

“And They Shall Be One Flesh”: Sexuality and Contemporary Mormonism

Romel W Mackelprang

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I presented a series of guest lectures on sexuality to undergraduate nursing classes at Brigham Young University's Salt Lake Center. My presentations were aimed at preparing students for their work with patients with severe neurological disabilities. During my first presentation, I was dismayed at the total lack of student interaction in a subject that in other settings usually met with lively discussion. I was even more surprised after the class by the number of students (all of them LDS) who wanted to talk privately about personal sexual matters. When it came to highly personal questions related to sexuality and Church policy, students were extremely anxious to talk privately with someone who shared their religious beliefs but who did not know them personally or was not in an ecclesiastical position over them. As I spoke with these students, I was struck by the uncertainty and, in some cases, guilt some were experiencing as they attempted to fit their sexuality with their religious convictions. In subsequent presentations at BYU, in speeches to Church groups, and in counseling sessions with Church members, I have noted the same phenomenon.

My experience in clinical practice has taught me that to help Church members with sexual problems, it is almost always essential to address contributing religious issues. My LDS clients' sexual problems seem to be no more severe or pervasive than those of members of other religions or of those who profess no religious affiliation. However, when

ROMEL W MACKELPRANG is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work and Human Services at Eastern Washington University in Cheney and Spokane. He has provided sexual counseling and has taught courses in human sexuality for eleven years. He and his wife, parents of three daughters and one son, daily wonder at the awe of procreation while at the same time wondering why they ever used it.

sexual problems occur, religious issues are more likely to be a factor for LDS clients than for any others (with the possible exception of Catholics). However unintentional, Church membership can contribute to sexual problems for some members. This essay, therefore, will address sexuality in the context of Mormonism and will explore ways to promote healthy attitudes about sexuality and sexual expression.

MORMON SEXUAL CULTURE

Church leaders, it seems, sometimes convey conflicting messages to members regarding sexuality. On the one hand, they repeatedly and forcefully emphasize that sexual activity is to be reserved for marriage. They characterize masturbation and other autoerotic activity as sins and teach that sexual contact outside the confines of marriage may be grounds for Church action that can jeopardize membership. In fact, leaders stress that adultery is second only to the “shedding of innocent blood” in seriousness. Moral sins of a sexual nature require confession to the Lord *and* bishop or other ecclesiastical leader for the transgressor to receive full forgiveness. Furthermore, some leaders consider homosexuality to be so grievous a sin that they do not differentiate between sexual *orientation* and sexual *activity* in calling for action against the membership of gay men and women.

Church leaders strongly and frequently emphasize the serious nature of sexual sins to members, especially young members. Bishops conduct regular worthiness interviews with adolescents from the age of twelve through young adulthood. Moral cleanliness is a major focus of those interviews. Ironically, “sins of immorality” are almost always defined as sexual in nature, a position that ignores the plethora of other immoral acts in which people engage. These regular opportunities for teens to confess their sexual sins to their Church leaders are intended to help young members remain chaste. Some bishops have even “helped” them by requiring them to confess their sins to their parents as well. Unfortunately, some adolescents learn to avoid the potentially negative consequences of confession simply by withholding information. For example, in one ward in which I lived, the bishop required deacons to tell their parents if they confessed to masturbation in priesthood interviews, whereupon several quickly learned to avoid this embarrassment by denying any such activity.

An all-too-common societal double standard sometimes surfaces in LDS culture as well: while sexual immorality is wrong for members of both genders, it is especially bad for females. This attitude sometimes becomes apparent when my clients and I discuss their sexual histories. For example, LDS men frequently talk about premarital masturbation

as though almost all boys have masturbated. LDS women, on the other hand, are far more likely to display embarrassment and guilt about masturbation.

On the positive side, Church members are taught that sex within marriage is a special way of sharing with one's mate. The act of procreation is as close to being godlike as men and women can become. Sex is sanctioned within marriage, especially when the intent is to bring children into the world. Unfortunately, the messages urging restraint and the warnings against sexual sin, even between husband and wife, greatly outnumber positive messages. Rarely do Church leaders affirm the pleasure and gratification brought about by satisfying intimate physical relationships, choosing instead to focus on the negative aspects of sexuality.

CHILDREN AND SEXUALITY

From the time of conception, humans experience the effects of gender. Genetics and, within weeks, hormone production begin a life-long process of sexual influence. Gender differences are present at birth and, through a combination of biological and environmental influences, continue throughout life. Infant exploration of the genitals is as common and natural as are other attempts to explore the environment. Unfortunately, some of the earliest negative messages about sexuality come from parents who, upon seeing this natural exploration, may react adversely and sometimes even punitively. As children grow, they encounter other similar messages. Boys and girls are taught to not touch themselves and are sometimes told that their genitals are undesirable or "nasty." This may be especially true for girls who, unlike boys, have no "legitimate" reason to regularly touch or view their genitalia. Girls may grow to womanhood without learning what their genitals look like or even the proper names of their sexual organs. An example of this was related to me by the nurse of a young, acutely disabled woman I was counseling. As the nurse began to teach this woman and her mother how to insert a catheter into the bladder, the mother asked about the "little mound of tissue" that was her daughter's clitoris. When the nurse offered an explanation, this mother of five adults expressed surprise, having always assumed that the clitoris was inside the vagina.

As children reach adolescence, they experience greater physiological, social, and psychological changes than at any other time in their lives. They develop new and confusing urges. The attitudes of parents and other adults help create either a positive sexual perspective or confusion and disproportionate feelings of guilt. When adults do not bal-

ance messages about the pitfalls of immorality with reinforcement of the special nature of sexuality, adolescents (and adults) who “fall” may believe that “all is lost,” an attitude that often leads to increased promiscuity among those who prematurely engage in sexual activity (Christensen 1976).

Parents have a responsibility to teach their adolescent children not only about morality and the implications of sexual expression, but also about the physical processes their bodies are undergoing as they mature. Those who do so conscientiously will reap great benefits for their efforts. Teaching proper sexual terminology in toddlerhood and progressing to comprehensive sexual discussions in adolescence will promote greater awareness and help circumvent future problems. Parents and Church leaders should present information and counsel in frank, positive ways rather than in negative and moralistic terms. A possible consequence of such a negative, moralistic approach was evident in a woman I treated who had an aversion to sexual intimacy. She related that the most powerful message about sex she received from her parents was, “I would rather see you dead than have you be immoral.” Though she was now a married adult, her strong fear of doing something immoral, even with her spouse, continued to plague her.

Discomfort with sexuality is manifest in the numerous euphemisms we use to refer to sexual anatomy. We wouldn’t think of using slang to refer to an arm or leg, but sexual slang could fill volumes. Parents who have difficulty using words such as “penis” or “vagina” convey their discomfort to their children, who quickly learn to avoid using accurate sexual terminology. When parents are embarrassed by their children’s questions about sex and reproduction, they teach their children to be likewise embarrassed. When parents neglect to discuss sexuality with their children, they almost ensure that their children’s education will be inaccurate and inappropriate. Ironically, many of these same parents oppose any attempts by public schools or other groups to provide sexual information.

This negative attitude towards sexual education can be seen in a statement by Rodney Turner, an LDS author and BYU professor who contends, “It was the father of lies who introduced sex education into the world” (1976, 55). When parents do not inform and schools are not allowed to educate, where do young people turn to find answers to their very natural questions? Unfortunately, they frequently rely upon movies, magazines, books, or older friends who provide information that is often as limited as it is inaccurate.

Some parents teach children that sex is dirty and undesirable. People from families where such attitudes are overtly taught or, more often, unwittingly conveyed may come to view sex as base and vulgar.

I find this attitude most often in women who were taught as girls that sex is a responsibility and a duty to be borne solely for the satisfaction of their spouses or the begetting of children. The idea of sex for personal and mutual gratification is a totally foreign concept to them. Most Church leaders would agree that this sentiment is destructive to relationships but seldom offer sexually affirming messages that would reinforce more positive attitudes.

Although there is no evidence that accurate sexual knowledge promotes premature sexual activity, it is clear that the lack of knowledge leads to sexual ignorance and problems. The 1989 *General Handbook of Instructions* for Church leaders is clear on the subject of sex education.

Parents have primary responsibility for the sex education of their children. Teaching this subject honestly and plainly in the home greatly improves the chance that young people will avoid serious problems. To help parents teach this sensitive and critical information, the Church has published "A Parent's Guide."

When schools have undertaken sex education, it is appropriate for parents to seek to ensure that the instructions given their children are consistent with sound moral and ethical values. (1989, 11-5)

Sex education, then, is the responsibility of parents, first to provide information, and second, to monitor and supplement information children receive from others.

To help LDS parents fulfill this responsibility, specific, Church-produced or—endorsed training materials are essential. Unfortunately, the General Authorities have historically been reluctant to produce such materials. Kenneth Cannon, a Brigham Young University professor, wrote about a project commissioned by Alvin R. Dyer to produce for the Church an educational manual entitled "Human Maturity." Although hundreds of hours were devoted to its production, the manual was never published. Cannon also reports that lessons on sexuality developed for inclusion in Church instructional manuals were likewise never published (1976, 9). In 1985, however, the Church published *A Parent's Guide*, a booklet that includes some open and frank discussions of sex and sexuality designed for parents of children ranging in age from infancy to young adulthood. To date, it is the best effort by the Church to deal with the broad range of sexual issues confronting its members. Unfortunately, the vast majority of those members are unaware of its existence.

The problems of sexual ignorance and the rampant discomfort about sexuality could be ameliorated with a positive, concerted effort by Church leaders to disseminate frank, comprehensive, and positive sexual educational materials. The *Parent's Guide* is a positive step, but much more information, more widely available, is needed.

SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

Marriage is the ultimate experience for many Latter-day Saints, who look to it for the emotional and physical bonding it offers. Physical expressions of love have both scriptural and ecclesiastical sanction. In fact, the Lord's first commandment to men and women, recorded in Genesis 2:24, deals specifically with sex and marriage: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." There is little doubt about the meaning of this verse. Sexual intercourse was not only approved, it was (and is) strongly encouraged by the Lord. It is important to note that this command was given independent of any reference to having children—becoming "one flesh" was to be an end in and of itself.

In the modern Church, the purpose most often given for sexual relationships between husbands and wives has been procreation. In addition, sex is approved to strengthen the spiritual bonds between spouses. Unfortunately, references by General Authorities to sexual activity solely for enjoyment and physical pleasure, even between marriage partners, are few. Far more common are references to marital sex as being appropriate if restrained and kept within "normal" limits. For example, in *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, Spencer W. Kimball devotes fifteen pages to the pitfalls of sexual impurity, adds a line briefly condoning a "normal and *controlled* sex life," but offers no elaboration on what constitutes controlled sex (1969, 74, emphasis added). Joseph F. Smith had earlier stated, "Sexual union is lawful in wedlock, and if participated in with right intent is honorable and sanctifying" (1939, 309), a notion that President Kimball echoes when he writes that "pure sex life in marriage is approved" (1975, 155). But while he sanctions sexual expression as appropriate, in the same section of the book, he states that "the doctrine that the devil is so eager to establish that sex relations are justified on the grounds that it is a *pleasurable experience in itself* and is beyond moral consideration" is unacceptable (p. 154, emphasis added).

While few Latter-day Saints would argue that marital sex should not be without some moral consideration, many are confused as to whether sex for the "pleasurable experience in itself" is appropriate. Church leaders say little or nothing regarding the physical and emotional pleasure, satisfaction, and bonding that are possible in a healthy sexual relationship. In fact, many messages, whether explicit or not, seem to indicate that "pleasurable" sex for its own sake is inappropriate. The section on "Sex Desires" in Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* contains no information at all and directs the reader to "see

Sex Immorality," the obvious implication being that sexual desires are sinful and "immoral" (1976, 709).

The primary message most Church members hear is that sex is primarily for procreation. David O. McKay states, "In most cases the desire not to have children has its birth in vanity. Such feelings . . . often tend to put the marriage relationship on a level with the panderer and the courtesan" (in Turner 1976, 227).

Rodney Turner takes this argument and concludes that "apart from parenthood, marriage has no eternal validity." He also emphasizes that marriage does not justify "unrestrained sexual activity" and argues that a couple's love for each other and their desire for sexual intimacy are inversely related. For Turner, the strongest sexual desires between spouses occur when "love is least present" (1976, 226, 263). This line of reasoning suggests that something is wrong with a marriage when a couple feels strong physical attraction for one another. With messages such as this, it is no wonder that LDS couples may become confused or even eschew the wonderful bonding and sharing that come from a mutually satisfying physical relationship.

While Turner's claims may seem extreme, Church leaders, for their part, have taught similar ideas. For example, J. Reuben Clark stated, "As to sex in marriage, the necessary treatise on that for Latter-day Saints can be written in two sentences: Remember the prime purpose of sex desire is to beget children. Sex gratification must be had at that hazard. You husbands: be kind and considerate of your wives. They are not your property; they are not mere conveniences; they are your partners for time and eternity" (in Turner 1976, 227).

President Clark's statement contains several messages. First, he equates sex primarily with procreation and implies that men enjoy sexual intimacy much more than women, a belief shared by much of society. Second, he assumes that men control sexual relationships and activity rather than men and women having an equal partnership. Third, if we take Clark's warning literally, sexual gratification can be hazardous, especially if it is to be had without the concurrent desire to procreate. The important positive message in Clark's statement is that women are the masters of their bodies and not men's possessions, and that men have no right to subjugate women for their own desires, either sexually or otherwise. (This pronouncement, especially at the time it was given, was certainly not in keeping with the sentiment of a major segment of society.)

Related to the discussion of sexuality is the topic of birth control. Since the early days of the Church, contraceptive use has been condemned. The doctrine of premortal existence and the mandate to pro-

vide premortal spirits the opportunity to experience mortality are the foundations for this proscription. For example, Brigham Young stated:

There are multitudes of pure and holy spirits waiting to take tabernacles. Now what is our duty? To prepare tabernacles for them . . . It is our duty to prepare tabernacles for all the spirits they can. (1941, 197)

Referring specifically to birth control devices, John A. Widtsoe wrote:

Any contraceptive is unnatural and interferes in one way or another with the physiological processes of life. All of them are in varying degrees injurious to those who use them, especially women. (1943, 247)

Speaking in the October 1965 general conference, President Joseph Fielding Smith reiterated this position, stating:

I regret that so many young couples are thinking today more of successful contraceptives than of having a posterity. They will have to answer for their sin when the proper time comes and actually may be denied the glorious celestial kingdom. (1965, 29)

However, a First Presidency letter dated 14 April 1969 takes a somewhat different tone:

We seriously regret that there should exist a sentiment or feeling among any members of the Church to curtail the birth of their children. . . . Where husband and wife enjoy health and vigor . . . it is contrary to the teachings of the church to curtail or prevent the birth of children. . . . However, the mother's health and strength should be conserved. . . . It is our further feeling that married couples should seek inspiration.

While Church leaders have repeatedly condemned the use of birth control, this 1969 statement left some discretion to couples and urged them to seek inspiration when determining the spacing and size of their families.

General Authority pronouncements regarding birth control have become less strident with the passage of time. Unfortunately, some modern Church writers are not so equivocal in their statements. Rodney Turner contends abstinence and natural methods are the only legitimate forms of birth control. Further, he judges that women who experience menstrual irregularities do so as a result of the sins of their female progenitors. In this context, he writes:

Both husband and wife must exercise self-control . . . [to avoid using] some form of contraception other than that provided by the menstrual cycle. This may appear unfair to those women who are subject to irregular menstrual cycles. However, the admitted inequities of nature's method of birth control are, presumably, to be borne along with all of the rest of life's inequities until a better day comes. In all likelihood, menstrual irregularities . . . came about through the violation of God's laws of health and hygiene. If so, the sins of the mothers of past ages have been

visited on their daughters living today. But again, are we to free ourselves of the natural consequences of the race's past sins by resorting to new sins [the sins of contraception]? (1976, 235)

According to Turner, women are not only to be blamed for gynecological problems, they must also allow these problems to control their sex lives.

This "blame the victim" mentality both degrades women and leads to unnecessary guilt. The LDS client who first showed me this passage and used it for a guide in her life had denied her husband and herself the intimate closeness they had previously enjoyed because she feared the spiritual and physical consequences the Lord might impose on her. Because of her menstrual irregularities, she and her husband had limited sexual contact. When they "couldn't help it" and had sexual intercourse using contraceptives, they felt guilty. Because they felt comfortable sexually only when she was pregnant or trying to become so, their marriage and family relationships were needlessly damaged. Another couple entered counseling after the husband announced to his pregnant wife that they would not engage in sexual intercourse or other intimate contact during her pregnancy to demonstrate their worthiness and devotion to the Lord. Since procreation was the purpose of sexual intimacy, he concluded, they had met that goal and were now to abstain.

Homer Ellsworth's remarkable comments in the August 1979 *Ensign* differ dramatically from Turner's opinions. In response to a question on family planning in the "I Have a Question" section, Ellsworth, a gynecologist, recommends that couples counsel together and seek the Lord's guidance in family planning matters. He discussed abstinence as *one* form of contraception, but one that could have potentially adverse "side effects" on the marriage relationship.

The latest official guidelines regarding "Birth Control" in the *General Handbook of Instructions* are as liberal as have been provided to date: "Husbands should be considerate of their wives, who have a great responsibility not only for bearing children but also for caring for them through their childhood. Husbands should help their wives conserve their health and strength. Married couples should seek inspiration from the Lord in meeting their marital challenges and rearing their children according to the teachings of the gospel" (1989, 11-4).

This is markedly different from the 1969 First Presidency statement. In a subtle, but very important change from the 1983 *General Handbook of Instructions*, it deletes the statement, "Married couples should exercise self-control in all their relationships" (p. 77). This deletion effectively rescinds the "doctrine" that "natural" birth control is the

only legitimate form of contraception and that sexual pleasure should be avoided. It is addressed primarily to men but acknowledges the mutual responsibility of both men and women in sexual decision-making. Distributed only to Church leaders, the statement would be extremely helpful if made available to Church members. In light of past statements regarding sexuality and the sexual culture that has prevailed in the Church, many members would benefit from wide distribution of policy statements that contain even subtle attitude changes.

In recent years, Church leaders and publications have presented a more positive view of sexuality. For example, in the October 1975 *Ensign*, President Kimball is quoted as saying, "We know of no directive from the Lord that proper sexual experiences between husbands and wives need be limited totally to the procreation of children" (p. 4). On another occasion, he observed, "If you study the divorces, as we have had to do in these past years, you will find . . . sex is the first [reason]. They did not get along sexually. They may not say that in court. They may not even tell that to their attorneys, but that is the reason" (1982, 312).

And while *A Parent's Guide* offers perhaps the most affirming officially sanctioned sexual messages for married couples to date, it presents a very conservative view of sexuality. It describes the sex drive as a myth, counsels engaged couples to seek sexual information separately rather than together, and warns against "sexual excess" on the honeymoon. Yet, it also provides some very positive sexual messages. Referring to sex throughout the duration of marriage, it states: "They [couples] must be the very best of friends on their first occasion when they are able to begin to know one another completely. . . . And they must realize that the greatest passions in marriage lie ahead, to increase over the years through experience and growth. . . . In virtuous marriage passions increase over the years between the couple" (1985, 46).

In the September 1986 *Ensign*, Brent Barlow discusses the joy and intimacy in marriage that couples experience when they nurture their sexual relationships. The 1989 Relief Society manual suggests that within marriage, "sexual expression is ordained of God. It is a strong force in strengthening love, unity, and companionship" (p. 137). Unfortunately, priesthood lesson manuals of recent years offer no similar reinforcement regarding sexual relationships. For example, in the 1990 *Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide*, the one lesson devoted to marital relationships, "Live Joyfully with Your Wife," contains no mention of physical intimacy between spouses. In fact, even though the authors refer to the "one flesh" scripture, they do so in a completely unrelated context. If it is true, as President Kimball suggests, that "sex is the

first reason" for divorce among LDS couples, why is it so extensively neglected in Church curricula?

Church leaders have softened their stance on sexual expression in marriage significantly in the last two decades, but in subtle and covert ways not easily discernable to many members. Whereas they earlier condoned such expression primarily for procreative purposes, and underscored this message with the recurring theme of sexual restraint, leaders now teach that sexual intimacy for physical pleasure, emotional bonding, and relationship enhancement is acceptable and even approved. While there have been no doctrinal reversals, there have been changes in emphasis. These modifications, however, as I have already noted, have not been widely dispersed to the general Church populace. Unfortunately, many members still operate under the mistaken assumption that sexual self-denial is a virtue and that sexual passions are sinful. Many remain ambivalent as they interpret these conflicting messages.

Now it is true that some people, both in and out of the Church, have little interest in sexual intimacy. Others display aversive reactions. Though this occurs in society in general, in LDS couples, sexually aversive attitudes are more likely to be justified for religious reasons. For example, one couple with whom I worked had had an essentially asexual marriage for five years. The couple had five children, and the youngest was four years old. At the onset of her last pregnancy, the wife informed the husband (just as her mother had done with her father) that since they were finished having children, their sexual life was terminated. In her mind, the gospel taught that sex was for procreation, and that self-control (and, by extension, abstinence) was the ultimate virtue — a virtue she was determined to master.

When sexual problems of this nature occur with LDS couples, it is critical to redefine them as "sexual" rather than "doctrinal" problems. Individuals who rely on past statements of Church leaders or other LDS writers could benefit from the most contemporary statements and references that affirm the role of sexuality in marriage and emphasize personal choice and free agency. By eliminating "doctrine" as the root of sexual problems and the justification for negative sexual attitudes, we are free to emphasize positive relationships, communication, and intimacy. Problems arising from guilt or fear can be ameliorated by emphasizing the Lord's mandate to become "one flesh." (One reframing technique could be to point out that the clitoris is the only anatomical structure with the exclusive purpose of sexual pleasure, and then ask if our Heavenly Parents would create such a structure if they thought sexual pleasure was wrong.) Couples can be encouraged to seek the divine guidance concerning the timing of bringing children into the

world. They should view sexual intimacy and procreation as related, but not synonymous terms. Finally, it is important to emphasize couples' mutual responsibility for decisions regarding sexual intimacy and procreation and a reduced reliance upon outside advice.

Before leaving the topic of sex and marriage, it is important to address a major concern for many LDS couples: appropriate and inappropriate methods of sexual expression. As I mentioned earlier, most of the BYU nursing students' questions revolved around whether or not the sexual activities they were engaging in (or those they thought they might want to try) were ecclesiastically sanctioned. A number of these young people were engaged, and others were married; but their concerns were the same: "What sexual practices can I engage in and not get into trouble with the Church?" (and, by extension, the Lord?). Whereas extramarital sexual contact is unequivocally prohibited, within marriage the question becomes somewhat ambiguous. The *General Handbook of Instructions* counsels, "To be morally clean, a person must refrain from adultery and fornication, from homosexual or lesbian relations and from every other unholy, unnatural, or improper practice" (1989, 11-4).

The uncertainty here comes from the "other" category. What is and what isn't unholy and impure? President Kimball counseled, "There are some who have said that behind the bedroom doors anything goes. This is not true and the Lord would not condone it" (1982, 312). In recent years, some local Church leaders have inquired into the specific sexual practices of married members and have subsequently denied temple recommends to those who, based upon the leader's interpretation, engaged in "unholy" sexual practices. Moreover, stake presidents and bishops have used Church meetings to specify the "unholy and impure" practices members are to avoid within marriage.

A question I have frequently been asked concerns the propriety of oral sex. To address this question, one must first define the term. Is kissing oral sex? How about a mouth on a breast? Or is oral sex limited exclusively to oral-genital contact? (These questions have special significance for disabled persons who are paralyzed and lack sensation in their genitals, arms, and legs and for whom sexual expression is very different from that of able-bodied persons. For some, their mouths may be the only means of active sexual expression.) On 5 January 1982, apparently in response to numerous queries about oral sex, the First Presidency distributed a letter (signed by Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, Marion G. Romney, and Gordon B. Hinkley) to bishops and stake presidents. In it, they characterized oral sex as impure. However, the letter specifically stated that Church leaders

were not to discuss intimate sexual matters with members. The letter was also not to be shared with the general Church membership. Apparently, a number of the local leaders read the first part of the letter but ignored the second, choosing instead to delve into their members' intimate lives. After the 1982 letter, several of my clients and a number of friends reported experiences in which their bishops or stake presidents inquired into their intimate sex lives. Some reported local leaders using Church meetings to counsel members about sexual practices. Almost all of the inquiries and counsel dealt specifically with oral sex. As a result of these intrusions, many members wrote letters to Church leaders, protesting ecclesiastical meddling. Apparently, in response to these reactions, on 15 October 1982, a second letter was sent to stake and ward leaders that reiterated the January 5 directive to avoid inquiring into couples' intimate sexual practices. Further, it directed leaders that, even if asked by members about specific sexual matters in marriage, they were to avoid giving direct counsel. The latest directive, in the "Instructions for Issuing Recommends to Enter a Temple" (1989), instructs interviewers to ask only, "Do you live the law of chastity?" They are further counseled:

When interviewing an applicant for a recommend, do not inquire into personal, intimate matters about marital relations between a husband and his wife. Generally, do not deviate from the recommend interview questions. If, during an interview, an applicant asks about the propriety of specific conduct do not pursue the matter. Merely suggest that if the applicant has enough anxiety about the propriety of conduct to ask about it, the best course would be to discontinue it. If you are sensitive and wise, you usually can prevent those being interviewed from asking such explicit questions.

This directive makes it clear that couples, not Church leaders, are responsible for their sexual conduct. They should take their questions to the Lord, not to ecclesiastical leaders, whose suggestions to "discontinue" sexual practices may lead to unnecessary guilt and restriction of physical intimacy. Perhaps the most beneficial recommendation for couples is to counsel together and, when necessary, seek the Lord's guidance.

Finally, in some relationships, couples use sex as a tool to manipulate or control. This type of behavior usually indicates serious marital problems. According to scriptural and ecclesiastical mandates, force or coercion are not to be used. Moses instructed that a man guilty of rape be put to death (Deut. 22:25). Church leaders and publications stress the importance of mutuality and sharing (*Parent's Guide* 1988; Kimball 1969; Barlow 1986). An example of destructive sex occurs when one partner withholds sex and affection to hurt or punish the other. At the other end of the spectrum is a woman I counseled recently

who had filed for divorce, but because of financial difficulties continued to live in the same house with her husband who, despite the impending divorce, continued to demand sexual contact. When the woman sought her bishop's help, he told her that until the divorce was final, she should meet her husband's sexual requests. Subsequently, every time he had sex with her, she felt violated; but because of her bishop's counsel, she also felt helpless to stop his advances. Loving sexual expression carries the possibility of great intimacy, but when used punitively can be extremely damaging.

HETEROSOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Related to the discussion of sexuality is the prevailing attitude toward heterosocial relationships between men and women in the Church. The belief expressed by Billy Crystal in the movie, "When Harry Met Sally"—that men and women can never become "just friends" because sex always gets in the way—likewise holds sway in the Church. Most members have known (or at least heard of) people who have committed adultery and have lost Church membership as a result. (Bishop-Relief Society president adultery stories are probably far more prevalent than their actual incidence.) The tragedy of broken families and damaged relationships that stem from infidelity needs no elaboration. The gospel teaches that we should share our affections exclusively with our spouses, advice that is salient for persons in or out of the Church.

Unfortunately, many Church members take the position that all extramarital male-female contacts or friendships are wrong. The following examples clearly illustrate this point. A man and a woman, neighbors in their ward, attended a series of Church-related meetings approximately twenty-five miles from their homes. They drove to these meetings separately and never considered car-pooling. When queried about this, the woman spoke of the impropriety of being alone with someone of the opposite sex and the importance of "avoiding the very appearance of evil." The implication was that during these drives, the two of them might be sexually tempted or, at least, give others the impression that they were romantically involved. This same heterosocial discomfort is evident in the practice of many wards in assigning older men as home teachers to young divorced women rather than sending men of a similar age. At a time when closeness and support of persons of the opposite sex are most needed, in the Church they are often least available. Marybeth Raynes discusses this frustration and suggests that we need to distinguish emotional closeness from erotic feelings (1981). Sexualizing heterosocial relationships often leads people to interpret

the intimate as the sexual and may, in fact, create the very atmosphere that we are attempting to avoid simply because we do not have opportunities for platonic intimacy.

The belief that friendships with members of the opposite sex automatically lead to romantic feelings or sexual relationships effectively separates members along gender lines. This especially damages women, who already have little access to leadership and the decision-making process. Gender separation in interpersonal relationships deprives male Church leaders of female perspectives and opinions. Married men and women must then rely solely on their spouses for opposite-sex interaction and feedback. Access to unmarried individuals is further restricted, especially when they are seen as potential threats to marital relationships. Removing heterosocial taboos would empower both women and men in the Church to take full advantage of the resources offered by others, regardless of their gender. For women to share a more equal voice, intergender desexualization of relationships is necessary, a process that will mitigate some of the pain and isolation felt by many single members of the Church (Oswald 1990; Young 1990; Raynes 1981).

Another negative byproduct of the Church's emphasis on avoiding sexual impropriety and heterosocial interaction is an environment in which single men and women relate to each other primarily as romantic objects or potential mates. After marriage, members avoid male-female friendships because they have not learned to relate to each other on a purely heterosocial basis. This predominantly masculine avoidance of the (nonwife) feminine results in a knowledge deprivation which devalues women's ways of knowing and being. Women, on the other hand, must daily acknowledge men's ways of knowing and doing since men hold virtually all ecclesiastical authority over their spiritual lives. If we can create a culture that validates heterosocial relationships, people will learn to socialize and work together without sexual interference. Gender imbalances that exist in today's Church will begin to disintegrate, especially as men become more aware of and responsive to women's needs and respond to them as intellectual, spiritual, and social equals. Developing healthy heterosocial relationships after marriage may, in fact, reduce marital infidelity and enhance marriages as men and women replace suspicious, fearful attitudes with affirming, nonsexual ones.

CONCLUSIONS

Sexuality permeates much of what we do and think. The Church's perspective on sexuality is unique: like our Heavenly Parents, we have

the potential to experience and enjoy eternal marriage relationships, one component of which is sexuality (we can eternally procreate). Attitudes toward sexuality and sexual expression have undergone marked changes in the 161 years since the Church was organized, many of which parallel similar changes in society at large (Hansen 1976). Although Church leaders have historically championed sexual expression for the purposes of procreation, they have only recently begun to sanction physical sexual fulfillment as ends in themselves. More than a decade ago, Kenneth Cannon called for an "LDS philosophy of sex" that emphasizes the full realm of sexuality rather than focusing almost exclusively on chastity (1976, 57). Whether or not we need an institutional "philosophy" on sex, it is certain that a church culture that provides moral guidelines, yet allows individuals and couples to fully develop as sexual beings is preferable to the current cultural ambivalence.

Though sexually affirming statements are gradually appearing in some LDS publications, their numbers are few, and most members are unaware of them. Moreover, of the sexually affirming articles and statements, very few are by General Authorities. However, General Authority statements emphasizing restraint and chastity are voluminous.

It is time for Church leaders to adopt a comprehensive approach to sexuality that includes positive messages emphasizing the joys and rewards of physical intimacy rather than focusing exclusively on the pitfalls of immorality. Ecclesiastical messages, whether in conference addresses, books, or other Church publications, condoning appropriate sexual relationships will engender a sexually affirming institutional environment, wherein members will feel free to seek and gain additional knowledge.

While it is important for members to obtain positive sexual information, it is equally important that they have access to plentiful educational materials. In 1976 Shirley B. Paxman reviewed sexually related books written by LDS authors. The list was sparse at that time, and few titles have been added since. An increased ecclesiastical openness toward sexuality would no doubt encourage a proliferation of writing on the subject. Sexual literature written within a gospel context would teach people about such subjects as sexual anatomy, the physiology of sexual response, sexual intimacy, and common sexual problems and strategies to alleviate them. This information would help dispel myths, promote knowledge-building, and reinforce positive sexual attitudes. Armed with healthy attitudes and accurate knowledge, the Church could next work on skill development. For example, priesthood and Relief Society manuals could include lessons about teaching sexuality

to children and enhancing intimate relationships in marriage. Educational materials designed for youth could provide information about physical growth and development and lessons teaching restraint and chastity.

An open environment that emphasizes the positive aspects of sexuality and promotes the acquisition of accurate sexual information will prepare Church members to teach their children healthy sexual attitudes, beginning with respect for and knowledge of their own bodies. As children mature, parents can balance messages about chastity with a celebration of the wonders of human development. This value-centered education in the home provides young people with the intellectual defenses necessary to counter the explosion of sexual information they receive from larger society and likewise prepares them for dating and, eventually, marriage.

Furthermore, an affirming sexual culture will likely prevent, and even eliminate, sexual problems for many Church members. As leaders and parents complement the teaching of chastity with messages affirming the joys of intimacy and healthy sexual expression, they can shift the emphasis away from restraint and focus on helping couples develop open and honest communication skills. Personal responsibility and spiritual guidance (when necessary) would replace ecclesiastical proscriptions. Couples could then feel free to make their own decisions regarding method and frequency of sexual expression, contraception, family planning, and childbearing. This increased openness and awareness would confirm that sexuality and sexual expression are sacred, not shameful. It would affirm the idea that sexuality is much more than sexual arousal and physical desire. As we institutionally learn to appreciate our sexuality, we will reduce artificial gender separations and enhance our ability to address the full range of sexuality-related issues. A culture that embraces all members will be created.

This paper barely scratches the surface in dealing with LDS notions of sexuality. Ongoing discussion on the broad range of sexual issues is needed. It has been said that procreation, that is the co-creation of children, brings us closer to God than anything else we do. We are taught that we have perfect Heavenly Parents. We can assume, therefore, that their love for each other must be equally perfect. They created us in their images with the desire that we emulate them. It follows, then, that the perfection we seek includes a perfect understanding of our bodies and the capacity to love our spouses completely in every way. One step on the road to perfection is an understanding and respect for our own sexuality and sexual expression, knowledge that will make us ultimately, and eternally, "one flesh."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barlow, Brent. "They Twain Shall Be One" *Ensign* 16 (September 1986): 49-53.
- Cannon, Kenneth L. "Needed: An LDS Philosophy of Sex." *DIALOGUE* 10 (Autumn 1976): 57-61.
- CR. Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. October 1965.
- Christensen, Harold T. "Mormon Sexuality in Cross-cultural Perspective." *DIALOGUE* 10 (Autumn 1976): 62-75.
- Ellsworth, Homer G. "I Have a Question." *Ensign* 9 (August 1979): 23-24.
- First Presidency. Letter to Stake, Ward, and Mission Leaders, 14 April 1969. Copy in author's possession.
- . Letters to local leaders, 5 January 1982, 15 October 1982. Copies in author's possession.
- General Handbook of Instructions*. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1983.
- . Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989.
- Hansen, Klaus J. "Mormon Sexuality and American Culture." *DIALOGUE* 10 (Autumn 1976): 45-56.
- Instructions for Issuing Recommends to Enter a Temple*. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 1989.
- Kimball, Spencer W. *Faith Precedes the Miracle*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1975.
- . "The Lord's Plan for Men and Women." *Ensign* 5 (October 1975): 2-5.
- . *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1969.
- . *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*. Edited by Edward L. Kimball. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1982.
- McConkie, Bruce R. *Mormon Doctrine*. 2d ed. (19th printing) Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1976.
- Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide: Lay Hold Upon the Word of God*. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1988.
- Oswald, Delmont R. "A Lone Man in the Garden." *DIALOGUE* 23 (Spring 1990): 139-46.
- A Parent's Guide*. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985.
- Paxman, Shirley B. "Sex Education Materials for Latter-day Saints." *DIALOGUE* 10 (Autumn 1976): 113-16.
- Raynes, Marybeth. "Getting Unmarried in a Married Church." *DIALOGUE* 14 (Winter 1981): 75-90.
- Relief Society Personal Study Guide*. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989.
- Smith, Joseph F. *Gospel Doctrine*. 5th ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1939.
- Turner, Rodney. *Woman and the Priesthood*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1976.
- Widtsoe, John A. *Evidences and Reconciliations*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1943.

Young, Brigham. *Discourses of Brigham Young*. Selected and arranged by John A. Widtsoe. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Inc., 1941.

Young, Lawrence A. "Being Single, Mormon and Male." *DIALOGUE* 23 (Spring 1990): 146-151.