What if J. Golden Kimball had his own political talk show?

MEET ELDER BECK

By Alan Rex Mitchell

MORALITY ON THE AIRWAVES

ABOUT ONCE A YEAR, SPORTS TALK SHOW HOST Jim Rome reluctantly repeats a personal story to his listeners in the “jungle.” Rome had left home in Los Angeles to attend college in Santa Barbara and returned some months later to find all three family dogs missing. His mother wouldn’t talk about it. His father explained that the oldest dog was getting up in years and had to be taken to the vet to be put down. His father didn’t explain why the other two dogs had gone along for the ride. Jim was devastated and has never gotten over it. The story has become a part of the jungle lore known as the Rome Family Dog Holocaust. It tells us how not to behave.

At their core, radio talk shows are about right and wrong. For commuters and drivers of heavy equipment, daytime talk radio helps keep the mind active as hosts display their unusual talent to point out the absurdities of life against a backdrop of morality. Dr. Laura Schlesinger is the most up-front about preaching morality; she even closes her show with the edict, “Do the right thing.”

Since Rush Limbaugh’s revival of talk radio in the late 1980s, several liberal talk show hosts have tried to match Rush’s popularity but have failed every time. The root of their failure is the lack of a moral foundation that a talk radio host must have to be effective. If there is no good, there is no evil. And if there is no evil to click our tongues or laugh at . . . well, what fun is that?

And listening is about having fun. We seem to never tire of such topics as:

- Another reason to hate Heidi Klum
- Craziest Hollywood Moms
- If Sting is smart, he won’t stand so close to me.

Now don’t call Glenn Beck an uptight xenophobic, homophobic, hollywo-phobic hater. After all, those topics were not addressed by Beck, but by radio host newcomer (and well-heel Mormon performer) Donny Osmond.

Listeners grow tired of a host advancing a give-me-more political agenda (welfare, government spending, wealth-redistribution, immigration amnesty, tort awards, feminism, homosexual rights). They don’t want to listen to a know-it-all saying the government should do more. It sounds too much like a whine. They don’t want to hear that complex problems require complex solutions. They know all problems can become complex, and getting hung up on that just prolongs the solution. They need someone or something to judge. They want a fixed moral compass informing that judgment. They can forgive later.

GLENN BECK AS A BORN-AGAIN MORALIST

GLENN BECK IS a media success because of his moral view of the world, enhanced by his miraculous conversion—not just to Mormonism, but to a conviction that righteousness is adherence to natural law. He lives the born-again mantra of a man who, with God’s help, turned his life around. He makes no secret that he is on his second marriage and that his divorce resulted from his alcoholism and drug addiction. He richly describes the squalor when he hit rock bottom, sometimes relishing in it. Being a recovering alcoholic, he can sound more forgiving but also more indicting of those who haven’t had their come-to-Jesus moment. He doesn’t care if people have done wrong, only if they have changed—he said as much in a recent commentary about actor Robert Downey, Jr.

It seems appropriate that Beck’s religious conversion was to the Mormon faith—it is hard to imagine his having the same patriotic appeal and moral ecumenicalism (for lack of a better word) had he become Southern Baptist, Buddhist, or Jehovah’s Witness. Southern Baptists don’t seem to cut other religions much slack, Buddhists are not much into change, and Witnesses aren’t patriotic. Mormonism is all three and doesn’t give up on individual salvation in this or the next life. Mormonism, correctly understood, doesn’t in-
spire hatred for other people or religions.

MORMONISM TAUGHT BY BECK

HOW DOES BECK’S Mormonism permeate his radio and television broadcasts? Does the gospel and Mormon doctrine constitute an unseen basis for the morality he espouses? And do his listeners notice? Let’s look at a few of the Mormon principles he advocates:

1. *Store food and necessities.* Beck advises gradual food storage to prepare for the coming apocalyptic storm, as LDS General Authorities also counsel.

2. *Pay tithing, and give to charity.* Beck encourages listeners to tithe their income and give to charity. He helps friend Jon Huntsman Sr., the millionaire philanthropist who funds the Huntsman Cancer Research Center at the University of Utah, and promotes other charities.

3. *Prayer.* Beck encourages listeners to pray more than even hosts do on Christian radio stations. He talks about the power of prayer in his life and gives air time to callers—most of whom are not LDS—relating their stories of the power of prayer. Even during his commercial endorsements, Beck advises listeners to pray about the product to see if it is right for them.

4. *Freedom and free will.* God told Enoch that “In the day I created them and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency,” (Moses 7:32). He often tells the story of Satan’s wanting to destroy man’s agency. Beck wants to ensure people preserve their agency against the pressure of larger government. Although Beck’s political views are conservative, he has a libertarian streak, considering it his God-given right to not answer all the questions on the 2010 census. He speaks out for the freedom to fail, using his own experience to emphasize that failure is another beginning of opportunity.

5. *The atonement of Jesus Christ.* When Beck talks about hitting rock bottom and the conversion that brought him back out, he practically starts singing “Amazing Grace.” He frequently invokes the atonement as a way to overcome personal trials.

6. *Personal responsibility.* Beck stresses that each individual is responsible to participate in the gift of redemption, a sound Mormon teaching. He once said “men will be punished for their own sins” and not their fathers’ sins. And he explains that on judgment day, God will not ask if your government cared for the poor but if you cared for the poor.

7. *The U.S. Constitution is divinely inspired.* Beck repeatedly says so, agreeing with D&C 101:79–80. He encourages listeners to contemplate the Constitution as a contract between the government and free men that limits the power and scope of government. He asserts that several powers have been wrongly seized, such as Presidents declaring war, the Supreme Court conjuring special rights, and Congress passing laws to limit free speech. In the debate over a living Constitution whose interpretation is adaptable (proponents include Thurgood Marshall and Lawrence Tribe), Beck sides with those favoring adhering to strict original intent (William Rehnquist, Robert Bork, and Antonin Scalia). He promotes American exceptionalism—the belief that America stands for the best principles in this age. He sincerely wishes for an “American Renewal”—the title of his touring show due in Salt Lake City in July 2010.

8. *The Constitution will hang by a thread (and the elders will save it).* Beck never uses those precise words, but he contends that the U.S. has changed radically from a republic with a constitutional framework into a progressive European-style nanny state. The statement about the Constitution hanging by a thread was first attributed to Joseph Smith and should not be discounted just because it was included in the discredited White Horse Prophecy; it was well known and quoted by Brigham Young, John Taylor, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Hyde, Jediah M. Grant, and George Q. Cannon. It was repeated by Melvin J. Ballard, J. Reuben Clark, Ezra T. Benson, Harold B. Lee, and L. Tom Perry.

9. *Non-violence.* To answer recent criticism of himself and the Tea Party movement he helped initiate, Beck has daily called for restraint among protesters.

10. *Miracles.* Lately, Beck has been promising miracles to those who get their lives in order, exercise faith in fighting for civic and personal liberties, and protest big government. He believes in a “God of miracles” (Mormon 9:10) who inspired the American Revolution and who will help the “Second Revolution” today.

11. *The last days.* Beck often speculates about future worst-case scenarios preceding the Second Coming, for example, the Israeli problem. He doesn’t scare audiences by quoting modern scriptural prophecies but ruminates about government overspending, excessive debt, perfect storms, and a
constitutional crisis that will bring about social unrest, riots, chaos, and leaving the state of Israel undefended.

12. *The family is the basis of society.* He admonishes listeners to teach their children, and he often shares the insights he gains from fatherhood and marriage. He encourages extended families to pull together during trying times.

13. *Service and leadership.* Beck adheres to the non-paid leadership ethic of King Benjamin, who provided for his own livelihood through manual labor while he presided over the Nephite kingdom (Mosiah 2:12–14), and who voluntary resigned his office (Mosiah 2:29). Beck echoes Benjamin in two ways: first, in calling to remove the burden of taxation to enable citizens to practice charitable giving, and second, in preaching humility that inspires non-judgmental giving (Mosiah 4:14–27).

Clearly, Beck is well versed in *Provision Living* principles and the *Gospel Principles* manual.

**BECK THE MISSIONARY**

LIKE IT OR not, Glenn Beck is a missionary. Doubtless some have joined the Church because of knowing Glenn Beck. He tells his conversion story on the DVD *Glenn Beck—an Unlikely Mormon.* An unofficial website GlennBeckMormon.com directs inquirers to Church-sponsored websites.

Occasionally Beck quotes or paraphrases scripture though he doesn’t distinguish (or doesn’t know) whether the origin of the scripture is ancient or modern. Perhaps he fears preaching Mormonism outright. This stealth preaching style was suggested by Brigham Young.

You know that I have said that, if it were now my calling to go and preach the Gospel, I could make as many converts as I ever did; for I would go in such a manner that the bitterly prejudiced would have to labor hard to find out that I was a “Mormon,” until I had induced them to love the truth. Then they would say, “If that is ‘Mormonism,’ I want it.”

Of course, LDS listeners’ ears will prick up when Beck says something like, “Men are that they might have joy.” Occasionally he sounds like a local bishop, only less reserved and more imaginative. Sometimes he veers from acceptable Mormon speech with the exclamations “Good Lord” and “Sweet Jesus,” or with mild vulgarities: “damn,” “fat ass,” “flying crap,” “screw the damn fish,” or “go to hell.” Such language might make his bishop uncomfortable—it certainly does me, but only because he is LDS; if he were Lutheran, I wouldn’t give a damn. Beck has even pondered aloud what LDS Church leadership thinks of him, and of course, what God may say to him and his fellow clowns at the judgment bar.

Do non-Mormon listeners notice the Mormonism? Probably only a small fraction of it. To his larger non-Mormon audience, Beck is a stealth missionary in his role of moral judge and jester. Remember, Dr. Laura doesn’t say she’s giving her callers advice based on Jewish law. Most listeners will learn the context and moral personality of the host and take their advice and commentary with a grain of salt. Perhaps Dr. Laura has led a handful of listeners to Orthodox Judaism, but more important she has inspired millions to act morally. The same goes for Beck, who has inspired millions to value freedom, prepare for the coming calamities, and resist government benevolence.

What most impresses listeners about Glenn Beck is his “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!” attitude. He is much like the sports talking head Charles Barkley. Some say Sir Charles has no filter between his thoughts and words—he would say the same thing whether on or off camera. Beck is not quite 100 percent on the Barkley scale, but probably a healthy 92—and that adds to his entertainment value. When he steps over the line, he is quick to apologize, as he did recently for critical comments about President Obama’s daughter.

Besides, Beck and Barkley give the impression, like the boxer Mohammed Ali, that though they have opponents and may mock them to hype a fight, they don’t really hate them. Beck was surprised when his opponent Van Jones publicly declared that he loves his brother Glenn Beck and there is nothing that Beck can do about it. Beck had thought the
fight was only about Van Jones' statist ideas—and not about liking the man. Why shouldn't he?

That ingenuousness lets Beck come out with guns blazing. For politically correct, measured, political discourse from the conservative right, there is always Mitt Romney. Mitt would never tell voters that an economic calamity is ahead. Mitt would never cuss on-camera. Mitt would never admit he'd been wrong in the past. Beck does all of that. He's much like nineteenth-century Mormonism—quaint, peculiar, ostracized, vocal—and certain that he has a mission from the Lord.

"ALL THOSE MORMONS ARE THE SAME."

Some have attempted to tie Beck to Commie-hating Mormons of an earlier generation in order to condemn him by association. Biographer Alexander Zaichik links him to Cleon Skousen and Ezra Taft Benson. Others believe that conservatism first attracted Beck to Mormonism, not vice versa, reasoning that Mormonism doesn't have a monopoly on conservatism. Zaichik's forthcoming unauthorized biography will likely seek to tie Beck to a caricature of Mormonism (prudish, white, weird) thus injuring two birds with one stone. But Beck likes Skousen and Benson only for their ideas about the Constitution. He probably knows nothing about the misguided zeal that led to purported secret spy networks at BYU. I suppose we could always ask Beck: "Do you now, or have you ever, supported spying networks to expose Communists at religious institutions of higher learning?"

Zaichik's caricature of Beck as a latter-day Joe McCarthy is unfair because although he was correct in his assertion that communists existed in the State Department, McCarthy brought specious accusations. In contrast, Glenn Beck's calling out of self-proclaimed communist Van Jones was specific, accurate, and successful.

Zaichik's guilt-by-association ploy should make us all nervous. If everyone who ever quoted Ezra Taft Benson is suspect, then virtually all Mormons over 35 are condemned, including some of us who especially liked Benson's conference talk against pride because we could bash others with it. (Not Benson's intent, of course.)

Attempts to discredit Beck through association with Mormonism may please liberals who already disapprove of conservatives and Mormons, but they're likely to backfire among Beck's predominantly Christian conservative listeners with libertarian sympathies. They have common political ground with this Mormon guy and will likely take his side when attacked by the left. In what may be a great breakthrough for Mormon acceptance, Jerry Falwell, Jr., invited Glenn Beck to give the commencement address at the religiously conservative Liberty University, where Beck received an honorary doctorate of letters. Most graduates found his speech inspiring, uplifting, and not at all controversial, as he encouraged them to exercise courage, keep the faith, and remain humble and close to God. While not trying to convince anyone of the Restoration, he told of his life-changing conversion through the atonement of Christ. If a Mormon can witness for Jesus like Beck does, what are his Christian brethren to think?

Also fascinating is how he tearfully pleads with listeners to wake up and see the fragility of America. Jewish mothers may use guilt, but this Mormon bawls. Even Van Jones publicly praised Beck's family values and his ability as a heterosexual man to weep in public. Beck's tears bring to mind Anne Osborn Poelmans story about her first sacrament meeting where she felt the spirit so strongly she began to cry uncontrollably and was needlessly embarrassed. She remarked that she hadn't then known that a ward can't make it through a monthly testimony meeting without a half box of tissues. Perhaps Van Jones and Jerry Falwell, Jr. are both im-

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pressed with the weeping man of Mormonism. (Apologies to Eugene England).

GLENN BECK HATES JESUS?

WHEN BECK SUGGESTED members withdraw from churches that preach government-run social justice, the response of conservative Christian radio was peculiar. While agreeing with his stance that charity should not be a governmental function, many Christian radio hosts noted that Beck was a Mormon (hence non-Christian), and that Beck's debating partner, Bill O'Reilly, was a Catholic (a Christian who didn't get it). Praising Beck while condemning his Mormonism, these hosts put their listeners in the position of agreeing with Beck's Mormon understanding of individual liberty and free choice. Maybe conservative Christian listeners will eventually resolve that tension in Mormon-friendly terms.

Debate about social justice in churches has been going on for years, but Time magazine saw controversy and wrote, “Glenn Beck hates Jesus.” President Obama's spiritual advisor Jim Wallis and others quickly attacked Beck for taking sides in a century-old debate while giving the impression that the debate had never occurred. Scott Baker of Breitbart TV described an interview with Wallis:

“If there's anybody in America who really does know exactly what Glenn Beck is talking about, it would be Jim Wallis. He knows that for a century there's been debates in Christianity about social gospels and personal gospels and his issues have been very divisive within the church. And so for him to come out and say this is what Glenn Beck is speaking against (caring for your neighbor and loving your neighbor as yourself), is absolute bull.”

Baker compelled Wallis to acknowledge the ongoing debate among the Plymouth Brethren with whom he had grown up. Baker then accused Wallis of bearing false witness for not putting Beck's words in the context of those debates. Three times Wallis “wouldn’t come to,” and countered that Beck has offended people and needs to apologize.

To link Beck to the John Birch Society is probably moot. People in the 60s and 70s easily ridiculed the Society as a bunch of fear-mongering anti-communists. After all, Birchers believed the United Nations was a joke, the Soviet Union was oppressive and evil, China would be our future opponent, and runaway government spending would ruin the US economy. Now ten years into the new millennium, it seems history has Birch-slapped us.

To paint Beck as a racist, hate-monger, and Jesus-hater is to take some statements out of context and ignore the good he has done, his humility, and his warning voice. The late President Hinckley said:

To highlight the mistakes and gloss over the greater good is to draw a caricature. Caricatures are amusing, but they are often ugly and dishonest. A man may have a wart on his cheek and still have a face of beauty and strength, but if the wart is emphasized unduly in relation to his other features, the portrait is lacking in integrity.

Criticizing Beck's caricature is complicated by the caricature's being Mormon. Because religious conservatives and libertarians already like him, denigrating Beck will likely be successful only among those leftists who hate Mormonism already.

So what can you do if Beck's style and politics grate on you? You could imagine he is the politically incorrect J. Golden Kimball of our century and laugh along. Besides, what if someone joins the Church because of Gladys Knight's popularity? Would you say to the new convert, “I think her music sucks ever since she left the Pips?” Probably not. So cut Beck a little slack.

Like a young zealous missionary, Brother Beck is far from perfect; but because he is so forthcoming with his emotions, spirituality, and mortal mistakes, people easily relate to him, criticize him, and love him. The man is reminiscent of the Lord’s estimation of Dr. Faust in the play by Goethe, “Es irrt der Mensch so lang er strebt.” Roughly translated: “Glenn Beck is bound to screw up occasionally as he progresses.”

NOTES

2. The White Horse Prophecy was disavowed by the Mitt Romney presidential campaign in 2008, along with the notion that Mitt was the Mormon who would ride the white horse to save America.