

The Logical Next Step: Affirming Same-Sex Relationships

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RECENTLY I HAD TWO LENGTHY DISCUSSIONS with local LDS church leaders about homosexuality. Those discussions convinced me that the problem faced by homosexual Mormons and their families in their relationship to the church, and the problem faced by the church in its relationship to its homosexual members and their families, are not insoluble. I use the word “problem” advisedly, when in fact we have before us today two conundrums.

I would like to identify these two conundrums and then conjecture about a possible solution—one that makes sense to me but may be nonsensical to others. Intricate and difficult problems rarely have simple answers. I am not so naive as to expect that everyone will embrace these ideas, but I am willing to make the effort because both the church and its homosexual members are important to me.

Identifying the two conundrums is rather simple. For homosexual members of the church, it is represented by a church policy that, in effect, forces its gay members to make a choice between two core identities. On the one hand, there is their inner core of same-sex attraction, which countless gay members will testify they discover, not choose; and on the other, there is their belief in the authenticity of the gospel of Jesus Christ as embodied in the LDS church. While virtually everyone concedes that the causes of homosexuality are complex, almost every gay person I know tells me that choice is not really operative and that their same-sex attraction just happened.

The reality of the matter, regardless of the origins of homosexuality, is that a small percentage of our LDS members find themselves romantically/sexually interested only in members of the same sex. These individuals are aware that church policy has “zero tolerance” for any

sexual activity between members of the same sex, or for that between any of its members outside marriage. They realize that this means they can never become romantically/sexually involved with someone of the same sex and remain a member of the church in anything approaching good standing. Hence, they are forced to choose between a romantic/sexual relationship and full membership in the church. I've previously referred to this as a veritable "Sophie's choice," because it is so difficult and so painful for anyone who is already integrated into and has developed a testimony of the truthfulness of the LDS church. Some actually do choose the church and thereby a life of celibacy and service in much the same manner as Catholic priests and nuns, but by far the majority choose a relationship and ultimately leave the church voluntarily or via church discipline.

To my knowledge, there is no substantive data on this, but I am privy to a survey done by Ron Schow, co-editor of *Peculiar People*, in 1995 at an Affirmation conference in Las Vegas. The survey sample included approximately 100 Mormons, the majority being returned missionaries who identified themselves as gay, and dealt with their activity in the church. They ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty-six, with an average age of thirty-six, and came from fine church families. (Six of their fathers had been stake, mission, or temple presidents; eight of their mothers had been Relief Society presidents; twelve of their fathers had served as bishops or branch presidents; ten more had a father who had served as a counselor in a bishopric.) Their church attendance averaged 93 percent as children, 94 percent as teenagers, 94 percent as young adults, but currently was 14 percent. This, despite the fact that 65 percent had counseled with an average of 3.3 church leaders, 40 percent had gone to LDS Social Services for therapy for an average of nine sessions, and another 50 percent had gone for other counseling for an average of eighteen sessions. To suggest that these previously active, contributing church members failed as members from a lack of effort seems disingenuous to me. These numbers simply corroborate the latest scientific research that sexual orientation is not readily amenable to change. The exodus of so many good, substantial members of the church is unfortunate, both for the church and for the individual, and should cause great concern among church leaders.

The conundrum faced by ecclesiastical leaders begins when their gay members choose a relationship. Most leaders are aware of the intense feelings that precede the choice of a relationship by gay members. Most leaders are truly empathetic and saddened that these circumstances have occurred, but are also loyal to the church and feel duty bound to adhere to church policy. In many cases they initiate a disciplinary council which usually results in the expulsion of their gay members from the church. Anyone who has sat on such a council will testify that they are gut-

wrenching and clearly represent some of the most difficult decisions imaginable because of the intensity of the love by the gay member for the church and for his or her partner. Part of the difficulty for the church leader is his awareness that his gay members are valuable, that they may have been making a contribution to the ward, and that the expulsion from membership will likely mean the end of what some would identify as "a beautiful friendship."

These realities occur in many wards and stakes in the church and are the source of much discomfort for members. Gays and lesbians and their families are torn between the reality of same-sex attraction and their love for the church. Church leaders and members are torn between their love and empathy for their gay members who are forced to make this "Sophie's choice" and their duty as leaders to implement church policy and remain loyal to the doctrine of the church.

The following story about the experiences of a gay couple I know illustrates some of these complexities. Interestingly, and to add to the complexity, both men met at Evergreen, an LDS Social Services-supported program for gays and lesbians which stresses behavioral modification and/or celibacy. They have been in a committed, monogamous relationship for the past six years. During the first three and a half years of their relationship, they were active and welcome members of their LDS ward in Salt Lake City. Their bishop was aware of their relationship, welcomed them in the ward, and encouraged their participation in ward activities. One of the men was called as priesthood organist and played faithfully every Sunday for almost three years. They met with their bishop on a quarterly basis and received encouragement to be faithful and monogamous in their relationship and to continue to concentrate on improving their spirituality and to do the best they could to live Christ-like lives.

About four years ago, they purchased a new home in a new stake in south Salt Lake and came under the jurisdiction of a new bishop and a new stake president. The new stake president and bishop were not supportive of their relationship. Consequently, disciplinary councils were called and both men were excommunicated. Neither claims to be bitter, but neither has attended church since then. Their former bishop was disappointed with the excommunications because the Spirit had told him, when he had made it a matter of prayer, that they should not be disciplined but should be encouraged to stay active in the ward and committed in their relationship to each other. He had read the *General Handbook of Instructions* and was aware that the purpose of excommunication was to help individuals repent of their sins, change their feelings and behaviors, and start anew. He was skeptical that sexual orientation was changeable and felt that these two young men would be better served by encouraging their activity and acceptance by fellow ward members. In

fact, he confided to them that he would “rather empty the Great Salt Lake with a teaspoon than excommunicate [them] from the church.” The bishop has been the subject of some criticism by, to use Richard Poll’s term, “iron rod” Mormons, while at the same time supported and praised by “liahona” Mormons.

The unfortunate part of these two young men’s experience is that it is being repeated too often in the church. Faithful gay members seek out ecclesiastical leaders they know to be tolerant and informed about the complexities of homosexuality and are occasionally successful in maintaining activity and acceptance in wards and branches with such “spirit of the law” leaders. When gay and lesbian church members sense their ecclesiastical leaders are uninformed, intolerant, and judgmental, they become inactive or try to find a ward with a more tolerant leader. Eventually, most gay couples encounter leaders who are uncomfortable with having them participate in ward activities while in a relationship, and, as a result, they migrate out of the church to seek a more gay-friendly environment.

Many church leaders and members simply wring their hands and suggest that God in his infinite wisdom will sort it all out in the next life. In the meantime, we continue to experience the pain and anguish inherent in these horrible conundrums. Can anything be done to improve the situation?

In thinking about various options that might be employed to resolve these two conundrums, we need first to accept and understand some necessary realities. These are: (1) The church will not amend its law of chastity. Bolstered by tradition, scripture, and prophetic pronouncement, church leaders will continue to stress the need for compliance to this law. (2) Most of gay and lesbian members and their families will continue to see their same-sex attraction as a normal biological variation that is rarely, if ever, chosen and not readily amenable to change. That position is certainly supported by the three major professional organizations that deal with homosexuality: the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the National Association of Social Workers, who issued a joint statement in their 1994 “friend of the court” brief to the U.S. Supreme Court that “research firmly and consistently rejects the widespread assumptions that sexual orientation is the same as sexual conduct, that sexual orientation is freely chosen and readily subject to alteration, and that homosexual or bisexual orientation is a mental disorder causing impairment of psychological or social functioning” (see *Romer v. Evans et al.*, U.S. Supreme Court, no. 94-1039). (3) Current church policy as it relates to homosexuality has and will continue to produce significant pain, anguish, dissent, and consternation among both straight and gay members. That bitter fruit is unlikely to go away and will continue to plague the church until some accommodation is made. (4) It is ir-

rational to believe that allowing gay members in committed relationships to remain full members will usher in a new era in which heterosexuals will begin to seek homosexual relationships. People who do not have same-sex attractions are not going to seek a same-sex relationship simply because the church validates committed same-sex relationships. (5) Church policy as it relates to homosexuality evolves as our understanding of sexuality increases, and it is vitally important that no one comes to the current debate assuming that current policy is fixed and immutable. The very title of my essay, "The Logical Next Step," implies prior steps.

When one compares the first substantive statements by the church about homosexuality published in the 1973 *Welfare Packet on Homosexuality* with the 1992 brochure *Understanding and Helping Those with Homosexual Problems*, or with Dallin Oaks's article in the September 1995 *Ensign*, some changes in policy are evident. The earlier pronouncements implied that homosexual thoughts were "learned behavior (not inborn)" and resulted from sexual abuse and/or dysfunctional parents or families, and that heterosexual relationships should be encouraged for gay members by their leaders. The church has now recognized that "some thoughts seem to be inborn," that "parents should not be blamed for the decisions of their gay children," and that "marriage should not be encouraged" as therapy. Unfortunately, these positive, progressive steps taken by the church have not yet significantly improved the church experience for gay and lesbian members.

For the remainder of this essay, I would like to build on the church experience of my two gay friends to explain why I think the logical next step for the church in ministering to its gay members should be some form of sanctioning or affirming committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. I would like to speculate about what might be the probable outcomes if bishops and other local leaders were encouraged, rather than discouraged, to follow the example of my gay friends' former bishop. Let's face it: most bishops, without encouragement from the First Presidency and/or general authorities, will continue to be uncomfortable about providing support for gay members who have chosen a committed, monogamous relationship. Such encouragement would not necessitate a change in doctrine, but would require a change in the way the church implements policy regarding sexual intimacy outside the bonds of marriage. I believe this has the potential to provide some reward and incentive for gay members to sustain a committed, monogamous relationship that would have value for the church. If gay members in committed relationships were able to feel that their relationship had value and that it would enable them to remain members of the church, I believe that most of the animosity currently extant would evaporate overnight. Other benefits to the church would flow naturally. Gay members would continue to

be active in the church and would be able to make contributions which are sorely missed presently.

Recently I attended a funeral service for one of the great women of Family Fellowship, Carol Mensel. (Family Fellowship is an LDS-oriented support group for the families of gays and lesbians.) Her gay son, Robert, is a talented musician who left the church shortly after discovering his same-sex attraction. He is currently in a committed relationship in Oregon, where he was music director for St. Stephen's Episcopal Church for four years and is currently conductor of the Portland Gay Men's Choir and director of the Rose City Freedom Band. The family asked Robert to make the musical arrangements for her funeral. The music was perhaps the best I have ever heard at any funeral. Robert is a Mormon expatriate who, I am convinced, would still be an active, contributing member if, as a church, we had been able to value the integrity of his relationship with his partner. He is just one example of thousands. It is inconceivable to me that the church doesn't feel his loss, but many former members who are gay will so testify.

Does the LDS policy of "zero tolerance" for sexual activity outside marriage necessitate that all relationships between gay members have no value? Present policy makes no distinction between committed, monogamous same-sex relationships and promiscuity; no distinction between responsibility and sexual license. It occurs to me that placing no value on committed, monogamous same-sex relationships is at the root of the strained relationship between the church and its gay members, as well as their immediate and extended families. One way to value a committed, monogamous same-sex relationship is to institute a policy that allows gay members in such a relationship to maintain their membership in the church. Temple recommends and attendance could still be restricted to members who are in full compliance with the law of chastity. We have many members of the church who do not qualify for temple recommends for a variety of reasons. How many of our members really comply fully with the law of tithing or live the Word of Wisdom without deviation? Perhaps we would do well to de-emphasize the word "law" and emphasize the word "ideal." Most members who are unable to live these ideals completely nonetheless remain active, contributing members and benefit from their participation in the church. Ironically, the church did not oppose domestic partnership legislation in Hawaii, accepting such legislation as a quid pro quo to prevent same-sex marriage from becoming legal. The church's lack of opposition is a tacit admission that committed, monogamous same-sex relationships may already have some value in its eyes.

The reality is that few gay members can function in a heterosexual relationship or want to live in celibacy. A policy that recognizes this reality

and stresses responsibility and fidelity in a committed relationship would create a "win-win" situation for the church, its gay members, and their families. If such a policy were in place, the majority of gay members would stay in the church and feelings of bitterness, hurt, anguish, and hostility would dissipate. Gay members would be better served by attending church and working on their spirituality than by being excommunicated. Immediate and extended family members could take some pride in encouraging their gay children to be in committed relationships just as they encourage their straight children. Such a position would disarm critics who suggest that too often the emphasis on the family comes at the expense of homosexuals and those who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to find or live in the ideal family of a father, a mother, and their children. Jonathan Rauch, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* (29 Nov. 1994), aptly states that "divorce, illegitimacy and infidelity are the enemies of the family." He points out, however, that "reports and articles by 'pro-family' groups devoted obsessive attention to homosexuality while virtually ignoring divorce."

A policy of including gay members who are in committed relationships would allow for the formation and recognition of non-traditional families, but families nevertheless. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, gay members are not anti-family; they simply fail to see "family values" as universal when their own relationships receive no value whatsoever. Gay and lesbian members would, for perhaps the first time, feel welcome that they finally have a place in the church. The church could even become a place where gay members with an interest in things of the spirit could socialize rather than congregate in gay bars. The exodus of so many gay members and their families and friends from the church would cease, and acrimonious feelings and expressions would certainly diminish. Many individuals, unable to give unqualified support to the church because of this issue, would return to the fold and once again become its advocates.

Aside from the excommunication of my own son, the most painful experience for me has been witnessing the failure of attempted heterosexual marriages involving gay Mormons. Current church policy discourages such marriages, but gay and lesbian members continue to try them as long as there is no acceptable alternative for inclusion in the church. Sooner or later, most of these marriages fail, and the pain and anguish thus produced are incalculable. The straight spouse, their children, and their extended families are victimized by both the gay member and a church policy which continues to stress the importance of a heterosexual temple marriage without exception. Placing some value on committed, monogamous same-sex relationships would benefit the church and its members by substantially reducing the incidence of these tragedies.

In creating a “win-win” situation, the church should consider distancing itself from those radical elements which continue to spew homophobic rhetoric and refuse to treat gay members and other homosexuals with the dignity and respect they deserve as human beings. Church leaders who hold responsible civic positions on school boards and in state legislatures should be encouraged to be sensitive to and aware of the needs of these men and women. Young people discovering they have same-sex attraction need solid information about homosexuality, not condemnation. Some believe the church has abrogated its responsibility to these young members when it opposes inclusion of information about homosexuality in school curricula and provides no credible information about homosexuality in priesthood and young women’s lessons. To the credit of current church leaders, families affiliated with Family Fellowship have seen a noticeable decline in condemnation of gay family members from the pulpit in general conference over the past two years.

In closing, I would like to comment briefly on the morality of homosexuality. Perhaps I could begin by sharing some of the lyrics from a Billy Joel song entitled “Shades of Grey.”

Some things were perfectly clear, seen with the vision of youth. No doubts and nothing to fear, I claimed a corner on truth. These days it’s harder to say, I know what I’m fighting for. My faith is falling away, I’m not that sure anymore. Shades of grey wherever I go, the more I find out the less that I know. Black and white is how it should be, but shades of grey are the colors I see.

Those who have read my previous essay in the December 1997 issue of *Sunstone* entitled “Mugged by Reality” will understand why those words have relevance for me. My wife, Millie, and I have six children whom we love deeply. They all have strengths and weaknesses, but in my judgment they are all responsible men and women. Four of them identify as straight, two as gay. I don’t know why two are gay, but all six are similar except for their sexual interests. When people ask me what I want for my gay children, I respond: I want them to have the same rights and opportunities as my straight children. I do not believe their sexual orientation is amenable to significant change and I would prefer that they not live alone. Intuitively, it seems to me that they have the same capacity to become involved in a moral relationship as my straight children. The morality of a relationship should be judged on the way the relationship is conducted, not on who is involved in the relationship. In my judgment, it would be immoral for my gay children to attempt a heterosexual relationship simply to comply with church and societal norms. Heterosexual relationships are not “natural” for my gay children and homosexual relationships are not “natural” for my straight children. To insist that my gay

children change or act as if they are heterosexual seems inappropriate to me. I have encouraged my gay children to seek someone they can love and share their life with and to be moral in that relationship. I would prefer that such relationships have the church's blessing and am sad and disappointed that this is not possible at present. I lament the fact that my gay children and other gay members of the church do not have a place to meet in the church and, too often, feel they must socialize elsewhere.

People sometimes criticize me for relying on my own intuition when it comes to the morality of homosexuality and suggest that I am going against God. My own intuition also tells me, however, that our current understanding of what God may have said about homosexuality is incomplete. I've read the passages and am not prepared to accept the literal interpretation of what was written since it flies in the face of reason and our current understanding of homosexuality. God's commandments are not arbitrary and should be able to stand on their own merits. When someone's only defense for suggesting that a committed, monogamous same-sex relationship is immoral because they believe God has declared it so, they are on a "slippery slope." As Peter Gomes points out in his new book, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Morrow, 1996), a literal interpretation of the Bible as "God's word" has been used in the past to defend slavery, anti-semitism, and anti-feminism, as well as to justify hostility towards homosexuals. Fortunately, we rarely see literal biblical interpretation used today to justify racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice. I'm hopeful that we can make similar strides in understanding homosexuality as we learn to read the Bible with heart and mind. A commitment to reason, as well as to things of the spirit, is indispensable when trying to decide what is just and unjust, moral and immoral. Discussion is essential in revealing new possibilities for understanding morality. I offer this expression sincerely and with the fervent hope that it may precipitate more dialogue and hopefully contribute to solving these vexing conundrums.