

# What's in a Name?

## The Growing Focus on Jesus Christ (by Name) since 2000 in General Conference Talks

*Grant Madsen and Joseph Corey*

In the last talk of the Sunday morning session of the October 2018 general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter “the Church”), President Russell M. Nelson felt “compelled to discuss . . . a matter of great importance.” He recognized that nicknames such as “Mormon Church” or “LDS Church” had a certain acceptance and utility, particularly in a world dominated by social media. Still, he called on members to rely on the full and proper name of the Church moving forward. “What’s in a name or, in this case, a nickname?” President Nelson asked. “When it comes to nicknames of the Church . . . the most important thing *in* those names is the *absence* of the Savior’s name.”<sup>1</sup>

Of all the talks given that October’s conference, this talk by President Nelson “generated the most buzz on social media.”<sup>2</sup> The local press responded with a bit of surprise at President Nelson’s “course correction.”<sup>3</sup> After all, the Church itself had “previously embraced and promoted the term Mormon, including with a 2014 documentary about its members called ‘Meet the Mormons.’”<sup>4</sup> Writing for *Religion News*

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1. Russell M. Nelson, “The Correct Name of the Church,” *Ensign* 48, no. 11 (November 2018): 87–88, italics original.

2. Peggy Fletcher Stack, Scott D. Pierce, and David Noyce, “Members ‘Offend’ Jesus and Please the Devil When They Use the Term ‘Mormon,’ President Nelson Says,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2018/10/07/members-offend-jesus/>.

3. Nelson, “Correct Name of the Church,” 87.

4. Brady McCombs, “Mormon No More: Tabernacle Choir Renamed in Big Church Shift,” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 5, 2018, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2018/oct/05/mormon-no-more-tabernacle-choir-renamed-in-big-chu/>.

*Service*, Jana Riess noted that “President Nelson is not only moving in a different direction, but he also hinted that the old direction may have been a ‘major victory for Satan.’” Such a sudden “180-degree turn . . . is almost unheard of in modern Mormonism, where change happens glacially and current leaders simply don’t overturn the legacy of deceased ones.”<sup>5</sup> When seen from the vantage of data science, however, President Nelson’s talk looks less like a departure and more like the culmination of a longer trend among Church leaders—particularly in their general conference talks—to not only emphasize the Savior but to call him by his name. As we will show below, since 2000, Church leaders have more than tripled their mentions of Jesus Christ by name.

Scholars across disciplines, including scholars interested in Church history and theology, have found increasing utility in using the power of computers to analyze large sets of linguistic data.<sup>6</sup> This approach goes by different names depending on the scholarly field and analysis: corpus linguistics, natural language processing, computational linguistics, digital humanities, digital history, word mining, and data science, to name a few. Each approach follows a similar methodology: it leverages computing power to go through millions or billions of words found in documents that have some logical connection (for example, all Supreme Court opinions or all Amazon reviews of a particular product). These documents collectively are referred to as a *corpus*, and scholars working in this field use computers to find patterns that might otherwise elude the human eye or prove too laborious to investigate manually.

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5. Jana Riess, “Why ‘Mormon’ Is Now a Four-Letter Word and Other General Conference Takeaways,” *Religion News Services*, October 8, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/10/08/why-mormon-is-now-a-four-letter-word-and-other-general-conference-takeaways/>.

6. Among works that use data science on Church topics, see Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Early Mormonism and the Modern LDS Church*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016); Stephen Thomas Betts, “General Conference Talk’: Style Variation and the Styling of Identity in Latter-day Saint General Conference Oratory” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019); John Hilton III, Emily K. Hyde, and McKenna Grace Trussel, “The Teachings of Church Leaders Regarding the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ: 1852–2018,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 49–80; Nicholas J. Frederick, “‘Having Many Things to Write to You’: Biblical Intertextuality in Joseph Smith’s Two Colesville Letters,” *Journal of Mormon History* 47, no. 2 (April 2021): 23–47; Jonathan Stapley, “Invoking the Name of the Lord: A Quantitative Study,” *Journal of Mormon History* 47, no. 4 (October 2021): 1–21; and Quentin Spencer, “What Don’t The Prophets Say Anymore?: A Text Analysis of General Conference, 1942–2020” (paper presented at Sunstone Symposium, online, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTV8sQ4nTC0>.

Our project takes advantage of the LDS General Conference Corpus, a collection of over eleven thousand talks (comprising twenty-five million words) given since 1851.<sup>7</sup> Using this corpus, we tried to decipher any patterns in the use of the appellation *Jesus Christ*, including twenty-four recognized titles such as *Savior*, *Redeemer*, or *Lamb of God*. We could thus gather the total references to Jesus Christ even if the speaker did not use his proper name.<sup>8</sup> We were careful to also eliminate perfunctory uses of his name—for example, when speakers closed their talks in his full name, or the speaker performed official Church business and therefore used the name of the Church (such as the typical greeting to the “semiannual conference of The Church of . . .”). We did this because we wanted to understand the usage of Jesus Christ’s names and titles as Church leaders taught about him (rather than simply counting talks closed in his name or mentions of the name of the Church).<sup>9</sup>

Among the notable findings, we discovered a sharp increase in the usage of the name *Jesus, Christ*, and most especially *Jesus Christ* beginning at the turn of the twenty-first century (see fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> President Nelson’s talk, in other words, fits nicely within a trend begun during President Gordon B. Hinckley’s administration (March 1995–January 2008).

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7. LDS General Conference Corpus, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.

8. In a technical sense, *Jesus Christ* is both a name and a title. His name was Jesus (Yeshua) and his title Christ, the Anglicized version of Χριστός (which comes from the Hebrew word for Messiah, or, more literally, “anointed with oil”). For our purposes, we use *Jesus Christ* as a name, not a name and title, throughout this article, since *Christ* is generally considered part of Jesus’s name (including by President Nelson).

9. In fact, as Stapley points out, the practice of closing all talks “in the name of Jesus Christ” evolved over time and was standardized in our familiar usage only “in the latter half of the twentieth century.” Stapley, “Invoking the Name of the Lord,” 2.

10. To be sure that we make a fair comparison across the long span of this study, all totals have been normalized. To normalize a word count, we first get a total of all instances of a particular word (for example, *Lord*) uttered in conference during a particular year. We then divide that total by the number of all words spoken in conference for that year. We then multiply that percentage by 1,000,000. The result is the normalized count for that word and year.

Thus, and for example, if our graph suggests that speakers uttered the word *Lord* 4,000 times in a particular year’s conferences, that should be understood as 4,000 utterances per 1,000,000 spoken words. Linguists prefer to illustrate results per million because the very tiny percentages these investigations produce belie the importance of a content word’s frequency. We might be tempted to see a result of 0.4 percent for the word *Lord* as insignificant. Since, however, much of spoken English involves what are called “filler” words (articles, prepositions, pronouns, and so forth), a very few “content” words (nouns, for example) convey most of the meaning in any given sentence. As a result, most scholars show results per million words spoken (rather than one hundred, which would give a typical percentage). We have followed that practice here.

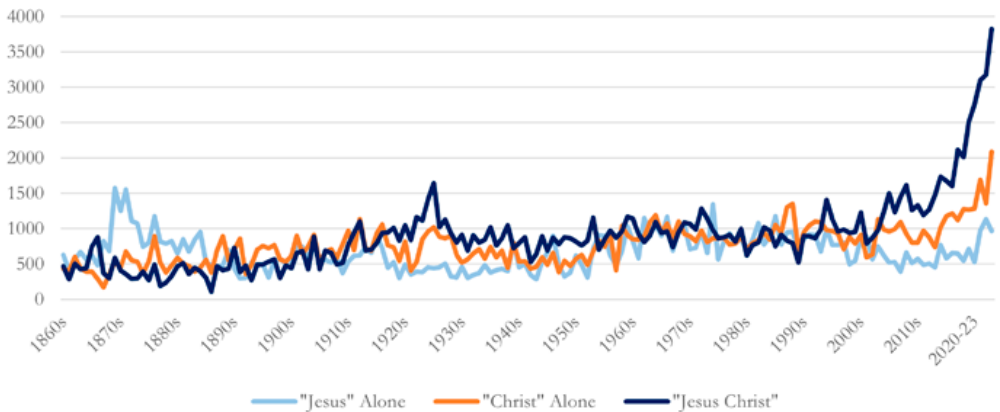


FIGURE 1. *Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ.*

When we looked more closely at the data, the turning point appears to be the April conference of 2003. Despite the fact that the Church had tried through the 1990s to emphasize its Christian *bona fides* (by, among other things, changing the font size of the name *Jesus Christ* in its official logo in 1995), general conference speakers did not necessarily reflect that emphasis on Jesus Christ (at least by name) in their talks (see fig. 2).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even after the the First Presidency issued a letter in March 2001 asking “members, news organization, and others to use the Church’s full and correct name—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—and to avoid use of the terms ‘Mormon Church’ or ‘LDS Church,’” talks that discussed Jesus Christ by name continued to decline.<sup>12</sup>

Then, two years later, the trend reversed. Since April 2002, general conference speakers have used the Lord’s name at a generally increasing rate (see fig. 3), doubling between 2002 and 2018, when President Nelson made the proper name of the Church a point of emphasis, and then nearly doubling again after that 2018 talk until April 2023, when we compiled this data.

11. See “New Logo Re-emphasizes Official Name of Church,” *Church News*, December 23, 1995, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/1995/12/23/23254586/new-logo-re-emphasizes-official-name-of-church>. For a brief sketch along these lines, see K. Shane Goodwin, “The History of the Name of the Savior’s Church: A Collaborative and Revelatory Process,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2019): 38–39. The gap between President Benson’s and President Hinckley’s tenure represents President Howard W. Hunter’s relatively short time as Prophet.

12. “Church Emphasizes Its Official Name,” *Ensign* 31, no. 5 (May 2001): 110.

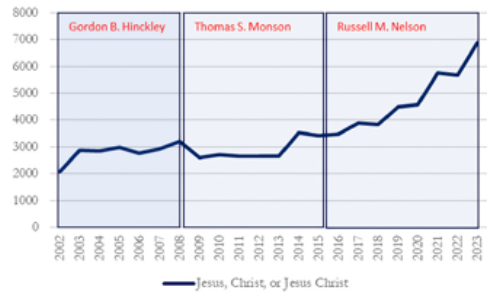
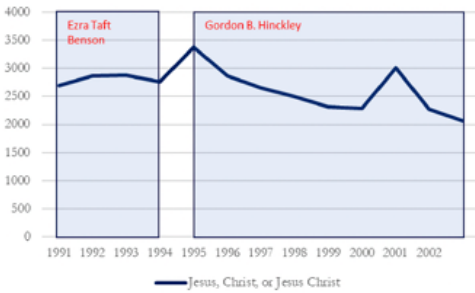


FIGURE 2. *Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ, 1991–2002.* FIGURE 3. *Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ, 2022–2023.*

Unfortunately, data science cannot tell us precisely why this shift occurred—whether instruction came from the prophet to conference speakers, or whether they (on their own) collectively felt inspired to make Jesus Christ a point of focus by name. Given the up and down of the graph line, though, we suspect the latter. On its surface, it would appear that conference speakers on their own and somewhat haltingly decided to name Jesus Christ in their talks more frequently after 2002—and that this trend continued right up until the moment President Nelson became President of the Church.

As often happens with computer analysis of large corpuses, curiosities also appear. To mention one in passing (and returning to fig. 1), we were intrigued to discover that early Church leaders preferred simply *Jesus* over *Christ* or *Jesus Christ* when speaking of the Savior. Consider, for example, two sentences with similar content: first, John Taylor’s 1869 sermon in which he said, “I want the doctrines that were promulgated by the *disciples of Jesus* on the day of Pentecost, through obedience to which men may gain the power and inspiration that were enjoyed by them, in accordance with the promises which Jesus had made”;<sup>13</sup> and then Elder Quentin L. Cook’s statement in 2015 that “as individuals, *disciples of Christ*, living in a hostile world that is literally in commotion, we can thrive and bloom if we are rooted in our love of the Savior and humbly follow His teachings.”<sup>14</sup> In both sentences, a leader of the Church

13. John Taylor, “Religious Conflict in the World—the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” Joseph Smith Foundation, *Journal of Discourses Online*, accessed December 18, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithfoundation.org/journalofdiscourses/speakers/john-taylor/religious-conflict-in-the-world-the-gospel-of-jesus-christ/>, italics added.

14. Quentin L. Cook, “The Lord Is My Light,” *Ensign* 45, no. 5 (May 2015): 63, italics added.

speaks of the Lord's disciples; however, it fit the style of the nineteenth-century speaker to say *Jesus*, whereas the twenty-first century speaker preferred *Christ*.<sup>15</sup>

Our research also shows that Church leaders have referred to Jesus Christ even more often by his many titles or roles, and like the usage of his proper name, these frequencies have also increased over the last two decades. We began this part of our study by relying on a list of “50 Names and Titles of Jesus Christ” provided by the Church as found in the Holy Bible.<sup>16</sup> After some analysis, we chose to remove a bit more than half of the titles because either (1) these titles (such as “Wonderful”) usually appeared in conference talks as an adjective, not as a title for Jesus Christ, or (2) some titles (such as “the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” [1 Pet. 2:25]) appeared very infrequently or not at all in conference talks. After eliminating terms that only occasionally act as titles or that rarely or never appear in the conference corpus, we settled on a list of twenty-four titles and names that appear at least a dozen times in the corpus and clearly refer to Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

As seen in figure 4, the title *Lord* appears by far the most often, although the gap has closed in the last decade, primarily due to a doubling in the usage of the term *Savior* in conference talks. Indeed, at the current rate, it could become the most preferred title within the decade, which suggests a subtle shift in the way Church leaders wish to emphasize Jesus Christ's relationship to Church members.

In figure 5, we show how usage of the term *Lord* compares with the names *Jesus*, *Christ*, or *Jesus Christ*. Here, we note that Church leaders have used the title *Lord* at a relatively consistent rate since the 1890s,

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15. The transition from *Jesus* to *Christ* is also a topic of academic investigation on the early Christian Church in the centuries after his death. As the generation that knew him passed away, the early Church also began to prefer the title *Christ* over the name *Jesus*. See, for example, Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Christ* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000). For similar results, see Spencer, “What Don't the Prophets Say Anymore?”

16. “50 Names and Titles of Jesus Christ,” Come unto Christ, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/comeuntochrist/believe/jesus/50-names-for-jesus>.

17. Our list of twenty-four includes (in order of total usage in general conference—more on this below): (1) Lord; (2) Savior; (3) Redeemer; (4) Son of God; (5) the Almighty; (6) Son of Man; (7) Only Begotten Son; (8) Creator; (9) Beloved Son; (10) Son of the Living God; (11) Messiah; (12) King of Kings; (13) Mediator; (14) Lamb of God; (15) Good Shepherd; (16) Prince of Peace; (17) Bread of Life; (18) Holy One of Israel; (19) Chief Cornerstone; (20) Immanuel; (21) King of the Jews; (22) Alpha and Omega; (23) Author and Finisher of Our Faith; (24) Fountain of Living Waters.

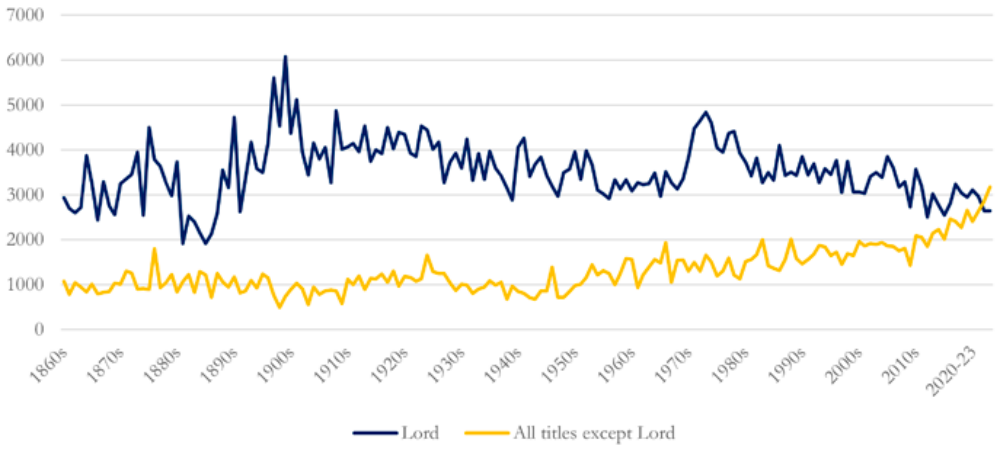


FIGURE 4. *Lord* vs. all titles except *Lord*.

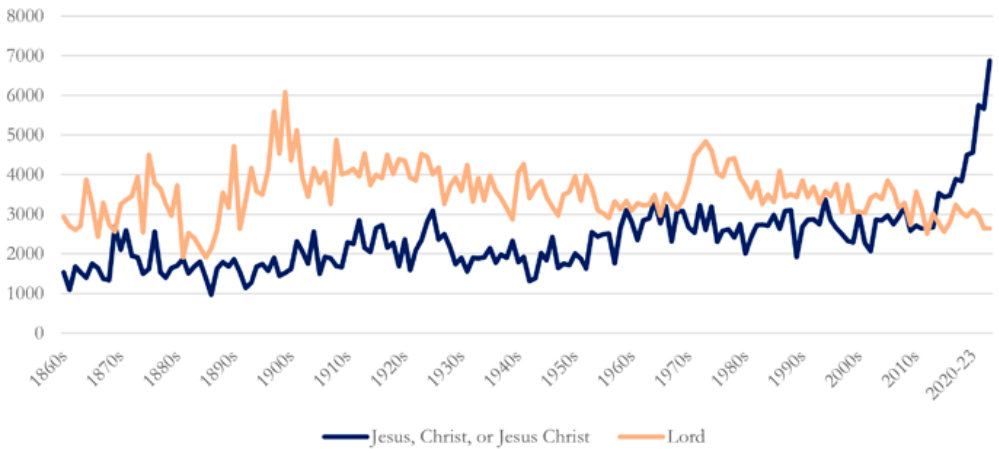


FIGURE 5. *Lord* vs. *Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ*.

when they were more than twice as likely to prefer the title *Lord* to the name *Jesus Christ*. The gap closed toward the end of the twentieth century, but again, the most obvious change appears from 2000 to 2022 as Church leaders began preferring *Jesus Christ* instead of the title *Lord*.

After *Lord*, the next most common spoken titles are *Savior* (as noted), *Redeemer*, and *Son of God*. All other titles (including, for example, *Only Begotten* and *Messiah*) appear much less frequently. One very common title for Jesus Christ, *the Almighty*, would stand in second place on this list (aside from *Lord*), had we written this article in 1870 (see fig. 6). “Be patient, live your religion, and when the Almighty does reward, it will be on a large scale,” preached Orson Hyde in a sermon from 1869 with a typical use of that title.<sup>18</sup>

When seen in total (and as fig. 7 shows), Church leaders have collectively preferred to use titles when speaking of Jesus Christ, although that gap narrowed in the 2000s and reversed itself in 2022, suggesting, again, that President Nelson’s 2018 talk reflected an ongoing trend rather than breaking from one.

After compiling these results, we also wondered how the growing focus on Jesus Christ (by name) compared to other important topics addressed in conference. We wondered, for example, if the focus on the Savior by name “crowded out” other topics, complemented other topics, or seemed irrelevant to the other concerns of Church leaders.

To find answers to these questions, we turned to the Church’s missionary guide, *Preach My Gospel*, to identify topics central to the Church’s teachings (such as prayer, faith, the Restoration, the Book of Mormon, and so forth). With these topics in hand, we counted how often Church leaders referenced these topics to see how they measured up to the growing focus on the Savior in conference talks.

Of the topics we gathered from *Preach My Gospel*, “the Church” itself proved the most frequently spoken term we found in conference talks since 1860. This analysis excludes incidents when a speaker referenced the Church by its full title. As shown in figure 8, we found that Church leaders referenced the Church more often than Jesus Christ (by proper name) starting around the 1880s and increasingly through the middle part of the twentieth century. The gap declined after the 1960s, initially because Church leaders mentioned the Church less often in their talks. Then, as noted, the focus on Jesus Christ by name began in the 2000s,

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18. Orson Hyde, “The Right to Lead the Church, etc.,” Joseph Smith Foundation, Journal of Discourses Online, accessed December 18, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithfoundation.org/journalofdiscourses/speakers/orson-hyde/the-right-to-lead-the-church-etc/>.



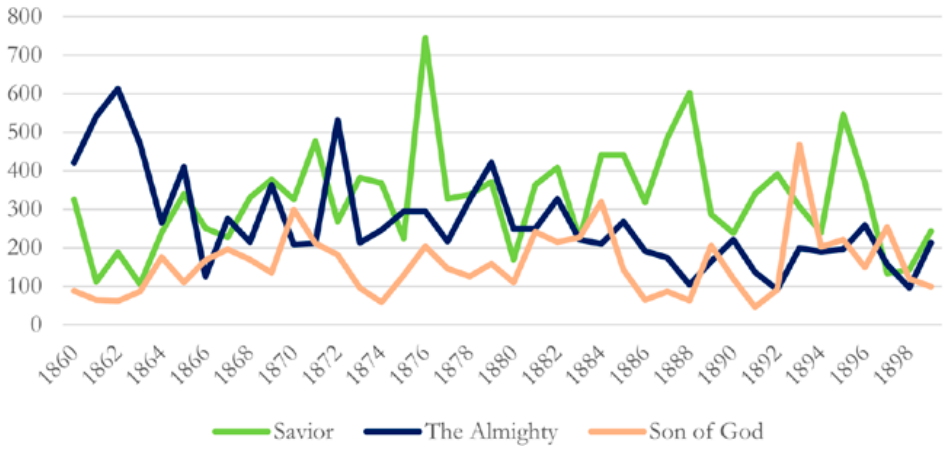


FIGURE 6. Most common titles (aside from *Lord*), 1860–1900.

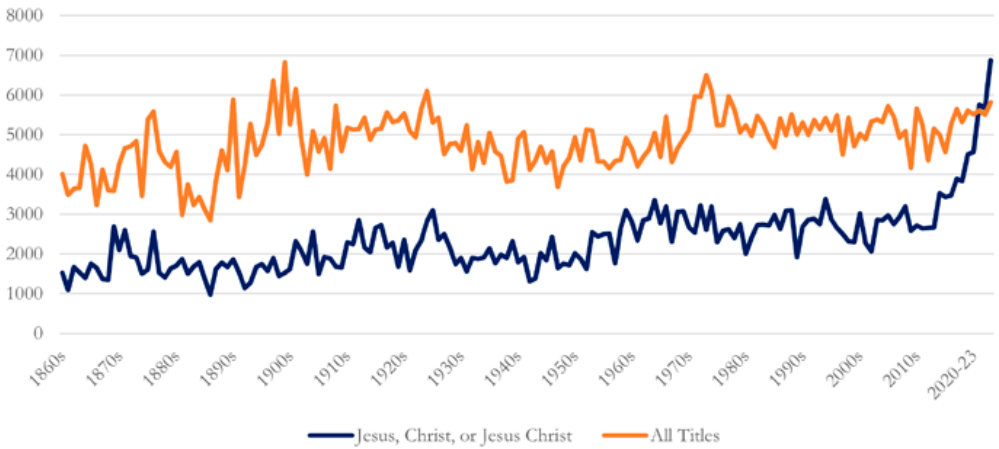


FIGURE 7. All titles vs. proper name (*Jesus*, *Christ*, and *Jesus Christ*).

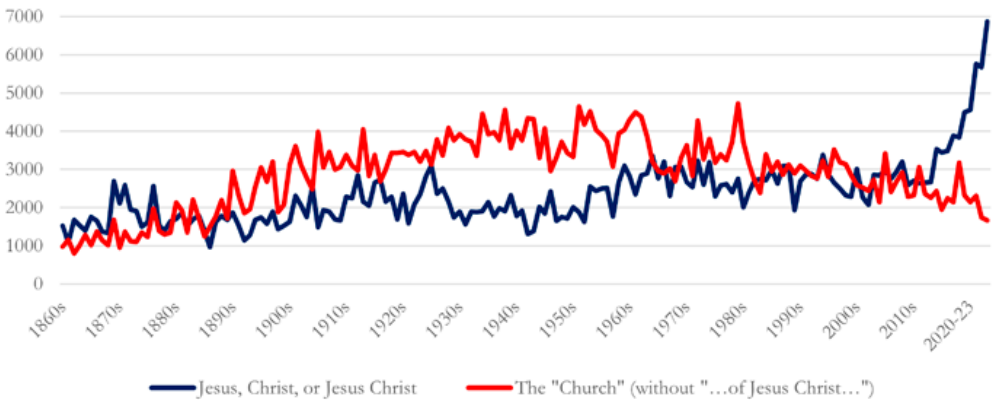


FIGURE 8. Church vs. proper name (*Jesus*, *Christ*, and *Jesus Christ*).

and now Church leaders are more than twice as likely to reference Jesus Christ by name as they are to mention *the Church*.

To account for the upsurge in references to the Church in the mid-twentieth century, we looked at a number of specific talks and found a few patterns. In part, the rise coincided with a growth in Church officers or practices (for example, “General Authorities of the Church” or “the organizations and activities of the Church”). The rise also coincided with more frequent mentions of the Church’s growth, and particularly its growing list of programs and facilities. This usage may reflect the Church’s increasing acceptance within the United States, its standardization of practices, or its successful missionary work (or all three). Overall, though, the analysis reiterates that Jesus Christ has become the increasing focus of talks in general conference.

In figure 9, we compare some common conference themes with usage of the Lord’s name. *Pray*, along with its iterations (*prayer*, *praying*, *prayerful*, *prayed*, and so forth), accounted for the next most frequently used term we found, followed by *family*. That term became increasingly important in the 1960s, when the Church made it a point of emphasis (in programs such as family home evening). Still, when we compare *family* to mentions of Jesus Christ by name, we can see that it comes close to matching Jesus Christ in frequency by the early 2000s, only to decline since then. By contrast, the term *covenant* has seen a growing emphasis in rough parallel to the increasing focus on Jesus Christ. Of course, staying “on the covenant path” has been a central message since the start of President Nelson’s tenure.<sup>19</sup> However, this message also appears to fit within a longer trend rather than departing from one. Usage of the word *covenant* climbed slowly through the twentieth century. Here, again, it might appear that President Nelson’s emphasis on covenants augmented a trend begun earlier.

Looking at other common topics central to the Church—captured in terms such as *faith*, *priesthood*, and *love*—we see again that none of these has been as frequently used as the name of Jesus Christ since the 1850s (see fig. 9).

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19. Camille West, “New First Presidency Speaks to Members Worldwide,” Church News, January 16, 2018, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/new-first-presidency-speaks-to-members-worldwide?lang=eng>.

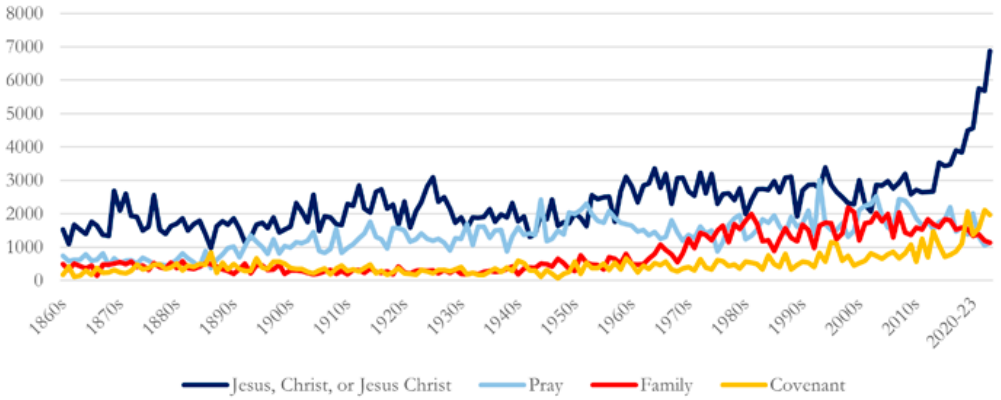


FIGURE 9. *Pray, family, and covenant vs. proper name (Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ).*

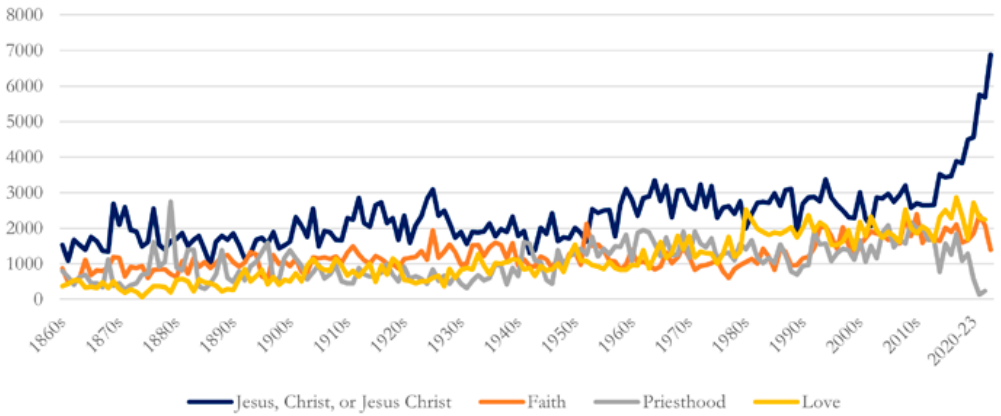


FIGURE 10. *Other topics vs. proper name (Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ).*

We note in passing, though, the gradual but significant increase in the usage of *love* in conference talks. Looking more closely at the way the term's usage has evolved, it appears that the uptick comes from several shifts in the way Church leaders express themselves. For one thing, Church leaders have more frequently expressed their love for Church members and each other. President Spencer W. Kimball seems to have made this acceptable in the 1970s. Today, it is quite common. For example, in a 2018 address, President Nelson concluded by saying, "I love you and thank you and now bless you with the ability to leave the world behind as you assist in this crucial and urgent work."<sup>20</sup> In addition, Church leaders have become more focused on encouraging the Saints to love one another. "Fill your heart with love for others," Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught in general conference, to give one typical example.<sup>21</sup> Other General Authorities have given similar instruction in their talks.

When taken collectively, figures 8–10 reveal that the increasing frequency by which Jesus Christ is mentioned either by name or by title only sometimes comes at the expense of other topics. *Church*, *priesthood*, and *family* have declined as a point of focus in conference talks recently. Other topics, though, have remained fairly constant or increased in focus (such as *covenant*). We might conclude, then, that since 2000, Church leaders have generally emphasized the ways in which Jesus Christ is the author, exemplar, or otherwise the center of specific Church principles and topics. "When we *discard* the Savior's name," President Nelson explained in 2018, "we are subtly *disregarding* all that Jesus Christ did for us—even His Atonement."<sup>22</sup> Put in positive terms, we might conclude that the last two decades of conference talks have collectively stressed all that Jesus Christ has done for us, as expressed through all the principles, teachings, and programs of the Church.

We could, of course, consider many additional topics addressed in general conference to discern patterns and gain insights. We will have to leave those investigations to other scholars. Our purpose in considering *love*, *faith*, *priesthood*, *family*, and so forth here largely serves to support our main observation that President Nelson's insistence on using

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20. Russell M. Nelson, "Sisters' Participation in the Gathering of Israel," *Ensign* 48, no. 11 (November 2018): 70.

21. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Missionary Work: Sharing What Is in Your Heart," *Ensign* 49, no. 5 (May 2019): 16.

22. Nelson, "Correct Name of the Church," 88, italics original.

the correct name of the Church fits within a broader shift in focus by Church leaders in their conference talks. Before 2018, they had already increasingly emphasized Jesus Christ by name in a noticeable and measurable way. It makes sense that this growing focus on Jesus Christ by name would eventually apply to the name of the Church. In this way, Church leaders have echoed the resurrected Christ's admonition to "take upon you the name of Christ" (3 Ne. 27:5), not only as that applies to each individual member but also as it applies to his Church.

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