series of lawsuits challenging this lack of transparency, including several brought by James Huntsman, brother of the billionaire and former U.S. ambassador Jon Huntsman, Jr. Church leaders defended their financial practices, stating that the funds were necessary for long-term sustainability and for future needs (Gruver 2023). While there are occasionally appeals for members to pay full tithes even in extreme poverty, while serving a mission, or even on members' deathbed (Andersen 2023), they have begun to seem grasping and decreased under Nelson.

At the same time, reported humanitarian and welfare expenditures grew significantly in the Nelson era, with annual global aid figures exceeding $1 billion in recent years and reaching approximately $1.45 billion in 2024, including thousands of relief and self-reliance projects and millions of volunteer hours worldwide (Kemsley 2025). This expansion of charitable activity—emphasized repeatedly in *Church News* releases and annual "Caring for Those

in Need" summaries—suggests that, even as financial transparency remains limited, the church has substantially increased its use of funds for externally oriented humanitarian purposes relative to its own historical record. It is difficult to see the timing of the very public controversy followed by an increase in both giving and publicly announcing it as entirely coincidental.

4. Internationalism

While the church saw part of its mission as finding the elect in all lands, in the nineteenth century those who accepted the missionaries' message were to physically "gather to Zion" as revealed in D&C 57, 101, and 115. This pressure for a literal gathering persisted well into the twentieth century, and despite a 1911 First Presidency statement encouraging converts to stay in their homelands, it remained a force until the presidency of David O. McKay in the 1950s (Rutherford 2017). Though McKay triumphantly declared he regarded "making of the Church a world-wide organization" his most outstanding accomplishment (Prince and Wright 2005, 358), a complete rearticulation of the doctrine of Zion as an attitude and lifestyle rather than a geographic location did not occur until a 1973 General Conference (Lee 1973). A special international issue of *Dialogue* in 1980 pointed out that the church was still thinking of itself as an American institution and exporting national values as if they were gospel principles in standardized manuals, hymnals, and policies (see esp. Tullis 1980; Jones 1980; Thiruthuvadoss 1980; Britsch 1980). As church growth stagnated in America, this "headquarters culture" has begun to erode (Quinn 2001), but at an exceptionally slow rate.

All organizations struggle to transcend the cultural assumptions their founders embedded, particularly when authority is centralized and leadership turnover is slow (Selznick 1957, esp ch. 3; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Converts on the geographic and/or cultural periphery of Mormonism have long faced distinctive participation costs and barriers to informal influence (Louder 1980), while life-long appointments at the highest levels limit the incorporation of leaders whose formative experiences lie outside the Intermountain West. Taken together, these dynamics lead the institution to forgo the well-documented "diversity bonus" of organizational learning and problem-solving that arises from cognitively and culturally heterogenous leadership (Page 2017).

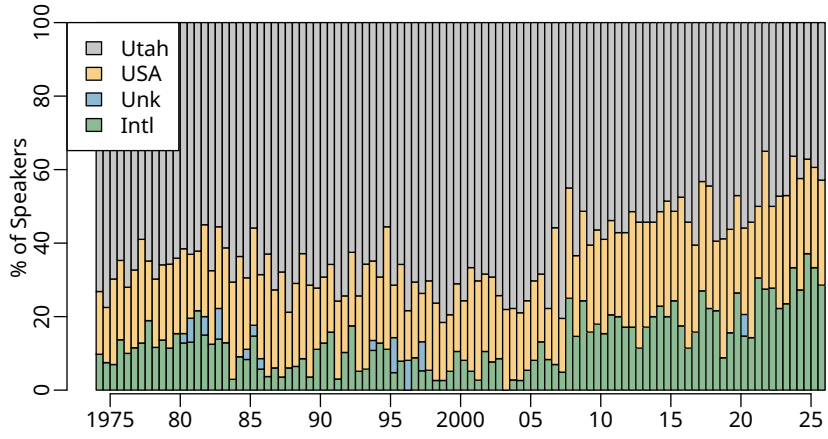
Institutional strategies optimized for cultural uniformity can remain effective so long as an organization's membership is geographically concentrat-

ed and socially homogeneous. For much of the twentieth century, the LDS Church could plausibly enforce a high degree of behavioral, doctrinal, and rhetorical uniformity because the overwhelming majority of members lived in the Intermountain West, shared broadly similar American cultural assumptions, and represented a substantial political bloc locally (May 1987, chs. 8–10; Alexander and Embry 1981). By the mid-1990s, however, this demographic foundation had eroded: the church became majority international in the early Hinckley era (1996), and by 2023 more than 60 percent of members lived outside the United States.

General Conference speakers lagged behind this shift. As late as 2003 there was a conference without a single foreign-born speaker, and in April 2007 over 80% of the talks were delivered by a speaker born in Utah. However, the talks delivered by non-US-born speakers increased from 6.6% under Hinckley to 19% under Monson and 24% under Nelson (Figure 22). Meanwhile, talks from Utah-born speakers fell from 72% under Hinckley to 54% under Monson and slipped below half at 48% under Nelson (including an all-time low of 35% in October 2021). Because conference talks always include the First Presidency (multiple times) and Quorum of the Twelve, these shifts reflect genuine changes in decision-making elites rather than merely symbolic inclusion.

A parallel, if slower, adjustment is also detectable in rhetorical content. References to Utah and Salt Lake City fell 45% under Monson/Nelson relative to the Kimball-through-Hinckley years (15.4 vs 27.2 mentions per conference,

Figure 22. *General Conference talks by birthplace of speaker, 1974–2025*



p<.01), and fewer talks used stories set in mid-century Utah as their dominant narrative frame. A disproportionate share of these stories came from Hinckley and Monson themselves (199 and 271 lifetime mentions of Salt Lake City or Utah respectively), while Nelson's usage was substantial but markedly lower (101).

The foregoing suggests that Mormonism has begun to globalize, but that its face is changing faster than its frame. Nelson's successor, Dallin H. Oaks, retains an ideal of a "gospel culture" that transcends and supersedes local traditions (Oaks 2003). Sociological theory would predict this solution to be both unworkable and counterproductive for a church whose vitality now depends on learning from, rather than flattening, the worlds it seeks to gather.

Themes as Responses to Challenges

As noted in the introduction, because challenges are usually confronted only indirectly, it is possible for rhetorical shifts to be responding to all four challenges simultaneously. The uptick in references to Nelson himself provides a good example. In the absence of empirically verifiable proof for LDS truth claims, official interpretations become more flexible. As a result, it becomes important to emphasize that only the Prophet-President has the authority to establish these interpretations.

Similarly, with Nelson taking many small steps in the direction of egalitarianism, it is important to remind entrenched conservatives to follow the prophet where he leads. The very fact that he took so many such steps means that leaders from across the spectrum can find at least a few things to praise, allowing everyone to selectively quote him in a supportive way. Finally, Nelson was also the CEO of one of the world's largest conglomerates, and emphasizing both his authority and inspiration was a useful way to quiet concerns over how he deployed church funds.

If this line of reasoning is correct, then one would expect the hard-liner apostles to be leading the charge in increasing references to Nelson, emphasizing ecclesiastical authority over personal relationships with the divine. This can be clearly seen by graphing the number of times each speaker mentioned Nelson versus Jesus/Christ/Savior in Nelson's presidency (Figure 3). The centrist apostles Ballard, Gong, Uchtdorf, and Holland all mentioned Jesus more

than 10 times for every one mention of Nelson, while authoritarians like Oaks, Rasband, Cook, and Andersen were well below that ratio.[8]

To a greater or lesser extent, most of the other six trends can be seen as attempts to decrease tensions between Mormon beliefs and those of external society. The decreasing frequency of anti-LGBT rhetoric, mid-century models of home and family, authoritarian control, specific discussion of sins (especially non-payment of tithing), and a cosmic force of evil in Satan run in parallel with an increasing emphasis on the blessings of gospel living, healing, overcoming small-scale obstacles, and finding deep meaning. The decline in references to family relationships and the Family Proclamation may indicate the leadership is belatedly conceding defeat in this battle of the culture wars. Certainly, these changes make it easier to accommodate (if not embrace) egalitarian ideals and a pluralistic worldview, addressing challenge #2.

However, it can also be seen as a continuation of policies that gelled during the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics. By deliberately branding themselves as exponents of eternal families and joyful living, church representatives could portray the journalists who accused the church of hoarding money or wrote about Mountain Meadows as bad guests. For example, Kenneth Woodward's *Newsweek* article on LDS finances was seen as the biggest church news event of 1982, but a similar article discussing far larger corporate holdings with even better research passed with barely any notice at all in 2002 (Stathis 1982; Shipps 2003). Thus, the change in emphasis from hierarchical obedience to the blessings of discipleship might have been a way to neutralize challenges #1 and #3, while making space for challenge #2.

Leadership is unwilling to abandon all claims of having the unique power to save. Many institutions promise a better life through their teachings, but Mormonism's unique offers of temple covenants and a living prophet are still seen as positive selling points. Taken together, this may explain why temples, covenants, and the prophet became the dominant points of emphasis in

[8] Labels like "centrist" and "authoritarian" are inevitably reductive, especially in a religious context where all apostles affirm core doctrines and institutional authority. Nonetheless, distinctions within LDS leadership rhetoric are evident and can be usefully framed in terms of what Armand Mauss called the oscillation between retrenchment and assimilation (Mauss 1994)—an internal LDS dynamic similar to the broader "orthodoxy-progressivism axis" described in James Davison Hunter's 1991 book *Culture Wars*. In this framework, some apostles emphasize themes consistent with a *boundary-maintaining orientation*: hierarchical obedience, prophetic infallibility, traditional family roles, and rhetorical vigilance against perceived doctrinal dilution. Others, while doctrinally orthodox, display a greater openness to psychological, academic, or pastoral modes of discourse and tend to frame gospel living in terms of growth, healing, and personal meaning.

General Conference during Nelson's presidency. These are the last remaining acceptable differences with broader US society that can keep the faithful stalwart and attract the attention of potential converts. Put another way, following Nelson and making temple covenants can preserve an appropriate level of distinctive tension with the wider culture, while other approaches—clinging to counter-scientific racist interpretations of scripture, sexist and/or anti-LGBT political interference, and maintaining huge cash reserves—have created too much.

Increasing emphasis on covenants, prophetic primacy, and correct naming represents a subtle reconfiguration of General Conference's long-standing reliance on transcendence rhetoric. Using Rosabeth Kanter (1972) as a frame, Shepherd and Shepherd (1984, chs. 5–6) argue that every generation of LDS leaders since the 1830s has emphasized transcendence more than any of the other five mechanisms of religious commitment (sacrifice, investment, renunciation, communion, and mortification), at times more than the other five combined. Yet transcendence has performed different functions across historical periods. During the crises of the nineteenth century, lexemes such as "God's guidance," "the one true church," "chosen people," "restoration," "priesthood authority," "Joseph Smith," and "last days" served to justify reversals, anchor authority in a mythic past and destiny, and stabilize leadership under extreme external pressure. As Mormonism accommodated to American society in the twentieth century, shared experiential language ("testimony," "sacrament," and "miracles") increasingly replaced ethnic or communal distinctiveness as the primary binding force. As the Shepherds observe, "control…emerges as the paramount commitment concern, but it is not ultimately control through coercive means resulting in mere outward conformity.… Rather, it is the control of ultimate meanings" (142–43).

Consistent with this account, my quantitative analysis shows that under Nelson, overt markers of coercive authority (priesthood offices, obedience, worthiness, and juridical obligation) declined sharply even as transcendence-linked language intensified, suggesting a redistribution of control from institutional command to internalized meaning. I argue that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this control of meaning has continued to migrate inward. As overt mortification and sacrifice became less feasible in a global church, Hinckley articulated an affable and humanizing transcendence, Monson a pastoral and narrative transcendence, and Nelson a more procedural form of transcendence—abstract, covenant-centered, and leader-refer-

ential, yet notably decoupled from explicit hierarchical or coercive authority language. Whether this rhetorical posture persists under future leadership remains an open question, but its appeal lies in the fact that transcendence, more than any other commitment mechanism, is uniquely scalable in a large, diverse, and increasingly global religious institution.

The Shepherds also build on the work of Peter Berger (esp. *The Sacred Canopy*) to argue that growing religions inevitably bend to the pressure of secularization to de-emphasize their most extreme supernatural claims and place-specific myths to appeal to a worldwide audience. They see this trend as intensifying from 1980–2009 (Shepherd and Shepherd 2015, 214–218). At first glance, several Nelson-era shifts appear to diverge from standard accommodation models, particularly the decline in family-centered rhetoric and the resurgence of eschatological language. However, high-salience identity markers—such as family respectability—are often amplified during periods of cultural contestation, then strategically de-emphasized once institutional equilibrium is restored. Similarly, increases in Second Coming references under Nelson reflect not renewed millenarian tension but the routinization of eschatological urgency into a motivational, non-disruptive form compatible with bureaucratic stability. Across domains, Nelson-era rhetoric exhibits not retrenchment or liberalization but a redistribution of symbolic labor. Contested metaphysical claims are softened, totemic markers are retired once successful, and authority is increasingly grounded in procedural revelation rather than cultural signaling.

A Model for Change Under Hierarchy

It is worth noting that the church has been slow to abandon an authoritarian model. Even with the egalitarian language shifts, it still clings to an all-male and rigid hierarchy with few (if any) checks and balances. The changes during Nelson's tenure seemed to have come about due to a general unwillingness of members to simply conform to the orders of church leaders. For example, most members do not have as many children as possible, mostly let women work outside the home, tolerate those who support LGBT marriage, and so forth. Such quiet obstruction is broad-based enough to make formal discipline of individual dissidents difficult. Leaders are therefore working harder to convince members of the rightness and blessings of conforming rather than simply ordering them to do so. If my thesis is correct that the rhetorical shifts noted above represent a persuasive rather than commanding mode, it supports the thesis that members do not uniformly follow the prophet like autom-

atons as assumed in some previous scholarship. In light of the above findings, scholars are right to criticize that viewpoint as overly reductive (Dunstan and Hawvermale 2023).

This may help further explain the exceptional use of Nelson's name in recent rhetoric. Sara Patterson's argument that church leaders primarily see themselves as conservators of a purity system has been criticized as overly credulous of their rhetoric, since it is a matter of historical fact that leaders have changed nearly every major doctrine from its original, putatively "pure" form as delivered from the mouth of God to Joseph Smith (Patterson 2023; Rees 2024; Patterson et al. 2023). A resolution to this paradox is that leaders are not concerned about doctrinal purity *per se,* though they may occasionally assert that they are (Kirkland 1998). Rather, they wish to maintain the pure authority to determine what is the official doctrine or "operative truth" without challenges from historians or reformers (Mauss 1998). As it becomes less possible to maintain that doctrine should be followed because it has remained unchanged since the beginning of the church, it becomes foundational to re-emphasize that the prophet is the only person authorized to determine what is truth.

To be fair, lockstep obedience may have been more common in the past. Merina Smith, building on work by Lawrence Foster and others, has studied how early Mormons moved from deep moral repugnance to the idea of polygamy to incorporating it into their self-identity to the point of being willing to fight the US military for it (Smith 2011, 2013; Walker 1982; Foster 2003, 1981, 1998). In her model, leaders were able to shift members from moral outrage to self-identity because of three factors:

1. Great social and spiritual revolution in the wider world primed converts to reject contemporary non-LDS society as fallen from the good old ways.

2. Converts believed the Second Coming was imminent and unusual doctrines were therefore about to come forth.

3. Converts lived in an isolated community whose leaders modeled these doctrines through personal example.

She adds that authority alone was not enough: while Joseph Smith was able to convince his first 13 wives to marry him (up through Mary Lightner) by claiming that his own personal righteousness would assure their salvation, this argument failed to convince Sarah C. Kimball and Rachel Ivins. And when he extended the practice to other men, such arguments did not persuade Martha

Brotherton to marry Brigham Young and nearly drove Vilate to divorce Heber C. Kimball. Records of subsequent proposals included not just assertions of the proposer's authority and righteousness but also a wider theological framework along with the priming of future wives by approaching them through friends or family members who were already polygamists.

To the extent that Smith is correct—that rejection of wider society, millenarian preoccupation, and positive influential role models are necessary for members to accept doctrines they initially find morally distasteful—it may explain why leaders have been unable to achieve the same degree of conformity in the last 50 years as they did in the first century of church history. The General Conference audience no longer lives in isolated communities, no longer views wider society as irredeemably corrupt, and is not excessively preoccupied with the world's imminent destruction in the Second Coming of Jesus—at least, not to the same extent as the early Saints (Hodges 2013). As a result, control has been diminishing. Despite leaders' exceptionally strong anti-birth control rhetoric in the twentieth century, Mormons have always exercised some amount of family planning. Although they had roughly 1.5 more children per family than US national averages from 1850 to 1970, their fertility has remained well below theoretical limits (Bush 1976). Moreover, family size is rarely mentioned today even though the number of children of record per 1000 members is now well below the US fertility rate.[9] Similarly, mothers working outside the home was routinely condemned up until early in Hinckley's tenure, but it has faded from conference talks as it has become widespread even among the faithful (Riess 2019).

This has not stopped speakers from attempting to reassert control through Smith's three tactics. In the October 2024 Conference, for example, 10 of the 35 speakers discussed the depravity of the world, though one (Buckland) interrupted his denunciation to tell a positive story of interfaith collaboration, and Oaks delivered a plea for finding common ground with those outside the church. Similarly, although allusions to the Second Coming more than doubled under Nelson, they remain rare. Notably, his inaugural talk as president ended with the apocalyptic warning "in coming days, it will not be possible to

[9] The US fertility rate declined from a local high of ~24 births per 1000 in the mid-1950s to ~15 in 1972, stabilized near that mark until 2007 (14.3) and then resumed its descent, crossing below 10 in 2022 (National Vital Statistics System, cdc.gov/nchs/nvvss/births.htm). The number of LDS children of record per 1000 members was above 20 every year for which data are available prior to 1984 but quickly dropped below 10 by 1992 and has been between 5 and 6 every year since 2019 except for a COVID-related outlier of 3.9 in 2020 (compiled from April conference reports).

survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost" (Nelson 2018). Framing a life-or-death outcome as depending on something as imprecise as feeling the "constant influence of the Holy Ghost" can leave listeners with a sense of anxiety, like that felt by early Saints about the imminent Second Coming. Additionally, because the "influence of the Holy Ghost" is not inherently tied to any one specific behavior or action, it grants leaders significant flexibility in defining what behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes must be adhered to if one is to "survive spiritually." In this context, the statement serves both as a call to deeper spiritual commitment and as a mechanism for reinforcing reliance on leadership for interpretation and guidance.

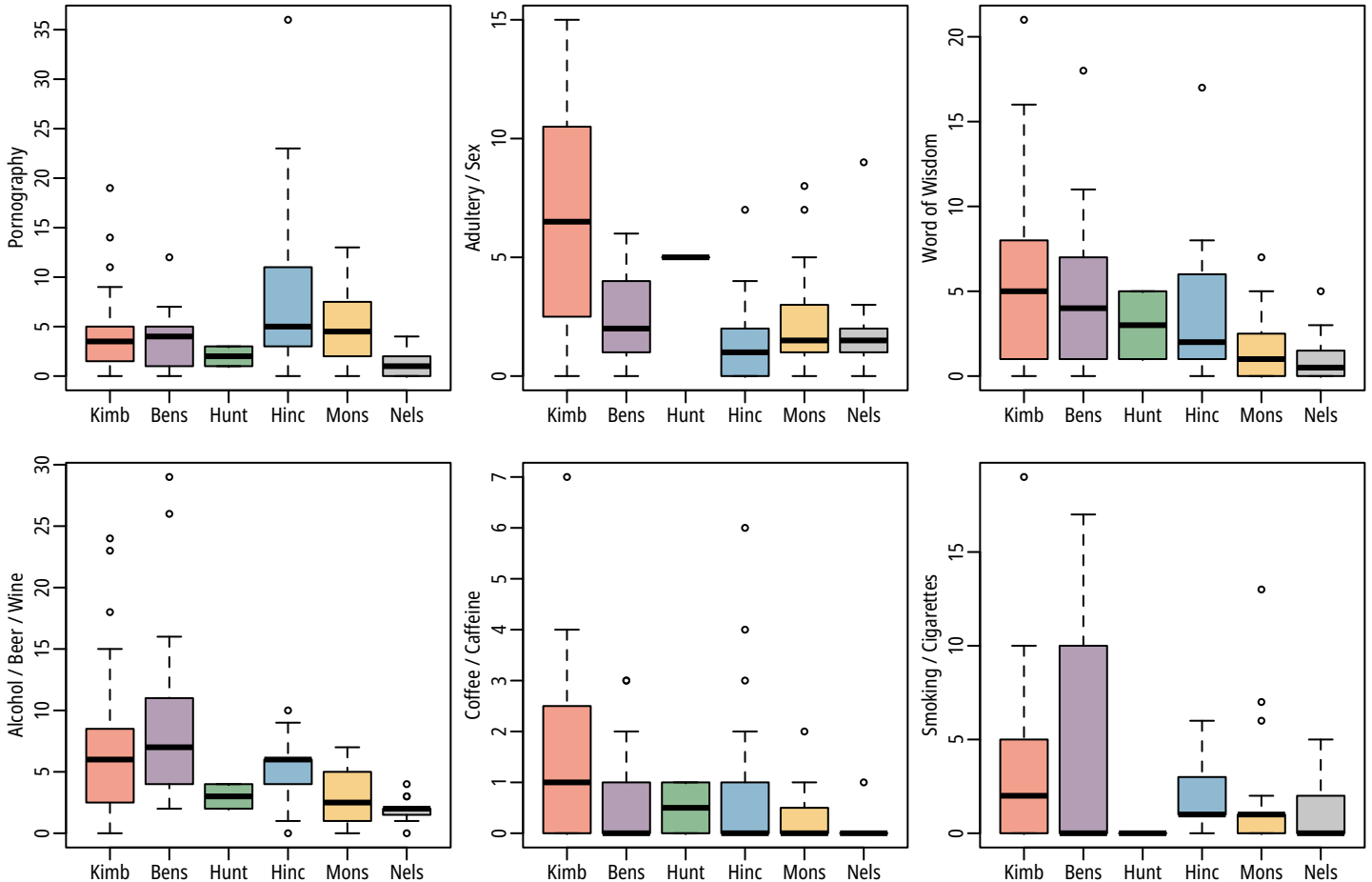
Limitations of This Study

This brings us to the shortcomings of this study. I relied heavily on word frequency, with inadequate analysis of the connotative meaning of these words. It is possible to use the same words to mean different things. For example, one speaker may discuss "belonging" as a way of feeling fully accepted, while another means members "belong" to the organization in the sense of being obligated to donate time, talent, and social capital to defend its doctrines and policies. The difference between the two would be invisible to stylometry, but is among the most spiritually fraught of the Mormon experience (Downing 2003; Properzi 2009). I suspect that the vocabulary shifts noted above are larger than contextual or tone-valence shifts; in other words, speakers have changed *how* they talk about things more than *what* they are talking about to those with ears to hear. An informal poll of 86 LDS scholars conducted by the author shows that while many had noticed the sharp increase in references to Nelson (60%), temples (52%), covenants (65%), and the Gathering of Israel (15%, likely higher had this not been added late to the survey), few had noticed the increase in allusions to questioning (2%) or grace/mercy (1%). None noticed the increase in healing words, though this was the only trend I am aware of another scholar independently studying and reporting under Nelson (Givens and Hamaker 2024). By the same token, 15% thought "obedience" words had increased, rather than the observed decrease. Even in Nelson's quote above, he used terms like "guiding" and "comforting" in a sentence that threatened the very existence of the audience, making it questionable how guided or comforted his hearers would feel.

This study has also focused exclusively on the rank-and-file members as the audience for General Conference sermons. However, self-presentation theory argues that many talks are delivered to those seated behind the speaker as much as to those seated in front; i.e., some speakers are signaling trustworthiness and upward mobility to the leadership more than fostering devotion in the membership (Goffman 1959, ch. 3). Concluding a talk by bearing testimony of basic LDS doctrines and declaring confidence in the current prophet-president can be seen as affirming loyalty to superiors as much as reassuring members. Separating which talks, or paragraphs within talks, are meant for leaders versus members is a tricky proposition which I did not attempt; such a study awaits future researchers.

It remains to be seen if the shift to a more positive, less authoritarian vocabulary will be sustained by Nelson's successors as they try to halt decades of decelerating church growth. Tactics such as emphasizing the joyful fruits of gospel living, the unique blessings of LDS temples, and the guidance of living prophets all seem to be moving the church in an "assimilating" direction. But if these prove ineffective, leadership may revert to a firmer "retrenchment" approach as employed under Benson and Hinckley (Mauss 1994). Indeed, while Mauss himself saw much of Monson's tenure as an assimilation phase (Mauss 2011), shortly after his 2011 article the pendulum began swinging back the other way on some issues with the excommunication of feminist Kate Kelly

Figure 23. *Appendix*



(2014) and a policy of refusing baptism to the children of homosexual couples (2015, reversed in 2019). While the church maintained its *rapprochement* with scholars through this social retrenchment, Brigham Young University is often a bellwether for changes of attitude toward the academy. The early 2020s saw indications that harder lines were being drawn there, perhaps in preparation for a change to the presidency of traditionally inflexible Dallin H. Oaks (Stack 2022, 2025; Monson 2025). Much of the LDS Church's future influence will depend on how successfully it can delicately navigate the covenant path between positive, inclusive rhetoric and apocalyptic moral absolutism.

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