

What Do We Know of God's Will For His LGBT Children? *An Examination of the LDS Church's Position on Homosexuality*

By Bryce Cook

Preface

In 1973 Lester Bush published a groundbreaking article in the Mormon Journal, *Dialogue*, on the history behind the priesthood and temple ban on people of African descent.¹ This article, and the long-forgotten history it brought to light, had an incalculable effect on events leading to President Kimball's 1978 revelation that overturned the ban. While I feel inadequate comparing my effort to Lester Bush's work, his article was a guiding light to me as I set out to write a "Lester Bush" article for LGBT members of the church. I have felt strongly impressed that such an article is needed more than ever for LGBT people in the same way Lester Bush's article was needed for black members of the church in the 1970s.

In the thirteen-plus years since our oldest son came out as gay (followed by a second son five years ago), I have studied, read, prayed and pondered extensively on this subject. More importantly perhaps, I have gotten to know hundreds of LGBT people on a very personal level. I have observed their lives and struggles, and I feel like I have come to know and understand the unique challenges they and their families face as Mormons. Because of this experience and the relationships I have with my LGBT family and friends, I felt compelled to write this article. Recognizing that many of the questions I raise and observations I make in the article may challenge the current thinking of some Church members, I felt that the words of President Dieter F. Uchtdorf at a recent worldwide leadership training conference were particularly appropriate:

Unfortunately, we sometimes don't seek revelation or answers...because we think we know the answers already.

Brothers and sisters, as good as our previous experience may be, if we stop asking questions, stop thinking, stop pondering, we can thwart the revelations of the Spirit. Remember, it was the questions young Joseph asked that opened the door for the restoration of all things. We can block the growth and knowledge our Heavenly Father intends for us. How often has the Holy Spirit tried to tell us something we needed to know but couldn't get past the massive iron gate of what we thought we already knew?²

¹ Dialogue 8 (Spring 1973, p. 54) <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/2012/mormonisms-negro-doctrine-an-historical-overview/>

² Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Acting on the Truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-leadership-training/2012/01/acting-on-the-truths-of-the-gospel-of-jesus-christ?lang=eng>

I. Introduction

Perhaps no other social issue in recent times has experienced such rapid change in public opinion as that of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. To many, it has been the civil rights struggle of our time, to others – particularly conservative religious people – it is a sign of the moral decay of our time. The LDS church has been greatly affected by this issue, garnering much negative attention in the media due to its public fight against same-sex marriage and the perception that it treats LGBT people unfairly.³ Its positions and policies, particularly the November 2015 policy that labels members in same-sex marriages apostates and prohibits their children from receiving church ordinances, have caused some members to question the church’s stance and others to actually leave the church.

The purpose of this article is to examine the LDS church’s position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage from a doctrinal, moral and empirical perspective.⁴ It is hoped that through such an examination the thoughtful reader may: (1) gain a better understanding of the church’s justifications for this position even as it faces mounting criticism and membership loss; (2) gain a more empathetic understanding of what it means to be LGBT in our church; and (3) sincerely and humbly consider our current state of knowledge about what we as a church believe to be God’s will for our LGBT brothers and sisters.

As an active, believing member of the church, my hope is that this article will cause members of the church to think deeply about the questions raised herein and come to their own opinions based on sound reason and personal inspiration. It is not my intent to criticize the church or undermine faith; far from it, I hope my fellow members will develop greater faith and a greater ability to receive inspiration about matters that affect their lives and the lives of those they love and care about.

Like opinions held by society in general on this issue, the church’s position on homosexuality has evolved quite significantly in recent years, although much of the general membership is likely unaware of the shift. The church’s current official position on homosexuality is perhaps most concisely summarized in its recently updated gospel topic entry on homosexuality (which redirects to “same-sex attraction”) on LDS.org:

³ In using the term “church” as the entity that promulgates the positions and statements discussed throughout this essay, I am generally referring to the members of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency who are authorized to make policy and pronounce doctrine for the church. While it is generally held that such policy and doctrine require the unanimous consent of the members of these governing bodies, it is also understood that individual members of these councils often have differing personal opinions. The lack of publicity associated with the church’s launch of its original mormonsandgays.org website, the inconsistent messaging and tone in church initiatives and statements on this subject, and certain personal insights related to these issues, seem to indicate differences of opinion among the top leadership in how to address LGBT issues. (For additional examples, see “The Exclusion Policy and Biology vs Behavior,” by Gregory Prince, <http://rationalfaiths.com/biology-vs-behavior/>.)

⁴ While much could be said about the significant and far-reaching impact of the November 2015 policy, this paper is focused on the underlying core doctrines that inform the church’s positions on homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

The Church distinguishes between same-sex attraction and homosexual behavior. People who experience same-sex attraction or identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual can make and keep covenants with God and fully and worthily participate in the Church. Identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual or experiencing same-sex attraction is not a sin and does not prohibit one from participating in the Church, holding callings, or attending the temple. ... We may not know precisely why some people feel attracted to others of the same sex, but for some it is a complex reality and part of the human experience.⁵

The church's position on same-sex marriage is succinctly stated in Handbook 2:

As a doctrinal principle, based on the scriptures, the Church affirms that marriage between a man and a woman is essential to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children.

Sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife. Any other sexual relations, including those between persons of the same gender, are sinful and undermine the divinely created institution of the family. The Church accordingly affirms defining marriage as the legal and lawful union between a man and a woman.⁶

Before examining why the church believes that *being a homosexual* who is naturally and instinctively attracted to those of the same sex is not sinful, but *expressing homosexual feelings and desires* is a sin – even within lawful, monogamous marriage – it is helpful to first understand the origination of the church's position and how it has changed over time.

Historical Background

For much of recent history, the church's views on homosexuality have reflected those of society in general. In the 19th and most of the 20th century, homosexuality was generally viewed by society, including the medical profession, as a mental disorder or a sexual deviancy. By the 1900s, most states criminalized homosexual behavior by enacting sodomy laws, which drove homosexuals deeper into the closet.

The Kimball Years

In the 1970s the psychiatric community began to acknowledge that there was no basis for characterizing homosexuality as a disorder and removed it from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Also in this period, LGBT people began to assert their rights to live their lives authentically and without persecution, mainstream media

⁵ <https://www.lds.org/topics/same-gender-attraction?lang=eng&old=true>. Along with updating this gospel topic entry in October 2016, the church released an entirely new version of its website devoted to this issue, mormonandgay.org. The original website, mormonsandgays.org, was released in December 2012 without any church-wide announcement or links to the site from the church's main webpage, and many members and leaders were unaware of its existence.

⁶ Handbook 2: Administering the Church, 21.4.10, "Same-Gender Marriages"

started giving more favorable coverage of homosexuals, and societal views ever so slightly began to shift. The church's stance in this period, however, remained unchanged, with Spencer W. Kimball, Mark E. Peterson and Boyd K. Packer being the church's primary voices on this topic through the 1970s and 1980s.

They spoke about homosexuality with disdain and disgust, which reflected the sentiment of their generation. They saw society's softening towards homosexuality, including decriminalization, as evidence of society's deterioration.⁷ Because it had been hidden and rarely spoken of in the past, but was now becoming more open and accepted, these church leaders saw it as a rapidly spreading contagion that was infecting society and even the church and was thus a dangerous threat to marriage and family.⁸ However, in demonizing homosexuality, they also demonized homosexuals, which caused untold despair and self-loathing among young LDS gay people trying to come to terms with their homosexual feelings in that era.

Spencer W. Kimball's popular book, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, first published in 1969, devoted an entire chapter to homosexuality, entitled "Crime Against Nature." As one LDS historian explained, "[This chapter] is the earliest and most comprehensive treatment on homosexuality by an apostle, and the foundation from which Mormon thought, policy and political action on homosexuality grew for the past 45 years."⁹ Kimball described homosexuality and homosexuals using terms such as, "ugly," "repugnant," "ever-deepening degeneracy," "evil," "pervert," "deviant," and "weaklings." He taught that it was a spiritual disease that could be "cured," and to those who felt otherwise, he responded: "How can you say the door cannot be opened until your knuckles are bloody, till your head is bruised, till your muscles are sore? It can be done."¹⁰

This "curable-disease" mindset – based on obsolete psychological thought from the 1950s and 1960s – was embraced by Kimball and other church leaders because it aligned with their spiritual views of homosexuality.¹¹ They believed that homosexuality was a

⁷ Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p. 40.

⁸ Ibid. See also, "President Kimball Speaks Out on Morality," *Ensign*, Nov 1980; and Kimball, "Voices of the Past..." *Ensign*, June 1971: "There are said to be millions of perverts who have relinquished their natural affection... This practice is spreading like a prairie fire and changing our world." <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/06/voices-of-the-past-of-the-present-of-the-future?lang=eng>

⁹ Clair Barrus, "The Policy on Gay Couples, and the Priesthood Ban: A Comparison," *Worlds Without End*, A Mormon Studies Roundtable, http://www.withoutend.org/policy-gay-couples-priesthood-ban-comparison/#_ftnref1

¹⁰ Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p. 42.

¹¹ Spencer W. Kimball, Jan 5, 1965, BYU Speeches of the Year, "Love vs. Lust." In that speech Kimball cited a 1964 article from *Medical World News* about the "strength of the patient's desire to modify [homosexual desire]," stating: "This statement by the Public Health Committee of the New York Academy of Medicine agrees with our philosophy. Man is created in the image of God. He is a god in embryo. He has the seeds of godhood within him and he can, if he is normal, pick himself up by his bootstraps and literally move himself from where he is to where he knows he should be." He spoke at length about curability. <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball-love-vs-lust/> Note: BYU removed the text of this speech and left only the audio. A text version is archived at:

psychological or spiritual malady that could be cured through intense repentance, self-mastery and even marriage to the opposite sex. This belief informed the church's ecclesiastical approach and training of leaders, as well as Mormon mental-health therapists, for years to come – and it was probably the most psychologically and spiritually damaging of all the church's teachings on homosexuality. Almost all gay Mormons, particularly those over the age of 30, have gone through intense periods of fasting, prayer and hyper-religiosity, pleading with God to change this fundamental aspect of their core nature, only to fall into despair and self-recrimination when the promised change never came. Most of them at one time or another thought of suicide as the ultimate cure, and some carried it out. Many of them married at the counsel of their church leaders, believing in good faith that if they married in the temple, kept their covenants and raised a family in the church, God would finally cure them. Other than the suicides, these are some of the most tragic stories I am aware of, as so many – if not most – of these marriages ended with both parties being spiritually and emotionally scarred.

While the curability mindset has since been mostly abandoned by the church, it still lingers on in the minds and beliefs of many who cannot believe that God would create people as homosexuals – people who seemingly have no place in our theology or God's eternal plan for families – and not give them a means to be cured. Elder Packer, who was one of the last public holdouts of this mindset among the brethren, famously expressed this sentiment in his October 2010 conference address, wherein he asked, "Why would our Heavenly Father do that to anyone?" only to have it removed from the church's official transcript days later.¹²

The following table compares key aspects of the church's past and present position on homosexuality.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20030519075029/http://mentalhealthlibrary.info/library/same/samelds/samelds2001/links/kimball/kimball.htm>

¹² Boyd K. Packer, "Cleansing the Inner Vessel," October 2010 General Conference, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/cleansing-the-inner-vessel?lang=eng&r=1> (compare audio/video talk at 9:00 to text that starts with, "Some suppose they were preset and cannot overcome what they feel are inborn temptations..."); *see also*, <http://archive.slttrib.com/story.php?ref=/slttrib/home/50440474-76/packer-church-question-speech.html.csp>

Past Position	Present Position
Is it a Choice?	
<p>“Many have been misinformed that they are powerless in the matter, not responsible for the tendency, and that ‘God made them that way.’ This is as untrue as any other of the diabolical lies Satan has concocted. It is blasphemy. Man is made in the image of God. Does the pervert think God to be ‘that way’?” (Kimball, <i>TMOF</i>)</p> <p>“There is a falsehood that some are born with an attraction to their own kind, with nothing they can do about it. They are just ‘that way’ and can only yield to those desires. That is a malicious and destructive lie. While it is a convincing idea to some, it is of the devil. No one is locked into that kind of life.” (Packer, Oct 1976 Gen Conf)</p>	<p>“Even though individuals do not choose to have such attractions, they do choose how to respond to them.” (Ballard, “The Lord Needs You Now,” <i>Ensign</i>, Sep 2015, also cited in mormonandgay.org, “Church Teachings”)</p> <p>“While same-sex attraction is not a sin, it can be a challenge. While one may not have chosen to have these feelings, he or she can commit to keep God’s commandments.” (mormonandgay.org, “Church Teachings”)</p> <p>“Perhaps such susceptibilities are inborn or acquired without personal choice or fault...” (Oaks, “Same-Gender Attraction,” <i>Ensign</i>, October 1995)</p>
What Causes Homosexuality?	
<p>“Parents need to know that lack of proper affection in the home can result in unnatural behavior in their children such as homosexuality...” (Victor L. Brown Jr., “Two Views of Sexuality”, <i>Ensign</i>, July 1975)</p> <p>“Homosexuality would not occur where there is a normal, loving father-and-son relationship.” (J. Richard Clarke, Apr 1977 Gen Conf)</p> <p>“If children have a happy family experience they will not want to be homosexual, which I am sure is an acquired addiction, just as drugs, alcohol and pornography are. The promoters of homosexuality say they were born that way. But I do not believe this is true.” (Hartman Rector, Jr., Apr 1981 Gen Conf, transcribed from audio)</p>	<p>“Don’t blame yourself for your child’s same-sex attraction. This is no one’s fault. Blame is neither necessary nor helpful.” (mormonandgay.org “Ten Tips for Parents”)</p> <p>“We surely encourage parents not to blame themselves and we encourage Church members not to blame parents in this circumstance.” (Oaks/Wickman interview, 2006)</p> <p>[The church deleted significant portions of Hartman Rector’s talk in all text versions, including the passage shown here.]</p>
<p>“What is more, [masturbation] too often leads to grievous sin, even to that sin against nature, homosexuality.” (Kimball, <i>TMOF</i>)</p> <p>“Sometimes masturbation is the introduction to the more serious sins of exhibitionism and the gross sin of homosexuality.” (Kimball, “President Kimball Speaks on Morality,” <i>Ensign</i>, Nov 1980)</p>	<p>“The Church does not have a position on the causes of any of these susceptibilities or inclinations, including those related to same-gender attraction. Those are scientific questions – whether nature or nurture – those are things the Church doesn’t have a position on.” (Oaks/Wickman interview, 2006; also cited in mormonandgay.org, “Church Teachings”)</p>

Past Position	Present Position
<p>"Every form of homosexuality is sin. Pornography is one of the approaches to that transgression." (Kimball, "God Will Not Be Mocked", <i>Ensign</i>, Nov 1974)</p> <p>"A normal 12- or 13-year-old boy or girl exposed to pornographic literature could develop into a homosexual" (Victor L. Brown, April 1970 Gen Conf)</p>	<p>[Note: none of the recent church resources or talks on homosexuality mentions masturbation or pornography as a cause. As quoted above, the church takes no position on cause, leaving that to the scientific/medical realm.]</p> <p>"Why somebody has a same-gender attraction... who can say?" (Oaks/Wickman interview, 2006)</p>
Is it Curable?	
<p>"Curable and Forgivable – With Effort. After consideration of the evil aspects, the ugliness and prevalence of the evil of homosexuality, the glorious thing to remember is that it is curable and forgivable...Certainly it can be overcome..." (Kimball, <i>TMOF</i>)</p>	<p>"...a change in attraction should not be expected or demanded as an outcome by parents or leaders." (mormonandgay.org FAQ)</p> <p>"I must say, this son's sexual orientation did not somehow miraculously change–no one assumed it would." (Holland, Oct 2015 Gen Conf)</p>
<p>"And while the number of divorces causes us to fear and admit it partly to be true, the principle of marriage is right. Some have changed their desires and yearnings and have convinced themselves that they are different and have no desire toward the opposite sex. ... But let this individual repent of his perversion, force himself to return to normal pursuits and interests and actions and friendships with the opposite sex, and this normal pattern can become natural again." (Kimball, <i>TMOF</i>)</p>	<p>"President Hinckley, faced with the fact that apparently some had believed [marriage] to be a remedy, and perhaps that some Church leaders had even counseled marriage as the remedy for these feelings, made this statement: 'Marriage should not be viewed as a therapeutic step to solve problems such as homosexual inclinations or practices.'" (Oaks/Wickman interview, 2006)</p>
Difference Between Being Homosexual and 'Acting on It'	
<p>"This perversion [homosexuality] is defined as sexual desire for those of the same sex or sexual relations between individuals of the same sex..." (Kimball, <i>TMOF</i>)</p>	<p>"...same-gender attraction is not a sin, but acting on those feelings is..." (Holland, "Helping those who Struggle with Same-gender Attraction," <i>Ensign</i>, Oct 2007)</p>

Positive Steps

With the passing of Kimball, Peterson and Packer, and the continued evolution in our understanding of homosexuality, many fundamental aspects of the church's position, such as cause and curability, have changed (as shown in the above table). In addition, the harsh, condemning rhetoric used by Kimball, Peterson and Packer gave way to the softer more compassionate tone of Oaks, Holland and Christofferson. Many in the general church membership also began to soften their stance as they observed openly gay co-workers, neighbors, and their own family members living happy, productive lives once they cast off

the shame and condemnation they were raised with. A 2015 Pew Research Center survey of Christian groups' acceptance of homosexuality found that Mormons experienced the largest increase in acceptance rates compared to all other denominations, going from 24% in 2007 (second lowest after Jehovah's Witnesses) to 36% in 2014 (now tied with Evangelicals at second lowest), a 50% increase.¹³

However, as church leaders saw their members following society's trend towards greater acceptance of homosexuality, including same-sex marriage, they began to speak out strongly again – focusing their attention and rhetoric on the evils of same-sex marriage. While leadership no longer embraced all the opinions of the Kimball generation, they still held strongly to that generation's belief that same-sex marriage was a dangerous threat to traditional marriage and society. The church began entering the political arena like never before, fighting same-sex marriage legislation and lobbying for ballot initiatives and legislation that defined marriage as only between one man and one woman. The political action started with Hawaii in 1994 and culminated with a bruising public battle over California's Proposition 8 in 2008, which sought to define marriage as only between a man and a woman. The church and its members were the largest donors in the Prop 8 fight, which won at the ballot box but was soon overturned in court. Ironically, this political fight may have done more to garner sympathy for gay people and galvanize public support for same-sex marriage – including its ultimate legalization – than any other event.

After Prop 8, the church tended to stay out of the public political arena on these issues, and instead focused on teaching the doctrine of traditional marriage and family with greater emphasis and frequency within the church, although it continued to have its lawyers quietly file amicus briefs in court cases around the country. Rather than getting involved in public lobbying itself, the church has encouraged its members to stand up for traditional marriage as a necessary foundation for religious freedom – its recent rallying cry.

While always quick to reaffirm its stance that same-sex marriage and homosexual behavior are grievous sins, the church in just the last few years has taken a number of steps that demonstrate improved understanding of and greater compassion for its LGBT members:

- 2012 – The church quietly released its original mormonsandgays.org website. The enlarged head-note on the home page contained the following statement:

Where the Church Stands

The experience of same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people. The attraction itself is not a sin, but acting on it is. Even though individuals do not choose to have such attractions, they do choose how to respond to them. With love and understanding, the Church reaches out to all God's children, including our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

¹³ Pew Research Center, "Most U.S. Christian groups grow more accepting of homosexuality," Dec 18, 2015 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/18/most-u-s-christian-groups-grow-more-accepting-of-homosexuality/>

- 2013 – In response to the Boy Scouts of America’s policy change allowing gay youth to participate (and after some previous mixed messages indicating the church might pull out of the BSA), the church affirmed its support for the policy change.¹⁴
- 2015 – In January, the church held a news conference and released video messages from leaders on a “fairness for all” approach, which sought to balance religious freedom with reasonable safeguards for LGBT people. The church said it “publicly favored laws and ordinances that protect LGBT people from discrimination in housing and employment.” Elder Christofferson, Sister Neill Marriott, Elder Oaks and Elder Holland expressed messages of tolerance and compassion for LGBT people, with Sister Marriott stating: “This [LGBT rights] movement arose after centuries of ridicule, persecution and even violence against homosexuals. Ultimately, most of society recognized that such treatment was simply wrong, and that such basic human rights as securing a job or a place to live should not depend on a person’s sexual orientation.”¹⁵
- 2015 – In March, the church released a public statement and employed lobbyists in support of a proposed LGBT nondiscrimination and religious rights bill in Utah. The bill had failed to pass in six previous attempts but passed this time; and the church issued a statement applauding its passage.¹⁶
- 2015 – In March, Elder Christofferson gave an interview on KUTV in Salt Lake City in which he said that church members could publicly advocate for gay marriage without having their membership threatened, as long as their effort didn’t attack the church.¹⁷

Major Setback

In the midst of this much-appreciated progress, on June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its decision in the Obergefell matter that made same-sex marriage legal in the U.S. – something no one had expected to happen so soon. The church issued a press release that very day, stating, “The Court's decision does not alter the Lord's doctrine that marriage is a union between a man and a woman ordained by God. While showing respect for those who think differently, the Church will continue to teach and promote marriage between a man and a woman as a central part of our doctrine and practice.”¹⁸

From that point on, the tide seemed to turn in the church. The doctrinal emphasis on traditional marriage and the Proclamation on the Family became a constant theme. Sunday talks and lessons frequently referred to the legalization of same-sex marriage as a sign of

¹⁴ <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-responds-to-boy-scouts-of-america-policy-vote>

¹⁵ <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/publicstatement-on-religious-freedom-and-nondiscrimination>

¹⁶ <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-issues-statement-on-utah-house-bill-296>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XybDk3CEoHg>

¹⁸ <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/supreme-court-decision-will-not-alter-doctrine-on-marriage>

the end times and the wickedness of the world. The previous messages of tolerance and empathy were drowned out by the old familiar refrains of the gay agenda and destruction of the family.

To make matters worse, on November 5, 2015, the church issued the policy that labeled members in same-sex marriages apostate and barred their children from receiving church ordinances and serving missions, effectively pushing their families out of the church. The policy was spiritually and psychologically traumatizing to the LGBT Mormon community. As John Gustav-Wrathall, the president of Affirmation, described it, “In the months since the policy I’ve seen widespread signs of trauma and depression within the LGBT Mormon community, including documented suicides. Many feel the church just wants to get rid of LGBT people.”¹⁹ A sharp increase in LDS youth suicides raised significant concerns among parents of LGBT children and garnered much media attention. As if to balance the recent hard-line rhetoric, the church finally responded with a conciliatory statement and an unprecedented series of articles in the church-owned Deseret News on LGBT issues, including references to resources it had previously not endorsed.²⁰

In October 2016 the church released an entirely new version of its mormonandgay.org website, which many in the Mormon LGBT community regarded as a significant improvement over the prior version. However, given the existence of the November policy, many felt the new website was more about public relations than the sincere concern of church leadership. Only time will tell how sincere the church is about healing its rocky relationship with its gay members and their families and supporters.

With this backdrop we might acknowledge how, perhaps more than ever, we as a church need to confront our position and beliefs about homosexuality head on. We need to ask some hard questions of ourselves as to why depression, suicide and loss of faith seem to be the outcomes of a position that is believed to be of God. While the official position has improved vastly from President Kimball’s generation, have we gone as far as the Lord wants us? Is there still more He would tell us if we had the humility and courage to ask? It is these questions that prompted me to make this in-depth examination of the church’s position on homosexuality and share my observations in this article.

¹⁹ “John Gustav-Wrathall: Show an increase of love,” Deseret News, Jan 31, 2016 <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865646442/John-Gustav-Wrathall-Show-an-increase-of-love.html>

²⁰ “LDS Church leaders mourn reported deaths in Mormon LGBT community” Deseret News, Jan 31, 2016 <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865646414/LDS-Church-leaders-mourn-reported-deaths-in-Mormon-LGBT-community.html?pg=all>

Tradition or God's Will

As noted above, church leaders have drawn a very clear line in how far their position on homosexuality can evolve, stating that the church's current position on marriage is God's will and therefore cannot and will not change.²¹ To address this belief and the questions raised above, it is necessary for a short digression on our perception of God's will in various ages and how it changes over long periods of time.²²

Throughout religious and human history there have been moral and cultural standards that have come and gone with the passage of time. Standards that have stood the test of time, remained constant across cultures, and consistently resulted in positive outcomes (i.e., "bear good fruit"²³) are those we may rightfully consider to be "eternal truths" and therefore God's revealed will to man. Standards that were once considered God's will by those who believed them but that have since been abandoned by religion and society are generally considered to be cultural relics, "folk doctrines" or incorrect traditions of men.

Consider for instance the following religious moral standards from ages past:

- If a man rapes a married or betrothed woman, he is subject to the death penalty; but if he rapes an un-betrothed virgin he can make reparations simply by paying her father 50 shekels of silver and marrying her (Deut 22:23-29).
- Women are to keep silent in the churches for it is not permitted unto them to speak; if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home for it is a shame for women to speak in the church (1 Cor 14:34-35).
- It is a sin to charge interest on a loan (Lev 25:36-37; also prohibited by the Christian church in medieval Europe; still prohibited in some Islamic societies today).
- Suicide is equivalent to murder.

²¹ FAQ on mormonandgay.org, "Will the church ever change its doctrine and sanction same-sex marriages?" The answer provided interestingly does not start with "no" but states that "marriage between a man and a woman is an integral teaching of the [church] and will not change."

<https://mormonandgay.lds.org/articles/frequently-asked-questions>

Elder D. Todd Christofferson, mormonandgay.org video, "Purpose of this Website," states: "There shouldn't be a perception or an expectation that the Church's doctrines or position have changed or are changing. It's simply not true, and we want youth and all people to understand that. The doctrines that relate to human sexuality and gender are really central to our theology. ... So homosexual behavior is contrary to those doctrines – has been, always will be – and can never be anything but transgression."

²² For an excellent treatment on this perspective, see BYU history professor, Craig Harline, "What Happened to My Bell Bottoms? How Things That Were Never Going to Change Have Sometimes Changed Anyway, and How Studying History Can Help Us Make Sense of It All," *BYU Studies*, Vol. 52:4 (2013). <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/what-happened-my-bell-bottoms-how-things-that-were-never-going-change-have-sometimes-changed>

²³ Matt 7:16-20; Gal 5:22-23; Moro 7:14-19

These standards were believed to be God's law in their times and cultures but are generally not regarded as such by most religions today. Women have been badly mistreated throughout history and thought to be weak and inferior in many cultures. Even today there is still much debate in the church about their proper role in family, society and the church. However, aside from certain religious fundamentalists, almost no one today would disagree that many of the biblical teachings relating to women, such as the two examples above, are cultural relics that were harmful to women, and were therefore of men and not of God.

The charging of interest was considered immoral and strictly forbidden among Christians through much of the medieval period.²⁴ But as capitalistic market economies emerged, the charging of interest on capital loaned to someone for a profit-making venture came to be seen as an important financial tool that benefitted society and not necessarily a means of taking advantage of someone who needed to borrow money because they had fallen on hard times.

Suicide has long been held as a grievous sin equivalent to murder in Christian religious traditions (as well as in Mormon doctrine²⁵). But the modern science of psychology has given us the tools to better understand and empathize with the victims of suicide, such that we no longer view it as a sin comparable to murder but more as a tragic result of mental illness or extreme despair that only God can judge. Here are three more examples of changing standards discussed in greater depth.

Slavery

Slavery has been a fact of life for most of human existence until relatively recently. It is treated as normal and approved of in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus taught parables involving slaves but never condemned slavery. Paul counseled slaves on many occasions to obey their masters and Peter even told slaves to patiently submit to unjust beatings by their masters because it was acceptable to God.²⁶ The general feeling was that if you were a conquering nation, you had the god-given right to enslave the conquered as a reward for your god-ordained victory. Or if you were considered a weak and inferior race, not much above the animals, you were naturally and divinely suited to slavery. Or if you were born a peasant and couldn't pay your debts, being sold into slavery was a just remedy.

It wasn't until the 1700s that certain people, starting mostly with the Quakers, really began to question whether ownership of another human was moral and in accordance with God's will. The Quakers were joined by Evangelicals and other religious groups, and this effort eventually evolved into the abolitionist movement. Many in society saw abolitionists as religious extremists (particularly those who went so far as to believe the black race were equal to whites and should be able to freely mix within white society). Those in favor of upholding the age-old tradition of slavery, including conservative religious groups who

²⁴ Craigh Harline, "What Happened to My Bell Bottoms?..." *BYU Studies*, Vol. 52:4 (2013)

²⁵ M. Russell Ballard, "Suicide: Some Things We Know, and Some We Do Not," *Ensign*, October 1987.

²⁶ Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-25; 1 Tim 6:1-5; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Pet 2:18-20. Note that the KJV translates the Greek word *doulos* as "servant," which is an inaccurate rendering given that *doulos* means someone in involuntary servitude. Slavery had a significant role in Roman economy and culture.

were fearful of the impact on society that freeing the slaves might have, quoted extensively from the Bible to support their position. In the end, despite the Bible's acceptance of slavery, and human tradition going back millennia, society and religion came to adopt the former "extremist" view that slavery was immoral and should be abolished. Unfortunately, the LDS church did not support the abolitionist movement in the U.S. and actually allowed slavery in the Territory of Utah.²⁷

Birth Control

Modern, effective birth control was hailed by many in society as a hugely important development for women and families that, among other things, would protect a mother's health and allow couples to better manage their family size in accordance with their financial and emotional resources. However, many past LDS prophets have soundly condemned birth control, as shown in the following examples.

- Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1954, Vol. 2, p. 273:

BIRTH CONTROL IS WICKEDNESS. The abuse of this holy covenant has been the primary cause for the downfall of nations. When the sacred vows of marriage are broken and the real purpose of marriage abused, as we find it so prevalent in the world today, then destruction is inevitable.

When a man and a woman are married and they agree, or covenant, to limit their offspring to two or three, and practice devices to accomplish this purpose, they are guilty of iniquity which eventually must be punished. Unfortunately this evil doctrine is being taught as a virtue by many people who consider themselves cultured and highly educated. It has even crept in among members of the Church and has been advocated in some of the classes within the Church.

- Letter from the First Presidency (David O. McKay, Hugh B. Brown, N. Eldon Tanner) to all Church units, April 14, 1969:

The First Presidency is being asked from time to time as to what the attitude of the Church is regarding birth control. In order that you may be informed on this subject and that you may be prepared to convey the proper information to the members of the Church under your jurisdiction, we have decided to give you the following statement:

We seriously should regret that there should exist a sentiment or feeling among any members of the Church to curtail the birth of their children. We have been commanded to multiply and replenish the earth that we may have joy and rejoicing in our posterity.

Where husband and wife enjoy health and vigor and are free from impurities that would be entailed upon their posterity, it is contrary to the teachings of the Church artificially to curtail or prevent the birth of children. We believe that those who practice birth control will reap disappointment by and by.

²⁷ http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/pioneers_and_cowboys/slaveryinutah.html.

- Harold B. Lee, Conference Report, October 1972, p. 63:

[W]e declare it is a grievous sin before God to adopt restrictive measures in disobedience to God's divine command from the beginning of time to 'multiply and replenish the earth.' Surely those who project such measures to prevent life or to destroy life before or after birth will reap the whirlwind of God's retribution, for God will not be mocked.

Despite these strong statements, which continued through much of the 1970s, the church's official stance began to change over time. The current Church Handbook of Instructions (21.4.4) doesn't even include the words "birth control" other than in the heading of a section that states:

It is the privilege of married couples who are able to bear children to provide mortal bodies for the spirit children of God, whom they are then responsible to nurture and rear. The decision as to how many children to have and when to have them is extremely intimate and private and should be left between the couple and the Lord. Church members should not judge one another in this matter.

Married couples should also understand that sexual relations within marriage are divinely approved not only for the purpose of procreation, but also as a way of expressing love and strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds between husband and wife.

Thus, what was once condemned by LDS prophets as an evil and grievous sin is now morally acceptable. Rather than a blanket standard or mandate applied to all, the decision to use birth control and choose family size is left to the personal inspiration of the wife and husband.

The Priesthood and Temple Ban

The priesthood and temple ban on people of African descent that originated with Brigham Young in 1852 was consistent with societal racial attitudes of the time, including the belief that blacks were the descendants of Cain and carried his biblical curse.²⁸ However, in the 1960s as black people in the U.S. began to protest unfair and abusive treatment, wider society started to listen to and empathize with their condition. Many in the U.S. began to reject long-held racist beliefs and attitudes and began supporting civil rights legislation that attempted to put blacks on equal standing with the rest of society. Sadly, the church and many of its senior leaders resisted this movement, believing that civil rights laws were a threat to traditional societal structures and morals and that the priesthood ban was God's will and could not be changed.²⁹ However, because Spencer W. Kimball was willing to

²⁸ LDS topical essays, "Race and the Priesthood." <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>

²⁹ Ezra Taft Benson, *Conference Report*, October 1967, pp. 34-39, "There is no doubt that the so-called civil rights movement as it exists today is used as a Communist program for revolution in America..." [http://scriptures.byu.edu/gettalk.php?ID=1569&era=yes;](http://scriptures.byu.edu/gettalk.php?ID=1569&era=yes)

question the church's position and acknowledge that it could be in error, he had the capacity to pray for and receive divine confirmation that the priesthood ban should be removed. Had he simply accepted the views and traditions of most of his fellow general authorities, he never would have even sought to know God's will on the issue.

Applications for Today

From the above examples, as well as many others, we see that certain doctrines and moral standards that were once considered God's revealed will (e.g., slavery, inferiority of blacks, treatment of women) have proved to be false doctrines and extremely harmful to those affected by them. Conversely, beliefs and standards once considered against God's will (e.g., abolition of slavery, civil rights for blacks, interracial marriage, removal of the priesthood ban, birth control) are now held to be moral and acceptable by the church.

How do we know if a doctrine or standard taught today is an unchangeable eternal truth or just a socio-cultural tradition that will change one day? Given the above precedents, we must be willing to ask some sincere and probing questions with respect to the church's current stance on homosexuality. Is the church justified in resisting societal acceptance of homosexuality, or is it simply holding to past traditions and views that are causing harm to those affected, as it previously did on civil rights and the priesthood ban? Is it really God's will that His children born with a homosexual orientation be required to live their entire lives in celibacy without the emotional, physical and spiritual attachment of someone they are naturally attracted to? Do we have the courage of a President Kimball to even ask these questions and consider whether the current position is truly God's will or whether it, too, could be in error?

Two Basic Premises

To take these questions seriously and to understand the reasoning and logic that follow, it is assumed the reader already understands and accepts two basic premises:

1. Being gay is not a choice.³⁰ A person's sexual orientation, or attraction to one sex or the other, is instinctive and innate. It typically begins to manifest at an early age and grows in

Delbert L. Stapley letter to George Romney, January 23, 1964, "I am not against a Civil Rights Bill if it conforms to the views of the Prophet Joseph Smith... I fully agree the Negro is entitled to considerations also stated above, but not full social benefits nor inter-marriage privileges with the Whites, nor should the Whites be forced to accept them into restricted White areas. In my judgment, the present proposed Bill of Rights is vicious legislation..." http://www.mormonmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/01/delbert_stapley.pdf

³⁰ M. Russell Ballard, "The Lord Needs You Now," *Ensign*, Sep 2015: "Let us be clear: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes that 'the experience of same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people. The attraction itself is not a sin, but acting on it is. Even though individuals do not choose to have such attractions, they do choose how to respond to them.'"

April 2006 Interview with Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Lance B. Wickman, "Elder Oaks: The Church does not have a position on the causes of any of these susceptibilities or inclinations, including those related to same-gender attraction. Those are scientific questions — whether nature

great intensity with sexual maturation. While the etiology of sexual orientation is not yet fully understood (although there is strong evidence of a biological/genetic component), we have the testimony of countless numbers of gay people – including members of our own church – who have told us that their sexual orientation is innate and not chosen, and that intensive and persistent effort to change it has not succeeded.

2. Homosexuals are just as capable as heterosexuals of forming committed, love-based relationships with a person they are naturally attracted to. And those relationships can be just as edifying and meaningful as the relationships formed by heterosexual couples. (Note that acceptance of this premise does not require belief that it is acceptable to God.)

If you do not know any gay people personally and have not had the opportunity to really talk to them about their life experience, particularly those who are in committed same-sex relationships, you may not be able to accept either or both of the above premises, and therefore may be unable to seriously consider what follows in this article. If that is the case, to make this article more meaningful, perhaps you can accept these premises on a hypothetical basis until you have the opportunity to get to know a good number of gay people, understand their experience and make your own observations.³¹

or nurture — those are things the Church doesn't have a position on." <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/interview-oaks-wickman-same-gender-attraction>

³¹ Alternatively, you can read about their experiences. I highly recommend, *Gay Mormons?: Latter-day Saint Experiences of Same-Gender Attraction*, compiled by Brent Kerby and available on Amazon. You can also watch/listen to gay Mormons relate their own experiences here: <http://farbetweenmovie.com>

II. Examination of the Church's Position – Doctrinal Basis

The primary source of doctrine in our church is canonized scripture (the four Standard Works), as well as the open canon of continuing revelation that comes through the words of those we sustain as latter-day prophets, seers and revelators. Both of these forms of doctrine are addressed below.

Canonized Scripture

With respect to canonized scripture, there is very little content on homosexuality and nothing that addresses the modern development of love-based same-sex relationships and marriage. The latter-day scriptural canon – the Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants and Pearl of Great Price – contain no prohibition against and are completely silent on homosexuality. In the four gospels of the New Testament, Jesus spoke of marriage, divorce and the sin of adultery but he never directly addressed homosexuality.

The two most direct passages in the Bible come from the Law of Moses and an epistle of Paul. Leviticus 18:22 states, “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.” In Romans 1:26-27 (NIV) Paul speaks of women who “exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones,” and of men who in the same way “abandoned natural relations with women” and “committed shameful acts with other men.”

While much of the conservative Christian world cites these scriptures as primary evidence of God's prohibition of homosexual behavior, perhaps somewhat surprisingly the LDS church and its leaders rarely do. For instance, the church's mormonandgay.org website, its most comprehensive resource on this topic, does not cite the Romans and Leviticus passages. Nor does the LDS.org Gospel Topics entry for “homosexuality” (which redirects to “same-sex attraction”). A search of general conference talks in the last 25-plus years shows that only five referenced the Romans and Leviticus passages – three were from Elder Russell M. Nelson and two were from Elder Boyd K. Packer (see Appendix 1).³²

Why is it that current church teachings on homosexuality and same-sex marriage rarely cite the two main biblical passages that most evangelicals (and likely most Mormon laity) rely on as evidence of God's prohibition of same-sex relationships? Perhaps our church leadership (and Correlation) recognize that more rigorous biblical scholarship does not adequately support the conventional interpretation, or at least that those scriptures do not really address the modern development of love-based same-sex relationships. While it is beyond the scope of this article to engage in a thorough exegesis of these passages (there are many other sources that do this quite ably), I will give a brief summary of some of the arguments made by some biblical scholars as to why these passages should not be used as evidence against same-sex marriage.

³² The New Testament and Old Testament Student Manuals, Seminary manuals, and Preach My Gospel still reference these passages when discussing homosexuality.

The Leviticus passage is one of many prohibitions given to the children of Israel to set them apart from their Canaanite and Egyptian neighbors as God's covenant people (Lev 11:9-12). Like other moral codes in ancient times, the Law of Moses had specific restrictions pertaining to diet and sexual relations. Some of them we follow today, others we do not. For instance, women who were menstruating were considered unclean, as was anything or anyone they touched. Having sex with a menstruating woman was strictly forbidden and required excommunication of both participants (see Lev 15:19-27; 18:19; 20:18). Similarly, the eating of unclean animals, such as shellfish, was considered an "abomination" and strictly forbidden (Lev 11:9-12). No one in our church today considers these laws to be binding, or doctrine, even though they are in the Bible.

The belief in biblical inerrancy is what allowed generations past and present to cite scripture in support of: slavery, genocide of "heathen" peoples, denying women the right to vote, treating women as the property of their husbands, and putting homosexuals to death, to name a few. As Mormons, we believe the Bible "to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly," and therefore have some latitude in trying to discern what is of God and what is of man, time and culture. In this way, we see that there are many ideas, beliefs and even commandments found in ancient scripture that have not stood the test of time and are not believed to be of God. Therefore, we need not be inextricably bound by the Leviticus passages on homosexuality any more than we are by the passages regarding dietary codes and other sexual mores of that time.

Paul's treatment of homosexual sex in Romans (and in a few other places) was likely addressing the sexual practices common in his time and culture. Greco-Roman society viewed homosexual sex as indicative of excessive sexual desire, not as a distinct sexual orientation. Indeed, the Greeks and Romans accepted forms of homosexual behavior that would not be acceptable by many of today's standards, including prostitution, master-slave sex and pederasty.³³ It is these practices that Paul was speaking against, not the modern development of egalitarian, love-based homosexual relationships, a concept unknown in those times (for that matter, egalitarian love-based heterosexual marriage is also a relatively modern development unknown in that time³⁴). By decrying various forms of sexual promiscuity, including the homosexual behaviors common in his time, Paul was calling for Christians to reject lasciviousness and promiscuity in favor of virtuousness and chastity.

Other biblical teachings on marriage (and celibacy) can help us understand how we might be able to accept a departure from biblical tradition. Jesus explicitly taught on three separate occasions, including in the Book of Mormon, that anyone who divorced and remarried, or even someone who married a divorced person, was guilty of adultery.³⁵ This teaching is about as straightforward and unambiguous as it gets, and yet our church

³³ Matthew Vines, "The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality," <http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript/>; J.R. Daniel Kirk, PhD., "Slave Sex in Ancient Rome," <http://www.jrdkirk.com/2015/05/05/slave-sex-in-ancient-rome/>

³⁴ See Stephanie Coontz, (2005). *Marriage, a history: From obedience to intimacy or how love conquered marriage*. New York: Viking.

³⁵ Matt 5:31-32; Matt 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; 3 Nephi 12:32.

doctrine does not prohibit divorce (even of a temple sealing) as the Catholic church does. Why has our church been willing to make exception to this clear teaching from the Savior himself? Nothing in LDS canon or latter-day revelation changed what Jesus taught about divorce, yet the church's acceptance of divorce is at direct odds with his teachings.

Historically speaking, this acceptance is likely related to our practice of polygamy, which was quite liberal in its allowance of divorce because of the difficult circumstances polygamous relationships sometimes created. But it may also relate to the acknowledgement that mortal life and relationships can be messy and imperfect, often falling short of the ideal. Yet with mercy and understanding the church allows our members who fall short of that ideal to divorce and remarry – or maybe recognizes the reality that people will do so regardless of church mandate. We might ask whether the same mercy could be extended to our gay members whose situation does not fit the heteronormative ideal.

After hearing Jesus' condemnation of divorce, his disciples observed, "it is not good to marry," which prompted further teaching from Jesus on the subject of celibacy. Jesus' response to his disciples' observation was that "All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given." In other words, celibacy is not a universal requirement but can be a gift to some people. He then explained how some eunuchs (or those who have no desire or attraction for a woman) were born that way, some were made eunuchs of men (a common station in the ancient world) and, perhaps most interestingly, some "made themselves eunuchs [or celibate] for the kingdom of heaven's sake." He again reiterated that this was not a universal principle, stating, "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it."³⁶

What does this mean for our gay brothers and sisters? Perhaps there are some gay members who feel they are among the few "to whom it is given" to be able to live a life of celibacy in order to fully devote themselves to Christ and his gospel (or under current circumstances, to remain in full fellowship in the church). Because they are "able to receive it," they willingly make themselves celibate "for the kingdom of heaven's sake." But we must remember that the ability to make this great sacrifice is a gift given to few and not a universal requirement, at least not required of any of our heterosexual members. Most of us believe that "it is not good for man to be alone" and that marriage and lifelong companionship with the one we love is a crowning experience of mortal life.

Are the biblical prohibitions against homosexual relations applicable to those in loving, committed relationships or are they like the biblical and religious traditions that have not stood the test of time? Perhaps with respect to some of these ancient laws there are underlying doctrinal concepts that are eternal even if the specific laws themselves were not. For instance, biblical prohibitions against usury (interest) are not relevant by today's standards, but the underlying concept of not taking financial advantage of others would seem to be an eternal principle. And while we no longer judge suicide as equivalent to murder, we still believe in the underlying concept of the sanctity of human life.

³⁶ Matt 19:10-12.

By the same token, perhaps the eternal principle underlying the biblical prohibition on homosexual relations pertains to the law of chastity, which teaches that the greatest and most meaningful expression of human sexuality is found in an exclusive, committed, love-based relationship (i.e., marriage). Therefore, in studying any of the Bible passages that regulate sexual conduct, we should consider how the law of chastity informs them and whether the deeper meaning of that law applies to all who abide by it, regardless of sexual orientation.

Modern-day Teachings

As previously discussed, the Church's recent teachings on the subject of homosexuality and same-sex marriage generally do not draw on the biblical verses prohibiting homosexual relations. Rather, church leaders have developed a theological argument in response to the recent development of same-sex marriage. This theological argument appears to be based on the church's teachings on eternal marriage, the Plan of Salvation and gender complementarity as set forth in various documents including:

- The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 1995
- First Presidency Statement on Same-Gender Marriage, 2004³⁷
- The Divine Institution of Marriage, 2008³⁸
- Letter from First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve to all church units in the U.S. and Canada after the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling legalizing same-sex marriage, 2015³⁹

While the doctrinal exposition contained in these documents is quite spare, they appear to be the primary documents the church cites in support of its position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Of these documents, "The Divine Institution of Marriage" is the most comprehensive and, in the church's own words, "outline[s] its doctrine and position on marriage."⁴⁰ Therefore, my examination of the church's position will focus on the concepts contained in that document.

One stated purpose of the document is to affirm that "intimate relations are acceptable to God only between a husband and a wife." In response to that statement, one might ask, "why?" Why is sex between a married man and woman acceptable to God but sex between

³⁷ <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/first-presidency-statement-on-same-gender-marriage>

³⁸ The church's website does not date this document: <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/the-divine-institution-of-marriage>. An original PDF version provides the date and context for the document, which was in support of the church's political campaign for Proposition 8 in the state of California. The current document has been modified somewhat extensively from the original, here: http://www.uvu.edu/religiousstudies/docs/mormonamerican/lds_newsroom_the_divine_institution_of_marriage.pdf

³⁹ <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/top-church-leaders-counsel-members-after-supreme-court-same-sex-marriage-decision>

⁴⁰ <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/supreme-court-decision-will-not-alter-doctrine-on-marriage>

two married men or two married women not acceptable to God? To those who are born heterosexual – the dominant majority – and into a culture where heteronormativity is a given, to ask “why” may seem preposterous, not even worth serious thought. But to someone born homosexual, that question is enormous, life-impacting, soul-searching, to some even a matter of life and death.

Are we absolutely certain of God’s will on this subject? How can we be so certain of the answer that we are willing to deprive the homosexual minority of something that we in the heterosexual majority consider one of the crowning experiences of mortal life? How can we require something of them that we ourselves are not asked to do? To these questions, the church has given no direct answer. Our gay members may justifiably wonder if church leaders have seriously asked “why?” Have they tried to consider it from the perspective of a gay person? Have they asked God in humility for an answer? Has the prophet received a revelation specific to this issue? Some members of the church may cite the Proclamation on the Family as the revelatory answer to these hard questions. But when President Packer referred to the Proclamation as a “revelation” in his October 2010 conference address, that reference was deleted from the official transcript (along with other incorrect statements).⁴¹

The church’s requirement for gay people – celibacy – is, ironically, considered a false and apostate doctrine.⁴² All members are expected to be sexually abstinent until marrying, but only gay people are required to live lifelong celibacy. Because gay people do not appear to fit into the church’s theology of eternal progression and the Plan of Salvation, and because church leaders have not received revelation or had the time or will to develop a theology that can encompass the wide variety of sexual/gender identity and orientation that we are only now beginning to recognize in God’s children, gay people are simply told “no, not for you.” As one concerned father of a gay son describes it:

Celibacy is the prescribed solution for the question to which we have no revelation. It is not mentioned in the Proclamation. It is not [taught] in the Bible. Neither celibacy nor homosexuality is mentioned in any work of modern scripture... There is no modern apostle or prophet who has expounded on how to live a celibate life. There is no handbook, guide or Church website addressing the subject. It is just expected. It is what you are left with when the commandments leave you nothing else.⁴³

In sum, celibacy appears to be the fallback position when prophetic vision, theological innovation and Godlike empathy fail. Rather than envision what might be possible, it is easier to default to “that’s how it’s always been” or “society may change but God does not change.” This same reasoning was used by those who defended slavery, objected to

⁴¹ Boyd K. Packer, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” October 2010 General Conference, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/cleansing-the-inner-vessel?lang=eng&r=1> (compare audio/video talk at 00:45 to paragraph three in the text); see also, <http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/home/50440474-76/packer-church-question-speech.html.csp>

⁴² Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, “Apostasy” and “Celibacy.” There is no entry for “celibacy” in the Gospel Topics section of LDS.org.

⁴³ Thomas Montgomery, “The Doctrine of Celibacy,” <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/the-doctrine-of-celibacy/>.

women's suffrage, feared the civil rights movement, and upheld the priesthood/temple ban as God's will. This way of thinking is aptly described by the Proverb, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Prov 29:18)⁴⁴

I use this proverb in the way President Gordon B. Hinckley did in his October 1995 general conference talk, "Stay the Course – Keep the Faith." In that talk he stated:

I cannot understand those of small vision, who regard this work as limited and provincial. They have no expanding view of it. As certainly as there is an Almighty Father in Heaven, as surely as there is His Son, our Divine Redeemer, so certainly is this work destined to reach out to people everywhere.

He then told the story of Joshua and Caleb, who, with ten of their brethren, were tasked with spying out the land of Canaan and reporting back to the people. The ten gave reports filled with doubt and fear while Joshua and Caleb's reports embodied faith and optimism. President Hinckley summarized the story in a way that appears to describe an oft-repeated pattern:

*But the people were more willing to believe the ten doubters than to believe Caleb and Joshua. **Then it was that the Lord declared that the children of Israel should wander in the wilderness forty years until the generation of those who had walked with doubt and fear should pass away.***

Because we as a church are so unwilling to embrace the paradigm-shifting views of our founding prophet or to sincerely question the status quo, are we destined to wander in the wilderness for 40 years while our LGBT brothers and sisters continue to perish for the lack of vision? Sadly, the positions the church has taken on LGBT issues over the last 20 years do not appear to have originated out of a sincere petitioning of the Lord for further light and knowledge on how the Plan of Salvation can embrace LGBT people, or even out of basic love and concern for our LGBT members. Rather these positions and policies mostly appear to have been a defensive response to political and societal trends towards acceptance of same-sex marriage. The church's statements and press releases sometimes feel no different than the culture wars waged in secular society, where empathy and mutual understanding have all but disappeared. The result is an "us versus them" mentality in our own church, where LGBT people are seen as the enemy rather than as our brothers and sisters. Is it any wonder that suicides among our gay youth have skyrocketed in this same time period? Truly, where there is no vision, the people perish.

The celibacy requirement made logical sense with the old way of thinking about homosexuality – when it was thought to be like a contagion that would ensnare others unless it were essentially quarantined by forced celibacy and public opprobrium. But with the greater light and knowledge brought about by science and by actually listening to gay people's lived experience, society – and the church – mostly abandoned that line of thinking, realizing that gay people do not choose their sexual orientation and that there is

⁴⁴ More accurate translations provide a different interpretation of this proverb, but the interpretation used in this paper is commonly used in the church, including by President Hinckley.

nothing inherently immoral about being attracted to one's own sex. But the church's doctrine evolved to a point that leaves gay people in a kind of no-man's land where their being gay is, thankfully, not considered sinful anymore, but giving expression to their natural affections and capacities for love and human intimacy – even in lawful monogamous marriage – is still considered a “grievous sin.”⁴⁵

If the church has been able to change its position on the causes and nature of homosexuality so dramatically from the incorrect teachings of past prophets, based on science, listening to the experiences of LGBT people and their families and, hopefully, based on enlightenment and divine inspiration, why is its position on same-sex relationships and marriage still informed by the teachings of those same past leaders whose understanding was unenlightened and incorrect? Based on some of the things they continue to teach, as discussed below, it appears that some church leaders still hold the old view that unchecked homosexuality – specifically, gay marriage – can spread like a contagion to heterosexuals and that gay people can influence heterosexuals to become gay, thus threatening traditional marriage and the bearing of children.

Having mostly publicly abandoned the old view that homosexuality is a chosen condition that goes against God's will by its very being, the church's rationale for lifelong celibacy now focuses on the “divinity” of marriage and the divine roles of husband/father and wife/mother, declaring that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. In the Divine Institution of Marriage (referred to hereafter as “the Marriage document”), the church makes three chief arguments in support of this declaration and in opposition to same-sex marriage. None are new or unique – all have been cited in legal briefs and in non-LDS sources by parties opposed to same-sex marriage at one time or another.

1. Procreation argument – *Marriage is closely linked to procreation and only a man and a woman have the biological capacity to procreate; therefore, only men and women should be allowed to marry.*

The first problem with the procreation argument is that it is only applied to homosexuals but not to heterosexual couples. Heterosexual couples who do not have the biological capacity to procreate (due to menopause, disease, injury, etc.) are still able to marry. And there are couples who have been previously married, had children, then gotten divorced or been widowed, and find themselves wanting to remarry but not wanting to have more children. The couples in these marriages are either unable or not desirous to fulfill God's injunction to Adam and Eve to multiply and replenish the Earth; yet, according to the church's position, God still accepts these marriages that are entered into solely for love and companionship.

⁴⁵ See for instance, Elder Christofferson's interview on the Policy, Nov 6, 2015: “We regard same-sex marriage as a particularly grievous or significant, serious kind of sin that requires Church discipline” <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/handbook-changes-same-sex-marriages-elder-christofferson>. As discussed later, even with a softer more compassionate tone, this teaching still sends the message that gay people are inherently defective.

Furthermore, as quoted above in the Church Handbook of Instructions, “Married couples should also understand that sexual relations within marriage are divinely approved not only for the purpose of procreation, but also as a way of expressing love and strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds between husband and wife.” Thus, the church does not require marriage and sexual relations within marriage to be solely for the purpose of procreation with respect to heterosexuals, so why does it use the procreation argument against homosexuals?

If heterosexuals who have no ability or intention to procreate are allowed to marry solely for love and companionship, why can’t homosexuals also be allowed to marry solely for love and companionship? If they have the same capacity as heterosexuals to form loving, lasting unions, and their intimate relations within those marital unions also serve “as a way of expressing love and strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds,” then how do we know that such unions are not divinely approved?

Another problem with the procreation argument is that it is inconsistent with the church’s prescription of celibacy for gay people. The church argues against same-sex marriage because a gay couple is unable to procreate and propagate the species, yet the church’s prescription of celibacy has the same outcome. Whether in a same-sex marriage or living in celibacy, a gay person’s ability to procreate doesn’t change. Therefore, it seems illogical to tell a gay person, “You should be denied the blessings of marriage to the one you love because you can’t procreate,” and to follow that with, “our answer for you is to live a celibate life.”

Finally, there is the unfounded fear that because gay people can’t procreate, society’s acceptance of same-sex marriage would result in rapidly declining birthrates and the depopulation of a nation.⁴⁶ This logic seems to be based on the old “contagion” view of homosexuality and that acceptance of same-sex marriage would somehow influence heterosexuals to change their sexual orientation or to stop procreating. This view is hard to fathom. For those of us who are heterosexual, can we imagine becoming attracted to our own sex and losing all attraction to the opposite sex simply because we know happily-married gay people? Whether married or single, gay people – who have always existed and who make up a small minority of the population – aren’t going to affect national birthrates and aren’t going to cause straight people to turn gay.

⁴⁶ Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p. 40: “If the abominable practice became universal it would depopulate the earth in a single generation.”

Dallin H. Oaks, “Principles to Govern Possible Public Statement on Legislation Affecting Rights of Homosexuals,” August 7, 1984, p. 19: “One generation of homosexual ‘marriage’ would depopulate a nation, and, if sufficiently widespread, would extinguish its people. Our marriage laws should not abet national suicide.”

James E. Faust, September 1995 First Presidency Message, “Serving the Lord and Resisting the Devil,” *Ensign*: “If [homosexuality were] practiced by all adults, these life-styles would mean the end of the human family.”

2. Complementarianism argument – Only marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God because of the complementary natures of male and female.

The Marriage document states:

*The special status granted marriage is nevertheless closely linked to the inherent powers and responsibilities of procreation and to the **innate differences between the genders**. By contrast, same-sex marriage is an institution no longer linked to gender—to the **biological realities and complementary natures of male and female**.*

Complementarianism is the theological view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, religious leadership and elsewhere. The church appears to accept complementarianism as doctrine, and further holds that the complementarity of male and female provides a rationale for denying marital unions to those of the same sex. The first problem with this rationale is that it seems to imply that true romantic/emotional/spiritual love can only exist between male and female, and that a same-sex couple – because they do not have complementarity of biological sex – are incapable of that kind of love. This assumption can be tested by observing and talking to same-sex couples about their relationships. Once you really get to know such couples, particularly those who have been together for many years, any doubts about the reality of their love and companionship are easily dispelled.

It is true that the opposing but complementary nature of the sexes has inspired art, music, literature and philosophy throughout the ages. There is beauty and mystery in contemplating the unity of opposites symbolized in the union of male and female. But is this aesthetic made any less true or beautiful by the existence of same-sex unions? The male/female aesthetic holds true for the vast majority of the world's population. Is it really threatened by the small minority of gay people whose "biological reality" does not encompass romantic love and desire for the opposite sex but who are perfectly capable of love for those of the same sex? The existence of gay people, with their unique gifts, abilities and love, could be seen as another expression of the wondrous variation found in all God's creations. As children of God, gay people have their own unique aesthetic that should be considered complementary, but in no way destructive, to the heteronormative aesthetic.

The church frequently cites the creation narrative in making its argument. In Genesis we read of God creating Adam and stating, "It is not good that the man should be alone," then making a woman as a "helpmeet" for him, who is later referred to as Adam's wife. But is it right to interpret this account as an edict against same-sex marriage? Such an interpretation reads more into the narrative than is actually there. Just because God created a man and woman in the beginning and intended for them to pair up and procreate doesn't mean that the gay people He created aren't also intended to be able to pair up according to their natural-born attraction. Some may argue that this account illustrates a divine pattern for marriage that same-sex marriage violates. But that divine pattern – a marriage between one man and one woman – was broken repeatedly in the Bible (and of course in our own church) by the practice of polygamy. In addition, that original biblical pattern had to allow for incestuous marriages among Adam and Eve's children and

posterity, which was later strictly prohibited in the Law of Moses and by the standards of most societies. This observation shows us that we should be careful about taking this story too literally or extrapolating it to situations to which it does not apply in order to support a particular position (known as proof texting).

Some look to the future state of an eternally married man and woman, the potential to become like our Heavenly Parents, and the mention of “continuation of the seeds” in D&C 132:19 as evidence of some kind of spiritual procreation that precludes same-sex marriage in the afterlife. Even if these theological ideas are taken literally, they are not weakened or negated by allowing the small number of God’s children who do not fit that mold the opportunity to marry in this life. Moreover, there are three degrees in the Celestial Kingdom, and only one requires the “new and everlasting covenant of marriage”⁴⁷ (which early church leaders and members took to mean plural marriage but has now been defined as eternal marriage between one man and one woman). So even taking a very literal approach to this scripture, there are still two degrees in the Celestial Kingdom that do not require marriage between a man and a woman (or women), which could leave room for same-sex married couples as well as single individuals.⁴⁸

Perhaps most importantly, the limited extent of our knowledge of the afterlife regarding sex, procreation, marriage relationships and becoming Heavenly Parents should cause us to be more humble and cautious in how we interpret and apply this knowledge. Terryl Givens’ exhaustive treatment of these doctrines and their genesis shows how little we really know. For example, he states:

*The impossibility of establishing with certainty Smith’s position on spirit birth as opposed to spirit adoption is one of many points of indeterminacy in the Mormon past, and a reminder of how much fog enshrouded a narrative that is at times depicted as clear and unfailingly linear in the modern church. It is possible that Smith was undecided relative to two scenarios of human creation. More likely, perhaps, is the fact that neither adoption nor procreation is an adequate human analogue for the process by which Smith believed eternally existing intelligent element (or beings) to be transformed into individual human spirits.*⁴⁹

Are we justified in imposing such a drastic restriction on our gay brothers and sisters in this life based on doctrinal speculations that may be more metaphorical than literal and about which we have little to no actual revelation? **Should incomplete, uncertain knowledge of the specifics of the afterlife trump what we can know with certainty in this life: that Heavenly Father’s gay children are fully capable of forming loving, meaningful relationships with those to whom they are naturally attracted?**

⁴⁷ D&C 131:1-4.

⁴⁸ Personally, I do not favor interpreting D&C 131 this way as it puts people on a different standing through no fault of their own and regardless of their faithfulness and character.

⁴⁹ Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, p. 157; see also, pp. 107-110; 156-165; see also, Taylor Petrey, “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue*, vol. 44, no. 4, Winter 2011.

Allowing gay people the right to love and marry in accordance with their “biological reality” need not threaten the doctrines that spring from the creation narrative of Adam and Eve or the eternal nature of the family or eternal progression. Those doctrines still apply to the vast majority of God’s children who are heterosexual. If we ceased trying to shoehorn gay people into conformance with those doctrines, allowing them the same blessings and benefits that heterosexuals derive from marriage, it would not negate, devalue or change in any way these doctrines as they apply to heterosexuals. We would just have to humbly acknowledge that at the present time we do not have answers for how those doctrines relate to God’s LGBT children but that we are confident He has a wondrous plan for them and loves them as much as He does His heterosexual children.

3. Families and children argument – Redefining marriage will further weaken the institution of marriage and undermine the family.

For this argument in the Marriage document, the church cites a number of academic studies, books and articles that are frequently cited by conservative religious and political groups opposed to same-sex marriage and LGBT rights. While traditionally there has been much mistrust by church leaders and membership of academia – particularly the social sciences – on issues of family and marriage, the church has embraced the sources that align with its position. However, by citing only those sources that align with its position and ignoring the numerous studies and personal experiences that reach different conclusions, the church’s document is lacking in intellectual integrity.

Moreover, if the church is going to step out of the realm of doctrine and theology and into the realm of academic research and political punditry, it can no longer hold its position to be inerrant, unchallengeable or equivalent to the voice of God. To the extent its position relies on science and reason (which is generally a good thing in my opinion), it should be subject to thorough examination such that, ultimately, “truth will prevail.” Or as Brigham Young said, “Be willing to receive the truth, let it come from whom it may”⁵⁰ – even if such truth doesn’t support the current position.

Before addressing the specific claims in this section, it should be noted that using families and children as an argument against same-sex marriage is a non sequitur. Unlike heterosexual marriage, children do not automatically result from a same-sex marriage. And the banning of same-sex marriage will not stop some gay couples from having children. Therefore, if the church opposes gay couples raising children, that should be the subject of its prohibition – not same-sex marriage. Notwithstanding, it is acknowledged that with the improved social standing, stability and legal rights granted by legal marriage, more gay couples who choose to marry may desire to have families than had they not had that right. Therefore, I address the following church arguments.

⁵⁰ *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, (1997), 14–20

The church states:

Extensive studies have shown, however, that a husband and wife who are united in a loving, committed marriage generally provide the ideal environment for protecting, nurturing, and raising children. This is in part because of the differing qualities and strengths that husbands and wives bring to the task by virtue of their gender. As an eminent academic on family life has written:

“The burden of social science evidence supports the idea that gender differentiated parenting is important for human development and that the contribution of fathers to child rearing is unique and irreplaceable. . . . The complementarity of male and female parenting styles is striking and of enormous importance to a child’s overall development.”

This is the gender complementarity argument applied to parenting. The church cites a number of studies in support of the first statement, which seems like common sense. One could hardly argue that a loving, committed marriage does not provide the ideal environment for raising children; however, such a claim does not demonstrate that two wives or two husbands cannot have a loving, committed relationship that would also provide an ideal environment for raising children. In fact, gay couples who choose to have or adopt children, do so with great forethought – it’s not something that can happen by accident as so often does with heterosexual couples. In my experience knowing a number of same-sex couples who have had children, they are some of the most devoted and loving parents I have ever seen. Rather than relying on secular studies and conventional wisdom for critical doctrinal positions, the church might also consider doing its own “research” by meeting in the homes of gay families and discerning for themselves the spirit that exists in those homes, the strength of their marriages, and how their children are faring.

With respect to the gender complementarity argument in parenting, this argument fails to consider that not all heterosexual marriages have distinct gender roles and characteristics. For instance, the man in the marriage may not exhibit all the traits society or the church considers to be masculine (e.g., emotionally reserved, athletic, career-minded, aggressive) but instead may exhibit many of the traits considered to be essentially feminine (e.g., sensitive, nurturing, artistic, passive). By the same token, two husbands or two wives in a same-sex union may exhibit the full complement of masculine and feminine traits, thereby qualifying for the supposed benefits such traits convey. Regardless, studies show that children raised by same-sex couples do not differ markedly from those raised by heterosexual parents, as summarized in this research summary by the American Psychological Association over 12 years ago:

Results of social science research have failed to confirm any of these concerns about children of lesbian and gay parents. Research suggests that sexual identities (including gender identity, gender-role behavior, and sexual orientation) develop in much the same ways among children of lesbian mothers as they do among children of heterosexual parents. Studies of other aspects of personal development (including personality, self-concept, and conduct) similarly reveal few differences

between children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual parents. ... The picture that emerges from research is one of general engagement in social life with peers, parents, family members, and friends. ... Overall, results of research suggest that the development, adjustment, and well-being of children with lesbian and gay parents do not differ markedly from that of children with heterosexual parents.⁵¹

In the Conclusion section of the Marriage document, the church states:

When marriage is undermined by gender confusion and by distortions of its God-given meaning, the rising generation of children and youth will find it increasingly difficult to develop their natural identities as men or women. Some will find it more difficult to engage in wholesome courtships, form stable marriages, and raise another generation imbued with moral strength and purpose.

This is a bold statement – again drawing on the old “contagion” theory – and not surprisingly the church cites no scientific studies for its support. That is because there are no reputable studies, it is simply opinion. And this opinion demonstrates a lack of basic understanding by conflating sexual orientation and gender identity. Also, it provides no explanation for how same-sex marriage will make it harder for heterosexuals to date and have stable marriages. As previously discussed, such a claim just doesn’t make sense.

Before concluding this section, I feel it is important to address one more doctrinal issue that has been cropping up with more frequency in recent years. It is the unfounded doctrinal speculation that a faithful gay person will be “cured” or changed to heterosexual in the next life. This teaching likely stems from the church’s 2006 Wickman/Oaks interview on same-gender attraction.⁵² In that interview, Elder Wickman stated:

One question that might be asked by somebody who is struggling with same-gender attraction is ... “If I can somehow make it through this life, when I appear on the other side, what will I be like?”

Gratefully, the answer is that same-gender attraction did not exist in the pre-earth life and neither will it exist in the next life. It is a circumstance that for whatever reason or reasons seems to apply right now in mortality, in this nano-second of our eternal existence. ... [You’re] not stuck with it forever. It’s just now.

Straight people may take some comfort in this doctrine because it helps them reconcile the obvious unfairness gay people face in this life through no fault of their own. If they can just remain celibate in this life, all will be made right in the next life when they are changed. But

⁵¹ “Sexual Orientation, Parents, & Children,” Adopted by the APA Council of Representatives July 28 & 30, 2004, *citations omitted*, <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/parenting.aspx>; see also, Columbia Law School Public Policy Research Portal, <http://whatweknow.law.columbia.edu/topics/lgbt-equality/what-does-the-scholarly-research-say-about-the-wellbeing-of-children-with-gay-or-lesbian-parents/>

⁵² Wickman/Oaks interview <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/interview-oaks-wickman-same-gender-attraction>

this belief is actually quite damaging – similar to the hurtful folk doctrines white church members made up about black people’s lack of valiance in the pre-existence to reconcile the unfair and discriminatory way they were treated in the church. This speculative doctrine is damaging to gays for a number of reasons. First, many gay people consider being married to a person of the opposite sex for eternity to be an awful prospect. To see it from their perspective, consider how a straight man would feel about being changed to homosexual in the afterlife and being married to another man for the rest of eternity.

Furthermore, many gay people feel that their gay identity is more than just a sexual orientation and comes bundled with a host of gifts such as, for instance, empathy, artistic expression and spirituality. They do not want their homosexuality changed because it would feel like giving up an integral part of who they are and losing all the unique gifts that come with being gay. But to others whose same-sex attraction feels like a constant weight dragging them down to destruction, this new folk doctrine may make suicide seem like a better choice, or even the only means of finally being rid of their evil desires and susceptibilities. For these reasons, I sincerely hope that the church would put an end to the teaching of this speculative and unfounded doctrine.

Doctrinal Basis Conclusion

Given all the above doctrinal considerations, and particularly if we acknowledge that sexual orientation is not chosen, can’t be spread like a contagion, and that gay people are just as capable as heterosexuals of forming committed, meaningful marriage relationships, we must be willing to ask the following questions:

Do we really have absolute doctrinal certainty that God’s will for His children who are born with a homosexual orientation is lifelong celibacy without the emotional, physical and spiritual attachment of someone they are naturally attracted to and can fall in love with?

Are we so certain of God’s will on this subject that we are willing to accept as consequences: depression and personal anguish to the point of suicide in some cases, and loss of faith in God and the church in the majority of cases?

Are we as a church rightfully resisting societal acceptance of homosexuality, or are we simply holding to past traditions and internal biases that are causing severe harm to gay people, as we previously did with the blacks and the priesthood? Is it possible that society is moving in the right direction, as it generally has over the ages on so many other social issues?

In addition to believing that God can provide an answer, any serious consideration of such admittedly difficult questions requires godlike empathy, humility and courage. President Kimball’s experience leading up to the 1978 revelation provides a near perfect model of these traits. Once black people became more than an abstract doctrinal issue to him, and he came to know and understand them as real people, he developed a godlike empathy for

them.⁵³ It wasn't until he obtained that empathy, and was humble enough to admit the church could be wrong, that he even had the capacity to actually question the church's position and to begin studying the issue and petitioning the Lord for more understanding. As President Hinckley said of President Kimball:

Here was a little man, filled with love, able to reach out to people . . . He was not the first to worry about the priesthood question, but he had the compassion to pursue it and a boldness that allowed him to act, to get the revelation.⁵⁴

Reflecting back on those times, President Kimball recalled his personal struggle:

Day after day, and especially on Saturdays and Sundays when there were no organizations [sessions] in the temple, I went there when I could be alone.

I was very humble . . . I was searching for this . . . I wanted to be sure. . . .

I had a great deal to fight . . . myself, largely, because I had grown up with this thought that Negroes should not have the priesthood and I was prepared to go all the rest of my life until my death and fight for it and defend it as it was.⁵⁵

Despite years of prophetic precedent and the statements of so many past leaders, he had the courage to question, and even greater courage to begin talking to his fellow brethren of the Twelve and First Presidency about his questioning, which ultimately paved the way for the confirming spirit of revelation and unanimous acceptance by the quorum.

Not only was the Spirit working on President Kimball, but it was also working on many faithful members of the church who knew in their hearts long before 1978 that the church's position was not of God. How did they know? An oft-cited example for testing prophetic pronouncements is this statement from President J. Reuben Clark:

I say it illustrates a principle – that even the President of the Church, himself, may not always be 'moved upon by the Holy Ghost,' when he addresses the people. This has happened about matters of doctrine (usually of a highly speculative character) where subsequent Presidents of the Church and the peoples themselves have felt that in declaring the doctrine, the announcer was not 'moved upon by the Holy Ghost.'

*How shall the Church know when these adventurous expeditions of the brethren into these highly speculative principles and doctrines meet the requirements of the statutes that the announcers thereof have been 'moved upon by the Holy Ghost'? **The Church will know by the testimony of the Holy Ghost in the body of the members, whether***

⁵³ "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," Edward L. Kimball, *BYU Studies* 47 no. 2, pp. 37-38, 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

*the brethren in voicing their views are ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost’; and in due time that knowledge will be made manifest.*⁵⁶

How can we know if the controversial positions and teachings of the brethren on homosexuality are from the Holy Ghost? Have the members of the church received the confirming testimony of the Holy Ghost on this issue, or do they simply accept what our leaders have said because the issue does not affect them personally? How much time must pass, during which gay people continue to suffer and some commit suicide, until “due time” is reached and the truth or error is sufficiently made manifest?

Many members *have* received answers to this question by the power of the Holy Ghost. They include our gay members who have wrestled for years with this question and have paid the price to know – they have studied, pondered, gone to the temple, and pleaded with God in the depths of humility to know what He wants for them. They include faithful parents, who have desperately sought answers to help them teach and raise their LGBT children in a way to best balance their spiritual and emotional wellbeing. They include members who are neither gay nor have LGBT family members but who have hearts that know and feel with a Godlike empathy the pains our gay brothers and sisters have had to bear.

Some of the things said by our church leaders seem to indicate that they do not yet have a very good understanding of or godlike empathy for our LGBT members and their families. They may not have reached the place President Kimball did where they are willing to sincerely and humbly question their long-held opinions on this issue. For those of us who feel so certain in our understanding of God’s will, we would do well to remember Elder McConkie’s words after having to retract what he said prior to the 1978 revelation:

*Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.*⁵⁷

There is another indication that lets us know if a doctrine taught by our leaders is truly of God. As Joseph Smith described it:

*This is good doctrine. **It tastes good.** I can taste the principles of eternal life, and so can you. They are given to me by the revelations of Jesus Christ... and when I tell you of these things which were given me by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, **you are bound to receive them as sweet, and rejoice more and more.***⁵⁸

⁵⁶ J. Reuben Clark Jr., “Church Leaders’ Words, as cited by D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” April 2012 General Conference; *see also*, James E. Faust, “The Truth Shall Make You Free,” *New Era*, March 1975; *Ensign*, July 1981; *Ensign*, September 1998.

⁵⁷ Bruce R McConkie, *BYU Speeches*, Aug 18, 1978

⁵⁸ Joseph Smith, *King Follett Sermon*, *Ensign*, May 1971.

For those who have paid the heavy price to know of the doctrine, who have yoked themselves to it and tasted its bitterness, the church's position – especially the November 2015 policy – does not taste good, it is not sweet, and it has not brought rejoicing. These are not the fruits of the Spirit.

III. Examination of the Church's Position – Moral Basis

The church would likely assert that the moral basis for any of its policies or positions is axiomatic if they are based on true doctrine. However, as explained above, there have been many teachings or doctrines – whether contained in the scriptures or taught by latter-day church leaders – that have been discarded because they are no longer believed to be true and have even been harmful. As described by President Dieter F. Uchtdorf:

And, to be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.⁵⁹

Therefore, given the potential for error in any particular doctrine that has not withstood the test of time, particularly if it is controversial and not universally accepted by the membership, this section examines the church's current position on homosexuality solely on the basis of moral reasoning, setting aside the question of whether that position is true doctrine or God's will. In other words, if an honest, moral person were not convinced that the church's position was of God, using her own God-given intellect and ability to reason, what kind of reasoning might she use to determine whether same-sex marriage is moral or immoral – setting aside all religious implications for the time being.

Love vs. Sex

In my experience, I have found that those who see same-sex relationships as sinful and immoral are focused only on the sexual aspect. They are generally unfamiliar with gay people and therefore can't even conceive of a gay person being in a loving relationship similar to that of a loving heterosexual couple. To them, being gay is only about sex. The result is that they see gay people primarily as sex objects instead of whole human beings, and they see their relationships as based only on lust and unnatural sexual desire and not on love, kindness and mutual respect.

This view is a twisted and unfair basis on which to make a moral judgment. What if this same perspective were used to view young straight couples, newly married and deeply in love? In viewing their relationships, would it be proper to think only about their private sex lives or to visualize the kinds of sex acts they performed in the privacy of their bedrooms? Would it be proper to assume that their young love was based solely on uncontrollable lust for each other, and that the only reason they got married was to satisfy their untamable sexual desire? Such a perspective is clearly unfair and would result in a perverse view of any couple's relationship, whether gay or straight. Yet this seems to be the perspective that many people use to judge gay people's relationships, which results in a faulty moral judgment.

I find it interesting that when certain church members first learn of someone they know coming out as gay, they often want to know if, or be assured that, the gay person is still celibate and what their intention is in that regard. This is such an intimate and personal

⁵⁹ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come Join With Us," October 2013 General Conference.

question, one they would likely never ask their straight acquaintances, but for some reason they feel compelled or entitled to delve into that aspect of a gay person's life. It is as though gay people are safe and acceptable only as long as they are celibate or essentially asexual; otherwise, their very existence offends the sensibilities and minds of some straight people who are now "forced" to think about gay sex. This is another example of how some straight people tend to objectify gay people.

In judging the morality of a gay couple's relationship, we should use the same perspective we use to view a straight couple's relationship. We should view them as whole human beings who have an innate desire for emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical attachment with another human being, as most humans do. We might observe such a couple to "be in love" in the same way any straight couple is. We might observe whether that love manifests itself in mutual affection, kindness, respect, compatibility, complementarity, commitment and stability, as well as physical attraction. If we generally observe these characteristics in their relationship, perhaps we may then conclude that there is no reason their relationship is any less edifying, beneficial and moral than that of a similarly situated straight couple. If so, we might conclude that a relationship between any two consenting adults who have the mental and emotional capacity to form a union based on love and mutual respect can thus be a moral relationship, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Instinct vs. Reason

Human judgment about what is moral or immoral is often not based on logic or reason but is simply a matter of gut instinct. Sexuality is one area that arouses strong positive or negative feelings in people. Heterosexuals may feel revulsion or discomfort at the thought of same-sex intimacy and may interpret those feelings as their spirit recoiling at something unnatural and immoral. However, this interpretation fails to consider that homosexuals may have the same feelings about opposite-sex intimacy. Whatever the feeling, are such gut instincts always to be trusted? Would it be proper, for instance, to judge interracial marriage as immoral just because you personally feel internal discomfort at the thought of intimacy with someone of another race? Such feelings may have been at the root of early church doctrines (and civil laws) that declared interracial marriage a sin against nature and

denied black people the priesthood and temple blessings.⁶⁰ Today of course, the church disavows that mixed-race marriage is a sin.⁶¹

Or what about the gut instincts we had as children? Think back to when you first learned how babies were made. If you were told the details while in your prepubescent childhood, perhaps on the playground at school or from an older sibling, you may have been shocked and disgusted at the thought and denied that such a thing could be proper or true. Certainly your parents would never do such a thing! Those were my thoughts when friends at school first told me. Because those feelings of disgust were so strong and the idea of sexual intercourse seemed so contrary to everything I had been taught, I could not believe in my childish mind that human sexuality could ever be acceptable or true. But with sexual maturation and development, what once seemed bizarre and disgusting all of a sudden felt instinctively natural, desirable and, of course, morally acceptable as long as it was within marriage.

Like the child who is developmentally incapable of comprehending adult human sexual intimacy, a heterosexual person may be incapable of fully comprehending same-sex intimacy. So if it is nonsensical to interpret childhood feelings about sexual intimacy as evidence of immorality, shouldn't it also be nonsensical to interpret a heterosexual's feelings about same-sex intimacy as evidence of immorality? Does it make sense that the heterosexual majority gets to decide the morality of sexual relationships for the homosexual minority? Isn't that a bit like right-handed people requiring that everyone use only their right hand for eating, writing, playing sports, etc. because that's what feels right and natural to them while using their left hand feels entirely wrong and unnatural?

If heterosexuals get to judge the morality of romantic relationships based on what feels right and natural to them, shouldn't gay people be able to use that same basis to judge their relationships? Some might protest that this line of reasoning is essentially, "if it feels good, do it." But that is faulty logic. This reasoning simply says that gay people should be able to judge the rightness and morality of their relationships the same way heterosexuals do – based on their own gut instinct but still within certain moral bounds. That basis does not give an automatic moral pass to do whatever they want with whomever they want. The same rules regarding consent, age, emotional and mental capacity and mutual respect still apply – but the rules should apply equally whether gay or straight. Therefore, if someone

⁶⁰ "Although fragmentary documentation obscures the reasons for [Brigham] Young's hardening position, his revulsion over the specter of interracial procreation apparently played a major role in his thinking. Perhaps most fundamentally, a church that emphasized forging links between the generations and eternal sealings between its members would not find it easy to incorporate black Americans within this ecclesial family." Turner, John G. (2012-09-25). *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (p. 223). Harvard University Press.

Brigham Young often advocated the death penalty for mixed-race marriage, as in this statement: "Shall I tell you the law of God in regard to the African race? If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot. This will always be so" (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 10, p. 110).

⁶¹ LDS topical essays, "Race and the Priesthood." <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>

wants to rely on their gut instinct as an indicator of morality, let them judge that morality for themselves and not for others whose gut instincts may differ.

Natural or Unnatural

One argument against same-sex relationships is that they are “unnatural” because they go against nature’s intended purpose for the sexes. However, whether something is natural or not is not necessarily a good indicator of morality. Think of the many medical advances, such as artificial joints, artificial hearts and in-vitro fertilization, that are unnatural but are not considered immoral (at least not by most people). Using one’s left hand, or being left-handed, was once viewed as unnatural but is not considered immoral (although that was not always the case – the Latin word for left is “sinister”).

As a missionary in the Missionary Training Center, I remember watching a short documentary about a woman who was born without arms but who had mastered the ability to use her feet to prepare her family’s meals, do her kids’ hair, bottle feed her baby, put on her makeup, drive a car, and, in short, do just about anything a mother with arms could do.⁶² She was doing things with her feet that at first glance, appeared unnatural and even somewhat off-putting. Using her feet to peel and cut apples or to caress her baby’s face was not what nature had intended for those body parts. But by the end of the film, I saw her as an inspiration and felt convicted for my initial feelings of discomfort. Certainly no one could say that the “unnatural” way in which she used her feet was immoral. Is it possible to countenance gay sexuality in the same light?

Setting aside whether unnatural equates to immoral, let’s simply consider the question of whether homosexuality is natural or unnatural. Those who view homosexuality as unnatural would probably cite two main reasons: (1) it cannot produce offspring, which is nature’s objective for sexual relations, and (2) gay sex itself is inherently unnatural.

Sexual reproduction evolved as a very effective means of ensuring propagation of the species – so, yes, sex for the purpose of having offspring is “natural.” **However, the vast majority of human sexual activity, including within healthy, stable marriages, is not for the purpose of reproduction but solely to express love and desire.** Does that make such sexual activity unnatural? As discussed above with respect to the church’s procreation argument, a relationship built on love does not require that sexual relations be for the sole purpose of reproducing. If the outcomes of a committed, loving same-sex relationship are just as positive and edifying as those of a heterosexual relationship, the ability to have children shouldn’t determine the “naturalness” of those relationships, whether gay or straight. In addition, there are a number of genetic and evolutionary theories that explain how homosexuality is an advantage in human societies (and actually strengthens wider

⁶² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonnie_Consolo

family units) and therefore continues to exist in a minority of the population. Based on these evolutionary advantages, homosexuality can be considered “natural.”⁶³

Whether gay sex is seen as “natural” comes down to very personal and subjective opinion that mostly hinges on one’s own sexual orientation, as discussed above in the section on gut instinct. To a straight person, the thought of same-sex intimacy feels unnatural, whereas to a gay person, heterosexual intimacy feels unnatural. In addition, heterosexual couples may engage in the same type of sexual activity that gay couples do, but there are no bedroom police to tell them what they can and can’t do or what is moral or immoral. At one time not long ago, the church used to weigh in on this aspect of couples’ sexual relations as it pertained to temple worthiness but soon thereafter left it alone.⁶⁴ Like the very personal and intimate decisions on birth control and family size, the church has left this area to married couples to decide on their own.

Finally, the church’s prescription for gay people – celibacy – is clearly not natural. Having to forgo human intimacy, physical affection and touch, romantic love, and lifelong companionship goes against human nature. To deny someone such fundamental human experience based on highly subjective personal beliefs and opinions could itself be considered immoral, especially considering all the associated negative outcomes.

Harm or Benefit

One way to judge the morality of something is if it causes harm. Does a committed, monogamous same-sex relationship cause harm? As discussed in the doctrinal section above, the church has stated its belief that same-sex marriage harms society and families because “children and youth will find it increasingly difficult to develop their natural identities as men or women. Some will find it more difficult to engage in wholesome courtships, form stable marriages.” There is simply no basis or evidence for this claim. It appears to be based on the outdated “contagion” belief that people, especially youth and children, are recruited to be gay or that their innate sexual orientation is susceptible to change due to external influences or traumatic events in their lives. For those who still think this way, they simply need to get to know gay people and learn of their life experience. Just as harmful racist notions about other races based on nothing more than oft-repeated stereotypes and internal prejudices were dispelled by actually coming to know people of different races, so too can harmful and erroneous notions about gay people be dispelled by getting to know them.

Once these erroneous notions are dispelled, it may be possible to see same-sex marriage as a benefit to society. Traditionally, society has valued the institution of marriage based on the belief that it causes young single people – who may be prone to more profligate, reckless living that can endanger the physical and emotional health of themselves and

⁶³ “The Evolutionary Puzzle of Homosexuality,” *BBC Magazine*, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26089486; see also, TED Talk by Dr. James O’Keefe, www.tedxtallaght.com/apps/videos/videos/view/next?channel_id=4249262&from_id=18991712

⁶⁴ “Prophetic Counsel about Sex Within Marriage: A Brief History,” <http://www.mormonmatters.org/2008/03/17/prophetic-counsel-about-sex-within-marriage-a-brief-history/>

others – to settle down, become responsible and think about others above themselves. If marriage really accomplishes this, why wouldn't we want it for gay people as well as straight people? Would we rather keep gay people on the margins of "acceptable" society, where hookup culture and risky behavior abound, or would we prefer that they have the same opportunity and expectations as straight people to enter into committed marriage relationships? If you were a parent whose gay child did not feel called to be celibate, what path would you prefer they take? Should the answer matter whether your child is gay or straight?

The great majority of LDS parents of gay children that I know want their gay children to have stable, committed relationships that will result in a greater likelihood of physical and emotional health and wellbeing – just as they do for their straight children. And those kinds of relationships are more likely to come from legal marriage. As LDS parents, we have taught our children from their earliest years the importance of finding a worthy husband or wife who will love and cherish them, and that the greatest joys in life come from a fulfilling marriage and family life. So should it come as any surprise that our gay children, who have internalized those teachings and seen the good examples of their parents, desire what we have? Is denying them that ideal because they are gay in their best interest, or in society's best interest? If they prefer to be in a committed marriage relationship instead of just living together, isn't that a good thing?

Moral Basis Conclusion

Again, setting aside all religious implications for the moment, if we accept the two basic premises previously introduced that (1) being gay is not a choice, and (2) gay people have the same capacity as straight people to enter into committed, loving relationships, we must ask ourselves how a love-based, committed same-sex relationship is any different or less moral than a love-based, committed heterosexual relationship. To go a step further, we should be willing to ask ourselves whether it is moral to deny gay people the right and opportunity to experience what almost every human being desires in terms of romantic love, physical and emotional connection, and lifelong companionship with someone they are naturally attracted to.

For those of us who are fully heterosexual, we should be willing to put ourselves in the shoes of our gay brothers and sisters and try to see it from their perspective. If you are a happily married man, imagine how you would feel if the majority of society told you that your relationship with your beloved wife, which you held most dear and treasured above all other earthly possessions, was depraved, unnatural and sinful. Or if a happily married woman, that the love you had for your husband was not real love, but a counterfeit version that could only lead to despair and unhappiness. That the only way to be moral and acceptable to decent society is to leave your beloved companion, and to forever shut down all desire for human intimacy and romantic love. Would you do it? Would you just accept what the majority of society told you even if your heart, mind and spirit told you your love was real, that your relationship was not unnatural, that your power and capacity to give and accept love was just as real as anyone else's?

Can we believe what our fellow gay members of the church tell us about the person they love? Are we willing to really listen to them, to understand them, and to trust them when they share the sincere feelings of their heart? Even if what they say goes against our prejudices and requires us to question historical precedent and tradition, can we give some weight to their personal experience? Consider these words from Berta Marquez:

Tonight, in the evening, after the gloaming I went to the shore to ride the waves. The sea was expansive and endless. As I went deeper and the water surrounded me I thought about how much I wanted to remember and feel the vastness of the universe, of this moment. I was grateful for the beauty of it. I had to stop in the waves to try to absorb what was around me, in the water, in the evening sky.

But the thing I want to remember most is how upon exiting the sea, my little board in tow, looking through the crowds for my companion, she had already taken the initiative to walk to where I was, towel outstretched, ready to surround me in warmth and comfort. This is the person I married, my helpmate, my fellow traveler, my wife. Every day I am legitimately awed by her thoughtfulness and kindness. I am grateful for the communion of our partnership.

I invite those who feel ambivalent about LGBT families, our lives and our marriages to reflect on this: the daily ordinary comforts, hopes and joys you cherish beat within our hearts as well. Carefully catalogue the purpose, strengths, hope and life-giving warmth you feel as you lie beside your beloved, as you wash the dishes together, as you discuss the coming days and how you hope to grow old together. Then think about asking another to forego the blessings and privileges you enjoy daily and ask if perhaps it is okay for others, though different from you in ways small or great, might not also deserve access to the same life affirming blessings you derive daily from the companion beside you. I hope you will see why the same things are vital to us, why we too need the emotional, spiritual and companionate love that makes life worth living. I hope you will see with new eyes.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ As shared in the Mormons Building Bridges Facebook group, October 12, 2015; see also: "Being Mormon, Lesbian, and in Love..." by Laura Root, <http://rationalfaiths.com/being-mormon-lesbian-and-in-love/>; and "I'm homophobic," by Chris Janousek, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/im-homophobic/>

IV. Examination of the Church's Position – Empirical Basis

The doctrinal and moral sections of this article primarily use reason and logic to examine the church's position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. This section attempts to examine the church's position from an empirical perspective. The word "empirical" can be defined as "based on observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic." Jesus advocated this approach in judging whether something was of God when he taught, "by their fruits ye shall know them."⁶⁶ Elder M. Russell Ballard has stated that, "A church, or any way of life, should be judged by the fruits or results that it generates."⁶⁷ Therefore, if the church's position on homosexuality is based on eternal truth and is morally sound, we would expect that living that way would produce "good fruit," while being in a same-sex relationship would produce "bad fruit."

Ideally, an empirical approach would be based on studies and surveys that employ scientific methods. There have been a small number of rigorous surveys of gay Mormons conducted over the years, with a recent one published in a peer-reviewed academic journal.⁶⁸ However, critics of these studies point out that the survey respondents are self-selected as opposed to being randomly selected and the study authors have an agenda or are biased against the church – maybe because the survey results consistently show highly negative outcomes associated with the gay people trying to live according to the church's position. However, it is notable that there have been no studies or surveys published by groups or individuals who advocate for the church's position as a way of life for gay people.

Leaving these studies behind, I will share my personal observations as someone who has two gay sons, helped found an LDS LGBT support group that has over 500 members,⁶⁹ and actively participates in Affirmation, the largest and oldest LDS LGBT organization in existence. In the 13 years since my oldest son came out, I have read and studied extensively on this subject, I have met and personally know hundreds of LGBT people, I have read the personal accounts and experiences of hundreds more, and I belong to a number of social media groups specifically for LDS LGBT people and their friends and families.

I recognize many may find fault with my observations – admittedly I'm just one person. But you don't have to just take my word for it. If you start talking to gay people and others who are familiar with these issues, I believe you will hear the same stories, and they will confirm my observations. Take from it what you will, here are my observations of the fruits most commonly associated with gay people who are raised in the church and are trying to live the church's position of lifelong celibacy:

⁶⁶ Matt 7:16-20; see also, Gal 5:22-23; Moro 7:14-19.

⁶⁷ M. Russell Ballard, "Faith, Family, Facts, and Fruits," October 2007 General Conference.

⁶⁸ Links to these studies can be found here: <http://gaysandmormons.org/scientific-research/>

⁶⁹ www.ALLArizona.org

Fruits of the church's position

Early stages (acknowledging being gay/same-sex attracted)

- Extreme guilt and self-loathing (even when living church standards)
- Depression and despair with occasional suicidal thoughts
- Extreme religiosity and scrupulosity (perfectionism and unhealthy obsession with righteous living and rule keeping in hopes of changing or proving worthiness)

Later stages (realizing sexual orientation isn't changing)

- Periods of depression and despair with suicidal thoughts, sometimes leading to suicide
- Social/emotional detachment, inability to form relationships with others
- Stagnation, apathy, hopelessness
- Overcompensation, perfectionism, overachievement
- Obsessive/compulsive behavior associated with pornography and masturbation made worse by feelings of shame, worthlessness and hopelessness
- Living in a perpetual cycle of shame trying to suppress innate sexuality and live according to the church's standards but always falling short (periodic hookups, pornography, etc.)
- Loss of faith, anger and bitterness against the church and God
- Vast majority leave the church to preserve emotional and mental health

Here are some examples of these fruits as related by gay members of the church.

Laura Root

...at the age of 44, I began to finally deal honestly with being gay. The moment that all the pieces came together hit me hard and forced me to confront my sexuality. It was one of the most awful moments of my life. Thoughts of my future in this life and into the eternities suddenly fell down hard on me, the heaviest burden I have ever felt. Like so many gay Mormons I experienced severe depression for several months and even some suicidal thinking. I couldn't bear the thought of never experiencing love again in this life and of never even hoping for it.

In addition, of course, were the questions of my eternal happiness. The church taught I would need to be sealed to a man at some point in order to receive eternal happiness. And yet, the thought of being with a man for eternity did not feel like happiness to me. I also could not imagine ever leaving the church I loved, with all my friends and family and which I believed contained the gospel of Jesus Christ. The agony and despair I felt at that time was overwhelming. I barely ate. I barely slept. I knew I needed something to keep me going so I read the Book of Mormon daily. It was like an IV drip of spiritual nourishment and I depended on it. Still, I had questions. Did Heavenly Father give me the ability to bond with and fall in love with

another human being and then require me to not use it as a condition of my salvation?⁷⁰

Kayden Maxwell (age 16)

I knew then [I was gay]. My heart sunk to my stomach, my entire world went into panic mode. I couldn't keep up in school. I couldn't look my parents in the eye. I became like a turtle in a shell, completely hidden, avoiding the world completely, not trusting anyone. No one could know. I was disgusted with myself, and I wanted nothing more than to get over it. No one could know. I prayed night after night that God would remove this horrible aspect of my life. My pillow was always wet with tears as I pleaded with the Master of the Universe to just please fix the mistake He made on me. ...

I stopped eating. I didn't have time for food, I was consumed with terror for my soul. I tried to starve it out of me. I tried to pray it out of me. I tried to sleep it away. But it was all useless. This was me. Mom caught on fast to my mood changes. ... One night, after questioning me deeply concerning my recent moods and appetite loss, she finally asked me. "Are you attracted to guys?" She said it lovingly and with concern, but the words shook my entire being; they ripped open the vault inside where my feelings were hidden and they shot to surface, overwhelming me in panic and fear for the future. I nodded through tears and finally met her eyes. We knew we had a mountain ahead, but in that moment, we knew we had each other to climb it with.

We talked to Bishop. My options were clear. I could marry a woman or I could be single my entire life. But not to worry, in the afterlife I would be perfected, he told me. I would be attracted to girls like I'm supposed to and I could have a family there. The perfect plan for my life that I had learned since birth no longer applied to me. I didn't fit.

Despite the unwavering support from my parents, my soul became draped in darkness. The world became Hell to me, with the flames of self-loathing furiously burning everywhere. I was left so uninformed. I needed answers and no one had any. I was left only with "God works in mysterious ways" to comfort me and explain why my world was falling apart while others didn't even know the taste of doubt. I felt almost ignored, given up on. We tried and tried but not even the bishop had the answers I needed. I was left always questioning, and never knowing.

Who was I? Why would God send me so broken? Didn't He love me enough to want me to be happy too? What would happen if others knew? What made me this way? Could this ever be removed from me? How could I say I don't support gay marriage when in truth that is the most excitement and support I felt about anything? Was I still a good person?

⁷⁰ "Being Mormon, Lesbian, and In Love..." by Laura Root <http://rationalfaiths.com/being-mormon-lesbian-and-in-love/>

I was doomed to live an entire lifetime alone. But I was told that it would all be over after this life. And soon the conclusion set in that my best hope was to end my life by my own hand. I had nothing to look forward to. I didn't have a happy life plan like all the kids around me. All I had to hold on to was the hope that my burden of liking guys would be gone after I died. There were examples of people before me escaping the task by ending life short. Mom feared that I would be one of them. She watched me close, but the depression was everywhere. I didn't like myself. I felt horribly ugly inside.

I would go to church and be offended because there was talk of evil gay marriage. I sat quietly while my friends that I'd grown up with would accuse gays of being selfish, immoral, manipulative, and many other things that I felt I was not. The more I went to church, the sadder I felt. The less I liked myself. The more I hated my religion. For a while, I was convinced that the only way I would ever make it to a long life was if I left church completely.⁷¹

Sarah Lewis

I have struggled in different degrees throughout my life with understanding my place in the church and what God's view of me is. A common experience I hear among gay members of the church including myself is that of self-loathing, guilt, and shame surrounding those feelings of same sex attraction we experience throughout our lives. The rhetoric I remember as a child associated homosexuality with perversion, abomination, and one of the most sinful acts that could be committed towards God.

I remember as a teenager being very confused to as why I could not rid myself of these feelings even with countless hours spent on my knees praying to God to take them away. ... As time went on it became more and more apparent that I was still attracted to women and not to men even after being married to James for several years. I still would pray almost daily for God to change my sexual orientation and would be met by silence. I was hurt and frustrated that God was not answering these prayers especially when I felt his influence in so many other areas of my life. I became depressed and hopeless that the righteous blessings I desired would never be given to me and that God did not love or care for me. That I was a hopeless cause.⁷²

John Bonner

Dear 14 year-old me, I see you there in the pews, head bowed, lines of tears marking divides down hot, embarrassed cheeks and pooling up in blurry smudges on the pages of the hymnal as you let the sacrament pass you by because you believe you're

⁷¹ "Hero Journey" by Kayden Maxwell <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/a-gay-mormon-teen-age-16-writes-an-essay-for-english-class/>

⁷² "That Weak Things May Become Strong" by Sarah Lewis <http://eachdayisanadventurelewis.blogspot.com/2017/01/that-weak-things-may-become-strong.html>

not worthy. I see you standing alone in front of the basement window in complete darkness and silently mouthing the words, "I'm gay," for the first time and vowing never to speak those words aloud to anyone. I see you pleading, begging, night after night on calloused knees to have these feelings taken away from you – rooted out of you and destroyed.

I see you confessing to the bishop that you touched yourself again and knowing with unquestioning certainty that no one else in the world has ever been as base and depraved as you are. I see you writing promises in your journal, written with such intense pressure that you can still read the impression of every word for many pages beyond the original entry, to never let Satan get ahold of your heart again, to never abuse your body or mind with impure thoughts, to be the righteous, obedient son God wants you to be from that moment forward. To be perfect, even as He is.

I see you looking up ways to die. And making plans. And rehearsing in your mind what the note should say. Believing the world would be better off without you. Trying not to imagine how it would break your mother's heart. Wondering if anyone else would miss you, or even care that you were gone.

I see you playing your guitar and singing love songs about girls and wanting to believe that you'll feel that way someday. And sometimes, when you're alone in your room and no one's listening, daring to use male pronouns in those love songs, and feeling a wash of profound shame extinguishing the fleeting rush of excitement that stirs within you.

I see you listening to firesides and reading scriptures and researching church articles and books that make mention of people like you. I feel your deep despair as you are compared to rapists and pedophiles and murderers. As you're told that you'll bring about the destruction of society and the end-of-times calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets. I know that you fear it's true – that you, in this homosexual state, are irredeemable.⁷³

Trevor Cook

As the realization of the reality of it [that I was gay] crystallized and as I acknowledged it to myself, all the thoughts and feelings I had innocently earlier ignored now weighed on me with tremendous guilt. I always felt tons of guilt all through my teenage life, especially during and immediately after the prolonged "realization" referred to above. You can't imagine this guilt unless you've experienced it: it's not really for anything you've done, and it's not always very strong, but it's always there nagging at the back of your mind making you question everything. ...

⁷³ "Letter to 14 Year Old Me" by John Bonner <https://outsidethebookofmormonbelt.com/2016/01/12/letter-to-14-year-old-me-by-john/>

There are tear marks in my scriptures over verses about worthiness. I was emotionally devastated in a seminary class once when a young teacher told a story of a mission companion admitting to him in tears that he felt attracted to the same sex and the whole class erupting in loud boisterous laughter and the teacher “recovering” (I think he had a nobler purpose in mind for the story, but the students wouldn’t have it) by laughing it off and assuring the class he was “straight as an arrow.”⁷⁴

Jena Lowry Peterson

Living with a gay heart and a Mormon heart was excruciating for me. I couldn’t figure out how to make the two hearts coexist with each other. I remained closeted and in pain for years. My mind told me I needed to choose one heart or the other, but I couldn’t. Both hearts meant so much to me and I couldn’t bear the thought of losing one or the other. I wanted to feel true, completely true to my orientation and honor my gay heart and live a life with Peg (alias name). But I loved Todd with all of my heart and wanted to live true to my covenants I made with him. I wanted to raise a family with him and experience the life I had always pictured in the church. But, something had to give. I couldn’t have it all. I had exhausted myself trying to make both relationships work. I loved both Peg and Todd so deeply.

I was backed into a corner and there was no way out. After becoming suicidal, I was desperate for help and checked into the hospital. I remember that first night, I was in so much pain I couldn’t even bring myself to pray. In fact, I could barely breathe. My whole body felt as though it were in a dark abyss, one that would swallow me whole. I felt lost and scared. I honestly felt like I had died. If I were to choose my gay heart, I would lose Todd. If I were to choose my Mormon heart, I would lose Peg, which meant to feel love and connection in a way that felt complete to me. I couldn’t handle the pain of either choice.⁷⁵

Jesse

I felt discouraged that I had not changed. My life felt stagnant. Many times I thought of driving off a cliff or into a rock wall, but luckily it was just thoughts that filled my mind on those serene lonely drives. ... Over the next five years, I continued to go through cycles of false hope, frustration, and depression: My mind just keeps going in circles ... I think I have no hope of marrying, so I get depressed and think I have no purpose in my life, so I think of just ending it now. It would make things so much less painful. Just think of having to endure never being intimate physically or emotionally with anyone. ... Every day I am at a crossroad. I am paralyzed to succeed in my life. My procrastination and negative thoughts poison my future. ...

⁷⁴ Trevor’s “coming out” letter to extended family, October 27, 2011.

⁷⁵ “Authenticity Through Connection” by Jena Lowry Peterson <http://rationalfaiths.com/authenticity-through-connection/>

I spoke a lot of how my faith in God has waned and that I honestly do not believe in God anymore. I said, "I could not understand how a God with a plan of Eternal Families could put 2-5% of his children down on earth lacking the fundamental key to be able to at least marry." ... I reread a lot of the teachings of the Church, and I realized that the teachings I had been taught about homosexuality were incorrect and were based on false stereotypes. I began to feel betrayed. I finally accepted that being gay did not make me broken. I accepted that I was not innately evil. I realized that if any of the amazing guys that I had been attracted to had reciprocated my interest, then I would have been in a committed monogamous relationship. I had never wanted to live the stereotypical "gay lifestyle" that I had been taught was what gays innately want to "act out." I knew I wanted and aspired to have the same type of relationship that many straight Mormons desire to have.⁷⁶

These examples portray much sadness and despair, giving the impression that gay people are broken and emotionally unhealthy. But the fact is, they tend to be some of the most talented, inspiring, passionate and accomplished people you will meet. It is not being gay that causes the emotional trauma and mental anguish, it is being gay and raised in a religion and culture that tells you from the time you are an innocent child that your feelings of love and attraction are degrading and sinful, something you must extinguish and bury deep inside. Unlike your straight friends and siblings who revel in their crushes, falling in love, showing physical affection, dating and marrying, you are taught the love and attraction you feel is from Satan and if expressed – even in a loving, monogamous marriage – will cause society's downfall and the destruction of the family, and you will be declared an apostate, an enemy of the church. Some of the toxic atmosphere can be alleviated as members become more educated about LGBT people, less homophobic and more compassionate and empathetic. However, as long as the church tells gay people that this deeply-felt, integral part of their nature is no different than (in Elder Oaks' words) an alcoholic's predisposition or susceptibility to alcoholism, it is inflicting spiritual and emotional harm on them.⁷⁷

How can anyone deny that what the church teaches about gay people – even if you believe it is from God – is not harmful to them? How many of us who are straight would stay in the church if we were told our love and affection for our beloved spouses was evil and must be abandoned? When almost every gay person you talk to who is raised in the church tells you that they had suicidal thoughts at certain points in their lives because of the intense conflict of being gay and being Mormon, how can anyone deny that the suicide epidemic among

⁷⁶ Kerby, Brent. *Gay Mormons?: Latter-day Saint Experiences of Same-Gender Attraction*.

⁷⁷ "Perhaps such susceptibilities are inborn or acquired without personal choice or fault... One person may have feelings that draw him toward gambling, but unlike those who only dabble, he becomes a compulsive gambler. Another person may have a taste for tobacco and a susceptibility to its addiction. Still another may have an unusual attraction to alcohol and the vulnerability to be readily propelled into alcoholism." Oaks, "Same-Gender Attraction," *Ensign*, October 1995.

Utah youth does not have some connection to the church's increased public rhetoric against LGBT issues starting with the Proposition 8 campaign in 2008?⁷⁸

How difficult is it to see that, for most gay people, leaving the church is the rational thing to do to preserve their mental and emotional health? Most of the gay people I know are out of the church to one degree or another. If we truly care, we should try to understand why. It seems there are two alternative answers to this question of why they leave. It has to be either: (1) gay people are spiritually weaker and less able to resist temptation than their heterosexual peers; or (2) there is something wrong with the church's position on homosexuality.

Addressing the first answer, it is my observation that gay people tend to be very spiritually sensitive and attuned to religious belief – even more so than their straight peers.⁷⁹ So many of them have a gentleness, kindness and innate Christlike love and sensitivity that comes with their sexual orientation. As Jonathan Manwaring put it:

...my personal experience with nearly every, single gay person I've met has been the same: there is something special, sensitive, spiritual, and kind in each of them that I believe is a gift from God. My wife, Rachel, tells me that she can see something special in their eyes. I believe it is a gift of the Spirit, because of their nature. ...

Could it be possible that our gay brothers and sisters aren't just born with distinct attractions, but are also born with a common, special gift of the Spirit that is intended to bless, strengthen, and influence others? Is it possible that the often soft, nurturing, and gentle nature of those who are gay could be intended to help those of us who are rough, withdrawn, and hardened? What if the special gifts of our gay loved ones could lead us closer to "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ"? (Eph 4:13)⁸⁰

In the cruelest of ironies, these most spiritually-sensitive among us have their hearts crushed by the very church they look to for healing. They are taught that their innate natures and desires are "inclinations" or "susceptibilities" like alcoholism or drug addiction. They who are so blessed with creativity, sensitivity and affection are told that if they ever express those feelings for someone they love, they will be cast out of the church. In addition

⁷⁸ Benjamin Knoll, "Youth Suicide Rates and Mormon Religious Context: An Additional Empirical Analysis," <http://rationalfaiths.com/mormon-religious-context-and-lgbt-youth-suicides-an-additional-empirical-analysis/>;

Daniel Parkinson, MD and Michael Barker, "The LGBTQ Mormon Crisis: Responding to the Empirical Research on Suicide," <http://rationalfaiths.com/the-lgbtq-mormon-crisis-responding-to-the-empirical-research-on-suicide/>

⁷⁹ Some of this religious devotion is likely connected with their increased religiosity in trying to prove their worthiness to God or to change their sexual orientation. However, I am always surprised at the number of gay converts I have met, who joined because they were seeking greater spiritual enlightenment and connection to God, despite the church's rhetoric on gay issues.

⁸⁰ "How My Gay Family Members and Friends Have Changed Me," Jonathan Manwaring, <http://ldslights.org/gay-family-members-friends-changed/>

to the loss of physical life, can we not see how these teachings destroy spirits, destroy faith, and turn our brothers and sisters into enemies? Would we act any different if we experienced what this LDS gay woman describes:

I first knew that I liked girls the way I was supposed to like guys when I was in Kindergarten. The innocent crushes of a little child were devastating to me. I knew I was different than the other little girls I knew and I worked hard to hide that. Living in fear of someone finding out I was same-sex attracted was nothing compared to the torment of believing that, since God knew everything about me, He knew and He hated me.

Consider that for a moment. A six-year-old, with all the innocence in the world, believed that God hated her. And why was that? Because of the way “gay” people were talked about – the fear and hatred in adults’ voices when they were mentioned. Children are aware of the current issues and children will listen.⁸¹

I belong to a private Facebook group for active LDS parents who have LGBT children. There are over 750 members at last count, with parents joining every day. In reading the stories of these parents, particularly those whose teen children are just coming out as gay, one of the most common themes is that before coming out the children begin pulling away from the church. While saddened that their children pull away from the church they love, these parents come to realize that they would rather have an emotionally healthy, well-adjusted gay child out of the church than a suicidal, emotionally unhealthy child in the church.

A small proportion of gay people are able to remain active in the church (although that number continues to decline with age), and some actually return to activity in the church after leaving. They are able to maintain a healthy attitude and sense of self worth because they do not internalize what the church tells them. They believe they are whole and undamaged, that being gay is how God intended them to be. And by my observation, most of them do not believe that same-sex marriage is against God’s will, even if they have not chosen that path for themselves in order to maintain full fellowship in the church (at least for the time being).

Fruits of committed, faithful same-sex relationships

A common refrain among religious people is found in this statement by President James E. Faust:

The false belief of inborn homosexual orientation denies to repentant souls the opportunity to change and will ultimately lead to discouragement, disappointment, and despair.⁸²

⁸¹ Meagan M. Colwell, Mormons Building Bridges post, Sep 28, 2014.

⁸² James E. Faust, September 1995 First Presidency Message, “Serving the Lord and Resisting the Devil.”

This view is understandable and logical if “acting on” one’s homosexuality is believed to be sinful and against God’s will. In this view, gay people may find momentary pleasure in living counter to God’s laws, but ultimately they will come to find out that “wickedness never was happiness” and will reap the bitter fruits of their unrighteous choices. But what if we find the opposite? What if we observe that gay people living in long-term, committed same-sex relationships are just as happy as their straight counterparts? What if we find that gay couples who live the law of chastity in the same manner required of straight couples (no sexual relations outside of marriage and total fidelity within marriage) receive the same blessings and positive outcomes as straight couples who live that law?

I have met and come to know many same-sex-married gay couples, some who have been married only a short time and some who have been married many years. Here are some of the positive fruits I have observed.

- Happiness and fulfillment
- Stability and commitment
- Sincere love and concern for each other
- Greater emotional and spiritual wellbeing
- Light in their countenance, the fruits of the Spirit in their lives

In other words, the blessings and benefits of marriage appear to be available to all those who are willing to abide by that covenant, regardless of whether they are gay or straight. Here are some examples of these fruits as related by gay people in their own words.

Berta Marquez

My faith has become something more inclusive than the tribal exceptionalism that we so readily embrace in Mormonism. After all, I have had many experiences with God’s affirming love for me and my wife individually and as a married couple. I witness the fruits of the spirit in our little family even when the ecclesiastical leaders of my faith tradition assert that this could not possibly be so. I know what it is like to be a fourteen-year-old with an unconventional experience with God to share, and to have people, even religious and political leaders of the highest repute say that it could not possibly be so. But here I am feeling profoundly loved and affirmed by the divine as an LGBT daughter of God and I cannot deny it. Now more than ever we can feel God’s hand gently guiding and lighting the way for our little family.⁸³

Trey and Guy

Our lives have been deeply blessed. It hasn’t been without its struggles, challenges and sorrows. 36 years ago I survived the suicide of my first love, a boy who brought me so much joy. It scarred and devastated me and I thought at that time that I’d never find happiness. If a person from the future told me on that day 36 years ago

⁸³ “A Polyphony of Three,” by Berta Marquez <http://affirmation.org/polyphony-of-three-bertha-marquez/>

that I'd have a soulmate who I was committed to, loved and cherished decades later, I would have not believed it. But if it had turned out that was all that was true, it would have been enough. If you told me that we'd have two sweet, wonderful daughters. I wouldn't have believed it, but it would have been enough. If then you told me that we'd have a supportive, loving extended family and many close and wonderful friends. I wouldn't have believed it, but it would have been enough. Then... if this person from the future told me that we'd be legally married, well, I would have had him committed. But it's all true. And we are blessed. I wish I could go back and tell my 17-year-old self that it didn't just get better—it got unbelievable.⁸⁴

Theresa and Rachel

Theresa and I met when Theresa was a recently returned missionary and we were both attending school at BYU. We became very close friends and eventually fell in love with each other. We didn't always recognize that we were in love with each other, as a relationship of more than friends was against our religious beliefs, but in retrospect it is very clear that we have been in love and committed to each for over ten years.

We had a love that not everyone gets to have, so how could we continue to refuse to accept it. Why sit around waiting for something else and beating ourselves up when the truth of the matter is that we just love each other. ... We didn't know where that left the church in our lives, but in that moment we just stopped worrying about it. The hands which had been holding onto the church so tightly just let go and we wondered what the future would hold. But the most amazing thing happened: from the moment we made the decision to just love each other, the underlying angst, depressions, anxiety, worry, insecurity, and anger have virtually disappeared. We never expected that. We never thought that would be possible. We never thought that just allowing ourselves to love and be loved would be such a freeing experience.⁸⁵

Jeffrey

Early in his life Jeffrey realized he was gay, and he struggled with his testimony and where he would fit in with the church. After working with his bishop for some time to try to dismiss his homosexual feelings, Jeffrey found that he wasn't happy and was missing something – something he didn't find in his relationships with women. Deciding to dismiss his feelings regarding the church, he tried to live a “gay lifestyle.” He entered a sexual relationship with another man, but found he still wasn't happy or fulfilled, and that a part of him was still missing. A turning point came when he realized that God loves him, and will continue to love him unconditionally. In other words, Jeffrey realized that he doesn't need to separate his

⁸⁴ “Our Families: Trey and Guy” <http://affirmation.org/affinity-march-2013/#1>

⁸⁵ “Theresa and Rachel: Our Story” www.nomorestrangers.org/theresa-and-rachel-our-story/

homosexuality from his spirituality. Jeffrey met someone who was gay, and who respected and loved the church. They eventually married and now Jeffrey feels emotionally and spiritually whole.⁸⁶

Max Eddington

As a (gay) married man, I can tell you that life for me and Michael is not a crusade to destroy the country's values or to attack the marriages of our heterosexual friends and neighbors. Nor is our marriage a sparkling rainbow land where no one ever frowns and unicorns wake us up in the morning (although that would be AWESOME.) Our marriage is a marriage. We eat breakfast together every morning, we go to work, we talk about our day and the things that are important to us. We go on date nights and watch TV shows in bed. We are two people who love each other and try to be better every day. Someday we hope to be dads and we will give our kids as much love, support, and education as they can handle. Although our marriage has always been legal in the eyes of the federal government, I can tell you that there is a different feeling in my heart and mind today, knowing that our rights as a married couple are full and complete no matter where we go in our country. It's the feeling of relief from an oppression that I didn't even know I was feeling.⁸⁷

John Gustav-Wrathall

I know the Church is true. That has been my polar star the last eight years of my life in trying to navigate a way forward. I've discovered – partly by following very personal spiritual promptings, as well as through some very special priesthood blessings received from my bishop, from my father, from home teachers, and last fall from an apostle of the Lord – that I have a unique earthly mission. In order to fulfill that mission, I have needed to stay close to the Church and to exercise a certain kind of faith.

I also know my relationship with my husband is true. That has been the ground beneath my feet, it has been the horizon that has made following that polar star of my Church testimony meaningful. The journey of making sense of my gayness and eventually finding and committing to my husband is a journey I have been making from the time I was old enough to be aware of my sexuality, and old enough to begin to figure out the nature of my yearnings for relationship and family (since I was roughly 11).⁸⁸

I love my husband Göran. I have loved him for twenty-two years as of our upcoming anniversary at the end of next week. In that time my love for him has only grown stronger, through every fight we have resolved and every challenge we have faced. It was a long, long time ago I realized I would give my life for him. What diminishes

⁸⁶ <http://farbetweenmovie.com/jeffrey/>

⁸⁷ Maxwell Dean Eddington, public Facebook post, June 27, 2015.

⁸⁸ "Doubt Your Doubts," by John Gustav-Wrathall <http://youngstranger.blogspot.com/2014/01/doubt-your-doubts.html>

him diminishes me. My soul, body and spirit, cleaves to him. And I can honestly say that today, on this day, I love him more than I have on any other day that has preceded this. And I can honestly say that that love has always elevated me. It has always made me want to be, and has helped me to be, a better man.

I love God. I love his Church because I love Him. And I have found that this love elevates and exalts my soul, and makes me want to be more, to be better, to be like God. This love has made me see more clearly than any other the connections between me, my husband, our son, my parents, my siblings, all my brothers and sisters of every nation, all my brothers and sisters, human, animal and element; all creation. I yearn for all those loves and connections to be eternal. I yearn to love in a way that is worthy of eternity.⁸⁹

Laura Root

As I sit in Fast and Testimony meeting this morning I hear one man speak of families. He expresses the immense joy he feels in his life because he has a wife and family. He says he has recently been wondering why families are so important to our Heavenly Father that all of His spirit children are born into and raised in families. He then answers his own question by stating, "it is because within marriage and families we learn to love like God." "Exactly," I thought, "that is exactly why I proposed to my girlfriend two weeks ago." I want to become like my Heavenly Father and learn to love others unconditionally, and I want the opportunity to be married to help me refine that process. ...

After countless hours and months of studying, pondering, and praying, and line upon line, I had a number of other spiritual experiences that reaffirmed God's love, kindness and mercy for me. He led me to know that not only does He love me more than I can imagine, He also wants me to enjoy the blessings and challenges and the refining process of committing my life to loving and serving the person that I love, even if that person is another woman. Eventually I began dating again, only this time I looked for the gender that was right for me, the gender that would allow me to truly bond, connect, and find happiness and meaning with another human soul.

Believe me, I am well aware that this makes no sense to most of my family and friends. It leads many to feel angry, sad, and confused. Some of my family members have largely shut me out of their lives. Fortunately for me I also have members of my family who are supportive of me. Additionally, I have some friends and ward members who, likewise, value my friendship and affirm me on a regular basis. I am SO thankful for them. ...

I am a different person than I was 2 ½ years ago. I have a stronger relationship with my Heavenly Father. I have a more clear understanding of who I am and what my responsibility is in this life. I have felt the power of the atonement in my heart as I

⁸⁹ "The Pillars of My Faith," by John Gustav-Wrathall <http://youngstranger.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-pillars-of-my-faith.html>

have struggled to choose love and patience over anger and resentment. I know what I have felt and experienced as I have searched for answers and have tried to put my trust in the personal promptings I have been given. I am so excited and thrilled to be getting married in two months to the woman I love. I feel the love of my Heavenly Father within this relationship. I am so grateful to Heavenly Father who, in his kindness and mercy, has shown me how I can be my authentic self and still have a meaningful and solid relationship with Him and my Savior. Although it is not as it once was, I look forward to continuing my relationship with the LDS church, the church I love, where thankfully, I have many kind and loving friends.⁹⁰

In addition to the positive fruits marriage brings to individuals and families, it strengthens our communities and society as a whole. The societal benefits of marriage apply to homosexuals as much as they apply to heterosexuals, as described by John Gustav-Wrathall:

1) ... *It is in the best interests of our society to promote stable, lasting pair-bondings.* Allowing same-sex marriage as an option helps to remove the social stigma on homosexuality. It will encourage same-sex oriented individuals to come out of the closet and pair bond with (marry!) other same-sex oriented individuals. This is what opponents of same-sex marriage do not want. But, it is nevertheless in society's best interests, because it will reduce the likelihood that closeted individuals will enter into inherently unstable unions with persons of the opposite sex. It will correspondingly increase the likelihood that they will form lasting commitments with persons they are attracted to, and who are attracted to them.

2) *We are individually and collectively stronger when we are members of a family.* Families are the oldest form of social insurance there is. Being married means you have someone to rely on if you get sick, if you lose your job or if you experience any other form of misfortune. That someone is there to take care of you not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. ... I know this has been true for both me and Göran. In our going on 18 years together, there have been times when one or the other of us has been down and out, and the other has been there as number one cheerleader and supporter.

Opponents of same-sex marriage would prefer that if gay people can't be married to a member of the opposite sex that they be single for life. But in whose best interest is that really? Certainly not in the state's interest. When a person who is alone falls, who is there to help pick him up?

Individuals live in families, families live in societies. If an individual falls, if he has no immediate family, extended family is expected to help. If extended family is non-existent or ineffective, then it falls to the larger society. Forcing gay people to be alone weakens the fabric of society. Because Göran and I have been able to help each

⁹⁰ "Being Mormon, Lesbian, and In Love..." by Laura Root <http://rationalfaiths.com/being-mormon-lesbian-and-in-love/>

other over the years, we are stronger, we've been able to become resources to others. In recent years we have become foster parents, able to provide a loving home to children who have fallen through the cracks of society. So, the fact that we exist as a family unit means we can provide resources to help care for others, to become part of the social safety net.

3) *Marriage promotes morality and makes us more spiritually sensitive.* Refusing same-sex couples the right to marry essentially sends a message to gay folks that the normal rules and expectations of sexual morality don't apply to us the way they do to everybody else. It also sends another, subtler and more damaging message: that gay people are inferior to heterosexual people. That we don't deserve stability, love or family. That we are inherently morally inferior. This damaging message encourages just the kinds of reckless, immoral behavior that the opponents of same-sex marriage claim to oppose. By legalizing same-sex marriage, we send gay folks the message that they are expected to abide by the same social norms, the same morality that we expect of everyone else.

When Göran and I got married, it had a huge psychological impact on me. I became aware of a profound responsibility to my significant other. It changed the way I thought about myself and about my sexuality. Committing myself to my husband and being willing to bridle my sexuality in a way that honors my love for him and my commitment to him has changed my life in so many ways for the better. In many ways, those commitments paved the way for me to come back to the Church. I believe living in a way that honored my love for him made me more sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit.

It is those spiritual benefits of the kind of love and commitment that can be fostered in marriage that I personally consider one of the greatest benefits of marriage. Though, for obvious reasons – such as social stability and the reduction of sexually transmitted diseases – providing a social framework that discourages promiscuity and encourages sexual morality among gay men and lesbians is also a benefit that strengthens not just the individuals involved, but society as a whole.⁹¹

These examples are not to say that gay people are immune from the marital/relationship problems that all people face. Indeed I am aware of some same-sex marriages that were perhaps entered into too hastily and have ended in divorce. But the joy gay couples are finding in the right to marry may be injecting new life into an institution that seems to be dying out in much of secular society. Who would have thought that gay marriage might actually strengthen the institution of marriage in society?

⁹¹ "Why Same-sex Marriage will Strengthen Marriage for Everyone," by John Gustav-Wrathall <http://youngstranger.blogspot.com/2011/05/why-same-sex-marriage-will-strengthen.html>

Empirical Basis Conclusion

Until relatively recently, society in general used to take much the same position as the church on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The church sees society's departure from that position as evidence of moral decay. However, the reason we as a society (including a growing number in the church) are moving away from the church's position is that we have been able to observe for ourselves the lives of gay people rather than relying solely on tradition and the cultural prejudices of past generations. Gay people are our friends, neighbors, co-workers, and our own sons and daughters. As they have been able to live their lives more openly and authentically, rather than in fear and hiding, we are able to see for ourselves that they are really no different than we are, that they are better off living with the same freedoms and opportunities we all have – without shame, without condemnation and without making them feel that their lives are bringing about the downfall of society and destruction of the family.

If we judge the church's position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage by its fruits as described above, and those fruits are accurate, can we still unequivocally say that this position is of God? Like the church's earlier teachings about black people, its position on homosexuality is resulting in great spiritual and emotional harm. If the church does not believe these fruits as I – and many others – have observed them, then with the stakes so high, one could only hope the church would do all in its power to confirm or refute these observations. It has the ability to commission reliable studies and surveys, to conduct large-scale interviews of gay people, to talk to LDS parents who have gay children and to determine whether its position truly has a positive or negative impact on the lives of gay people. Perhaps it is doing or has already done so. If so, and it finds no basis for the negative fruits observed above, one would think the church would publicize this information, to confirm why it holds its position and to give people some much needed comfort – especially considering the many families whose kids have committed suicide.

But if the results of such investigation *do* confirm the negative outcomes, I acknowledge it would take great humility and some awkwardness for the church to reverse its position after expressing such certainty for so long. Or else it would have to somehow try to explain how it is still God's will despite the horrible outcomes. I pray nearly every day for our leaders to have inspiration, empathy, strength and humility to be able to ask for and discern God's will on this issue.

V. Where to From Here?

As pointed out at the beginning of this article, the church has evolved significantly on this issue. And aside from the emotional and spiritual trauma caused by the November 2015 policy, the church has taken a number of positive steps that have led to greater understanding of and compassion for our gay members of the church. However, no matter how much the church encourages love and understanding, no matter how much it tells gay people that there is no sin in being gay – but their deep inner desire for love and companionship is considered a defect, like a susceptibility to alcoholism – this message will continue to cause hopelessness, shame and bitterness and will continue to result in depression, suicide and loss of faith.

The Need for Another “1978” Revelation

More education on this issue and more love and empathy for our gay members will help mitigate some of the negative symptoms they experience. But the reality is, as long as gay members are treated as unequal to straight members, as long as they are taught from the time they are young that their core natures are essentially a defect that will be fixed in the next life, their psyches and spirits will be damaged and they will leave. Can we really expect otherwise? Would we do any differently if we were in their place? Prior to the 1978 revelation on the priesthood, wasn't it logical to expect that the majority of black people would find the church a hostile and damaging place because they couldn't receive the same blessings as white members and were taught that they carried the curse of Cain and were spiritually inferior to whites in the pre-existence? Should we expect our gay members to respond any differently given what the church teaches about their nature?

Just as it took a major doctrinal change in 1978 for the church to allow black people to be treated as whole human beings and spiritually equal to white people, nothing less than a similar doctrinal change regarding our characterization of homosexuality will allow us to treat gay people as whole human beings and spiritually equal to straight people. As previously discussed, the doctrinal change does not require changing our doctrines on eternal marriage or eternal families. It simply requires: (1) applying the law of chastity equally to all members regardless of sexual orientation, and (2) recognizing that marriage has the same ability to bless and ennoble the lives of gay couples as straight couples.

Following such a doctrinal change, at some point temple sealings for same-sex couples would need to be addressed to ensure equal treatment of all couples who feel their love and commitment is eternal. Because Joseph Smith's teachings on relations between couples in the afterlife and the nature of spiritual procreation are still so vague and undeveloped, there appears to be no theological/doctrinal reason this issue can't be addressed. There is ample historical and theological basis for exploring the possibilities for LGBT people.⁹²

The longer this change is in coming, the more people we will lose – not just gay people, but increasingly their family members, their friends and other sympathetic members of the

⁹² Taylor Petrey, “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue*, Winter 2011.

church, particularly younger people, who do not see same-sex marriage as a threat to society or a sin against God. And unlike black people who had the choice of not joining the church during the priesthood/temple ban, gay babies are born into the church every day and at increasing numbers as the church grows. Their departure – along with their families and those who care about them – ultimately harms us as a church more than it does them. It leaves a gaping wound in our church, the body of Christ. And sadly it is our doctrine, not their weak character or lack of spirituality, that is pushing them out.

I can anticipate one likely response: if the doctrine is God’s will, it is out of our hands. Regardless of the despair, the suicides, the mental anguish, the bitterness, the ultimate loss of faith and loss of members, some will argue that we cannot change what God has decreed.⁹³ But do we really believe these fruits are acceptable to God and in accordance with His revealed will, or are we leaning too much unto our own heterosexual understanding? Do we believe in continuing revelation or not? Do we not have enough scriptural/historical precedent demonstrating that revelation comes not just when God decides but when we seek it out? Think of most of the major revelations given to Joseph Smith, think of the 1978 revelation to President Kimball – all came in response to questioning, seeking and petitioning the Lord for answers to sincere and sometimes difficult questions. We must remember these fundamental precepts of our church:

- “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that *He will yet reveal many great and important things* pertaining to the Kingdom of God. (9th Article of Faith)
- “Yea, wo be unto him that saith: We have received, and we need no more!” (2 Nephi 28:27)
- “But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.” (D&C 9:8)

It is my hope that church members and leaders might sincerely ponder the foundation of their own beliefs on this topic, study it out and sincerely ask God if it is right – just as President Kimball did when he began to see the harmful fruits of the church’s doctrines on race.

If the answers are not forthcoming or fully apparent at this time, might it be better to be less strident and more humble about what we claim to be the will of God? If we fear to err, might it be better to err on the side of mercy and agency, and trust more in the Savior’s atonement than in our own imperfect knowledge? At a minimum, if church leaders realize

⁹³ In a Religious Freedom conference held in Arizona on January 21, 2017, Elder Dallin Oaks gave several reasons as to why the church must resist societal change on traditional marriage, including: “We believe in revelation from God and we have no power to alter revealed doctrine that collides with manmade laws or cultures. ... We also have no power to alter revealed prophetic directions on the application of that doctrine on the circumstances of our day. And we should also note that revelation is the province of God and comes not when we will, but when and how He decides.”

their words are taken by the membership as God’s own words, and their pronouncements and rhetoric on this issue affect the lives of thousands in such a significant way, can they perhaps speak less stridently and with more compassion?

A Simple Temporary Solution: The Pastoral Approach

Even if the leadership of the church are not ready to seek a 1978-style revelation and cannot conceive of questioning the doctrine anytime soon, there is a pastoral approach that, while it won’t fully stanch the outflow of gay members and their families, would at least slow it. It is actually something that a few wards and stakes around the country have been doing already (although less so since the November 2015 policy). It is this simple message:

Come worship with us and bring your spouse or partner; you will always be welcome in our ward, you have nothing to fear, we love you and WE NEED YOU.

That message, along with the decision not to automatically initiate church disciplinary action unless the person desires it as a way back into full fellowship, would do so much to heal the spiritual wounds we have inflicted and make the church a Zion community. Even if gay members can’t participate as members in full fellowship, their marriages and partnerships can be treated with respect and dignity. These individuals should also be treated with love and respect and allowed to worship with us without any fear of church reprisal. If a gay person or couple who has already suffered so much at the church’s hands and has wrestled mightily with the decision on how to live their life now feels a spiritual pull to attend church again, does it make sense to punish them with the harshest action the church can take, or to make them feel like they are too unworthy and spiritually damaged to simply attend church with us? How I wish we could at least make this simple change in the interim.⁹⁴

A Final Plea for Understanding and Empathy

For those who have sincerely considered everything in this article, have spiritually wrestled with these ideas, have tried to understand and feel what our gay members go through, have asked God and sought inspiration on the matter – and still reached the conclusion that committed, monogamous same-sex marriage is against God’s will and the church is better off maintaining its position – I grant you the respect to believe as your heart and conscience tell you. May I ask the same thing of you? Will you please allow me and others who have spiritually struggled with this issue, and reached a different conclusion, the right to our agency and personal revelation without judging us to be apostates, unfaithful, or unworthy of being your fellow citizens with the saints? Seeing the spiritual and emotional harm our gay family members and friends suffer in the church

⁹⁴ I realize with the inception of the November 2015 policy, and the subsequent elevating it to a “revelation” by President Nelson in his January 2016 YSA devotional talk, this solution is not as simple as it once was. Such a church-wide solution would necessitate the removal of the policy. Until then, this solution still lies in the hands of individual stake presidents and bishops, which can put them in a difficult position.

makes it hard enough to maintain faith and trust in the church without our fellow members making it any harder by marginalizing and judging us for our sincere beliefs.

Above all, will you recognize the supreme sacrifice our LDS gay members must make because of the position we as a church put them in? To live the church's position, they must give up a core part of their humanity – their ability to fully and completely love another person – and choose lifelong celibacy, something no one else is asked to do. If, on the other hand, after much internal debate, prayer and spiritual struggle, they do not feel the call to sacrifice that part of their humanity, they are then forced to give up full fellowship in the church, and are all too often shunned or looked down on by their fellow members of the church and even members of their family. No matter what choice they make – stay in line with the church or fall in love and find a companion – they lose something precious. Can you put yourself in their shoes, try to imagine what this impossible choice must feel like, and let empathy and Christlike love fill your heart for our gay brothers and sisters who have been so misunderstood for so long?

May God grant us the inspiration, courage and grace we need as a church and people to find the right path on this issue. A path that will be in accordance with His will and that will save the lives and souls of our beloved gay members of the church.

- Bryce Cook, March 2017

About the Author: *Bryce Cook is a founding member of ALL (Arizona LDS LGBT) Friends & Family and a co-director of the annual "ALL Are Alike Unto God" Conference held every April in Mesa, Arizona. He is married to Sara Spencer Cook and together they have six children, two of whom are gay. Since their oldest son came out publicly in 2012, Bryce and Sara have become public allies for LGBT people in and out of the church. Bryce graduated from BYU with a degree in finance and from ASU with an MBA. He is an economic consultant at an international consulting firm.*

Appendix 1

General Conference Talks that Referenced Romans 1:26/27 or Leviticus 18:22*

Date	Speaker	Rom/Lev	Context	Source
Oct 2013	Russell M. Nelson, Decisions for Eternity	Both - Footnote only	Regardless of what civil legislation may be enacted, the doctrine of the Lord regarding marriage and morality cannot be changed.	https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/decisions-for-eternity?lang=eng
Oct 2000	Russell M. Nelson, Living by Scriptural Guidance	Lev - Footnote only	Self-esteem is also earned by obedience to God's commandments regarding chastity.	https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2000/10/living-by-scriptural-guidance?lang=eng
Oct 2000	Boyd K. Packer, Ye Are the Temple of God	Both - In text	The scriptures plainly condemn those who "dishonour their own bodies between themselves ... ; men with men working that which is unseemly" (Rom. 1:24, 27) or "women [who] change the natural use into that which is against nature" (Rom. 1:26). ... They can never make right that which is forbidden in the laws of God (see Lev. 18:22; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:9–10).	https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2000/10/ye-are-the-temple-of-god?lang=eng
Apr 1996	Russell M. Nelson, Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods	Lev - Footnote only	Self-esteem is also earned by obedience to God's commandments regarding chastity.	https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1996/04/thou-shalt-have-no-other-gods?lang=eng
Oct 1990	Boyd K. Packer, Covenants	Rom - In text	Paul, speaking on this very subject, condemned those "who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator." (Rom. 1:25.)	https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1990/10/covenants?lang=eng
Apr 1974	Spencer W. Kimball, Guidelines to Carry Forth the Work of God in Cleanliness	Rom - In text	Now the works of the flesh are many, as given by Paul:...[quotes 2 Tim 3 and the Romans verses]	https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1974/04/guidelines-to-carry-forth-the-work-of-god-in-cleanliness?lang=eng

*References identified from the search function on LDS.org using all variations on the search terms (e.g., Romans, Rom., Rom).

