

# GETTING OUT/STAYING IN: ONE MORMON STRAIGHT/GAY MARRIAGE

## *Getting Out*

*Ben Christensen*

BEING A GAY MORMON is one thing; being a gay Mormon married to a woman is quite another. At this point, defining exactly what *gay* means to me is not only a question of how true I am to my religious beliefs, but also a question of how faithful I am to my wife. Knowing this, one can't help but wonder why I chose to marry in the first place. Was it unyielding faith? Earth-shattering love? Temporary insanity? Not-so-temporary stupidity? Probably all of the above, give or take an adjective or two.

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I made a point of not telling Jessie ahead of time that I wanted to talk to her because I didn't want her to go through the torture of wondering what horrible thing I wanted to talk about. I knew she'd immediately assume that I was going to dump her, which was far from my intentions. She might have thought that I was going to officially propose, but she's smart enough to distinguish between a good "I want to talk to you" and a bad "I want to talk to you."

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After going to the temple, we decided to stop at Taco Bell. I went through the drive-thru because I knew that inside wouldn't be a good place to talk—too many people. Then I looked for a church parking lot, which took surprisingly long considering we were in American Fork, Utah. As we pulled into the dark lot it occurred to me that I was behaving strangely—insisting on going through the drive-thru, then spending five minutes trying to find an empty lot to park in. It also occurred to me that bad things happen to girls who park in dark places with boys. Hoping Jessie wasn't thinking the same thing, I scarfed down my burrito as quickly as possible. When I finished she was still trying to figure out how to eat her Mexican pizza without a fork.

"Is it okay if we talk about something?" I asked.

"Oh. Okay." I sensed the uneasiness in her voice, the insecurity. Although we'd been friends for over a year, we'd only been dating for a few weeks. Neither of us had been in a serious relationship before. Dating had progressed into kissing, and kissing had progressed into talking about marriage much faster than either of us had expected. Jessie had expressed concern early on about our romance possibly not working out and ruining our friendship. Now, in the car, I saw in her face that she believed her fears were about to come true. She looked as if she were on the verge of crying, and we hadn't even started.

"Before I say anything else, I should say that this has nothing to do with us or our relationship. At least I hope it doesn't. I'm happy being with you and I still want very much to marry you and I still love you."

This seemed to help, but I could see the gears turning in her head as she wondered what horrible confession I had to make, now that some of the expected options were eliminated. I must have told her that I loved her at least four more times before I gathered the courage to go on.

"I . . . I'm . . ." I sighed. "Sorry, you'd think this would be easier after I've done it so many times. I can't even get the words out of my mouth."

Jessie reached across the compartment between the seats and squeezed my hand. "It's okay," she said, looking into my eyes.

I looked away. It's nearly impossible for me to speak about myself openly. Even with her. I took a deep breath. "I'm not like other guys." I took another breath. "As long as I remember, I've been attracted to men." There. I'd said it.

She nodded. Her eyes were turning pinkish and raw, but no tears

came. I couldn't tell if she was angry, surprised, sad, or what; she didn't say a word.

"I've talked to countless bishops and counselors at LDS Social Services. I've been trying to overcome this problem for years, since before my mission. I've come to accept that it might be something I have to deal with for the rest of my life." I told her how I'd first talked about it to a counselor in the stake presidency, who also happened to be my best friend's father, when I was seventeen. Since then I'd told only three of my sisters, two friends, and my mother (not counting the bishops and counselors and random group therapy people). I told her about how the counselors said it probably had something to do with my relationship with my father (or lack thereof) and my "defensive detachment" from men. This theory made *some* sense to me but didn't quite all add up. There had to be more to it. Maybe I'd blocked out some kind of early childhood abuse, or maybe it really was a genetic thing. I'd stopped caring about the whys anyway, I told her.

Her first question was one I had expected. "Have you ever . . .?"

"No. I've never done anything with another guy. Anything." I paused, allowing that to sink in. "I just wanted you to know before you made any kind of commitment to marry me. You know, so you know what you're getting into." As if I knew what either of us was getting into.

Silence.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"I'm scared."

"That we'll get married and five or ten years down the road I'll mess up?"

She nodded.

"To be honest, that scares me too. I know getting married won't make these feelings go away. But I can promise you that if we get married I'll be faithful to you. I won't leave you. I refuse to become my father."

I really wanted to be as confident as I sounded. Maybe I was.

"At any rate, I don't want you to decide tonight. I want you to take your time and think about it, then let me know if you still want to marry me. I won't blame you if you don't."

Another silence, then Jessie's voice, calm, slow. "I think I still do want to marry you. I'll think about it and pray about it, but I think I do."

Jessie told me the next day while we sat together on the steps in front of her apartment that she wanted to go ahead with the engagement. She

was hesitant to get into a marriage that might prove to be as tumultuous as her parents' was, always wondering if divorce was right around the next corner, but at the same time she knew that (1) we were nothing like her parents, nor would our problems be anything like theirs, and (2) even they had made it through more than twenty-five years of ups and downs and were now very happy together. If I had asked her a few years earlier, when things were still pretty rocky for her parents, she might've said no. Who knows?

A week or two later, I officially proposed with a white-gold diamond ring after homemade lasagna and before Breyers ice cream at Kiwanis Park.

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In an ideal world, I'd be able to sit down at lunch with a group of friends and we'd all talk openly about our challenges and struggles. One might say, "I was getting *Newsweek* this morning at Barnes and Noble, and I was really tempted to pick up a copy of *Penthouse* also." Or, "I thought I'd kicked this smoking thing years ago, but I'm really craving a cigarette today." Or, "Last night my kid wouldn't stop crying and I was so angry I almost hit her." "I can't stop thinking about this guy in religion class," I would say.

(Actually, in an ideal world I'd be turned on by boobs like the other 90 percent of the world's male population.)

It ticks me off that Mormon social taboos force me to lie about who I am. Every day of my life. I've been doing it for so long, it's become second nature. A year or so ago in an English class at BYU, we were playing a "get to know you" game. This one involved each person in the class saying what celebrity she or he would like to kiss. Besides the fact that I was bothered by the general immorality of the question, it really bugged me that if I said Ewan McGregor I'd probably be turned in to the Honor Code Office (and yet it's okay for a married man to say he'd like to make out with Gwyneth Paltrow). I ended up saying Lauryn Hill, not because I'm any more attracted to her than to any other woman, but because I like her music and I thought it would be interesting to throw a black rapper into all this fantasizing about whitebread movie stars. I don't think God really wants us to lie in order to make people think we're "normal," but Mormon culture sure expects us to. It's not like pretending I'm attracted to women will make it true.

I don't intend to justify homosexual behavior. If I thought homosexual behavior was okay, I would have left the Church long before I even met Jessie. I certainly wouldn't have gone on a mission. Sex outside of marriage (and for that matter, lust) is wrong, regardless of whether it's with women or men. But the initial attraction itself is not a sin, and people who happen to be attracted to their own gender shouldn't be made to feel any worse than people who happen to be attracted to the opposite gender. There shouldn't be any need to make homosexual attraction into some deep, dark secret, something to be ashamed of. It's not as though I choose who I'm attracted to any more than anyone else does—as if I wouldn't have enough problems without being attracted to the gender my religion forbids me to marry.

Married men often talk to each other about how they had to look the other way in order to avoid having bad thoughts about a beautiful woman passing by. An innocent attraction is confessed, perhaps joked about, then dismissed before it can fester in the mind and grow into lust or something worse. I believe this is healthy. In my wife's family, there's an ongoing joke in which my mother-in-law will see some guy on TV and comment on how hot he is, then add with a grin, "But not as hot as your dad." Will I ever be able to casually comment that Tom Cruise is hot, but not as hot as my wife?

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Difficulties arose fairly quickly in our engagement. It bothered Jessie that she was usually more interested in kissing than I was. This bothered me too, but I didn't know what to do about it. I definitely loved her, and out of that love an attraction was growing, but to be honest it was nothing compared to the strong desire I had for men. But then it's not accurate to even compare the two feelings. My attraction to Jessie, the drive that made me want to hold her in my arms and feel her body next to mine, came entirely from my heart. On the other hand, the drive that made me want to feel a man's body next to mine was purely a libido thing. I've never allowed a physical attraction to a man to become any more than just that. Apples and oranges.

That summer I worked as a park attendant in northwest Provo. I spent eight hours a day cleaning bathrooms and mowing grass and picking weeds by myself. Way too much time to think, particularly if you're an engaged man prone to second-guess every decision you make. Every day

I'd wonder if I was making a mistake, if I was forcing myself into something I just wasn't ready for yet, or if everything I believed in was a load of crap and I really should run off to San Francisco and embrace a rampant life of unrestrained queerness. More than anything, I was afraid that getting married would cut me off from that option. While I wasn't ready to completely accept homosexuality, I wasn't ready to completely abandon it either. As far as I was concerned, that was what marriage meant—permanently burning the bridge of homosexuality. Marriage is forever.

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Once, when I was a teenager, in a rare bout of courage I asked my father about a somewhat sensitive subject: The Divorce. At least it was a sensitive subject for me, since I saw it as the defining point of my hopeless and miserable teenage life. As far as I was concerned, my father had abandoned not only my mother but also me; and in my melodramatic view of the world, I couldn't understand how anyone could not see the cruel injustice of not having a father figure around during my oh-so-precious formative years.

As I recall, we were driving on some highway between Green Bay and Milwaukee. The land of cheese and beer was my home away from home for two summers and one Christmas between the ages of nine and sixteen. To a boy who had lived all his life on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the long stretches of road and farmland were very foreign. So was everything else about my father.

"You don't understand," he said in his defense. "Marriage is complicated. Sometimes divorce is unavoidable."

"It's avoidable if you put some effort into it," I muttered. I was shaking with the anger I felt toward this man whom I didn't know well enough to yell at or swear at or hit.

"Ben, I'm not going to argue with you about this. You're fifteen years old. You'll understand when you get married."

Who was he to talk about marriage, at that time going through divorce number five? How dare he assume that I would fail at marriage just because he had? I thought these things but I didn't dare say them.

Years later, after I'd taken some big steps toward forgiving my father and building some kind of relationship with him (more than anything, I stopped blaming him for everything and started taking responsibility for my life), I still couldn't accept what I perceived to be his "fail and bail" phi-

losophy of marriage. If I married Jessie and I couldn't handle being married and I bailed, then he'd be right. I couldn't allow that to happen. I wouldn't.

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One morning while I was cleaning up the playground at Rotary Park, I found a condom streaked with poop lying on the ground. It was the single most disturbing thing I had ever seen. This all-too-graphic image, this irreconcilable association between anal sex and poop, helped me ultimately opt for a heterosexual lifestyle. If I start thinking I might like to have sex with a man, the poop-streaked condom stands in my way, shaking its little rubbery head and saying, "This path is not for you, my friend."

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A couple of years ago, KBYU planned to air some talks given at a conference about overcoming homosexuality. Gay rights activists in Salt Lake complained, and KBYU backed down and canceled the scheduled programming. When I learned about this, I felt betrayed. Betrayed by a church that told me to give up homosexuality but didn't have the guts to stand by this doctrine in the face of adversity (realizing, of course, that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and KBYU aren't exactly one and the same), and betrayed by my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who fought so hard for their right to be who they wanted to be but would deny me that same right.

I don't understand people who call themselves liberal and progressive but are threatened by homosexual reparative therapy enough to try to stop people like me from having that option. In my mind, this kind of thinking is anti-progressive. The whole point of the civil rights and women's liberation movements was to allow blacks, women, and other minorities to break free of what had been their traditional roles. We live in a world now where it's okay for blacks to do what was once considered "white" and for women to do what was once considered "male"—get an education, have a career, etc. Why then is it not politically correct for a gay man to venture into what is usually considered the exclusive territory of straight men—to marry a woman and have a family—if that's what he chooses to do?

I already know the answer to this question. Many gays and lesbians

believe that if homosexual reparative therapy is recognized as a legitimate and viable option, it won't be long before we're back to the days of labeling homosexuals as social deviants and forcing them to submit to electroshock therapy or some such barbarism. Others don't feel this way. When I voiced my frustration over the KBYU thing on a Mormon discussion board, one man contacted me and apologized for the overzealous activists who demanded that KBYU back down. He believed God had told him to leave his wife and pursue a homosexual relationship, but he felt in no way threatened by those of us who choose not to. He assured me that most gays and lesbians would not react as the vocal minority had.

It's easy for me to blame liberal gays for making me ashamed to be straight and conservative Mormons for making me ashamed to be gay, but truthfully a lot of it comes from my own fears. I'm afraid of what people will think of me. I'm afraid that I'll be labeled by one side as a religious wacko in denial about who I really am or by the other as a sex-crazed pervert unable to look at a man without mentally undressing him.

When I first heard Lauryn Hill's song "I Get Out," I felt that she was singing my life with her words. In "I Get Out," Ms. Hill talks about getting out of the boxes that society tries to force us into: "Psychological locks / Repressin' true expression / Cementin' this repression / Promotin' mass deception / So that no one can be healed / I don't respect your system / I won't protect your system / When you talk I don't listen / Oh, let my Father's will be done."

My everyday existence is a threat to the world's neat little boxes of "gay" and "straight." I get out of the boxes that liberals and conservatives would put me in. The freedom is exhilarating.

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A couple of times during our engagement, I talked to Jessie about my fears. I tried to explain that I loved her but I wasn't sure if that would be enough. These conversations tended to end with one or both of us crying and my concluding that I just couldn't bring myself to hurt her.

One night I talked to one of my sisters about my uncertainty. I didn't tell her exactly why I was afraid to get married, just that I was. She told me about an experience she'd had years before when a guy she was dating proposed. He seemed to feel good about marrying her, and he was a priesthood holder so she was hesitant to question his inspiration, even if she didn't have the same feeling. She also really liked him, so she didn't want

to hurt him by saying no. After a lot of prayer and thought, though, she came to a wise conclusion, which she now shared with me.

"Ben, you have to think about yourself first. I know you love her, so you don't want to hurt her, but doing what's best for you really is doing what's best for her. Telling her no may hurt her now, but marrying her when that's not right for *you* will hurt her more in the long run."

The problem was that I didn't know what *was* right for me. How could I be sure?

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For the record, "gay" is not the Mormon PC term. Mormon (and other conservative Christian) psychologists differentiate between living a homosexual lifestyle and experiencing homosexual desire by referring to the former as "gay" and to the latter as "SSA," which stands for "same-sex attraction." But you can't *be* SSA, and saying "I struggle with SSA" or "I have SSA" makes it sound as if I suffer from some obscure venereal disease. SGA—same-gender attraction—is no better.

So, for lack of a better term, I choose to call myself *gay*. Does that mean I have sex with men? No. It means I'm naturally attracted to men and, like it or not, that's part of my identity. An important part, yes, but not the most important part. "Gay" falls somewhere below "child of God," "Latter-day Saint," "husband," and "father." Maybe even below "writer," "librarian," and "unabashed reader of comic books."

But it's still part of who I am, and I'm okay with that. It makes me unique. It separates me from all the things I don't like about heterosexual male culture—like football, hunting, and chauvinism—while connecting me to millions of people like me around the world.

Which, of course, is a lie. I'm no more *gay* than I am *straight*. No, I don't fit into any of the heterosexual male stereotypes, but I don't fit into the *gay* stereotypes either. I don't have an effeminate voice or walk with an exaggerated gait, nor do I have a supernatural fashion sense. If I were to appear on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, it would be as the hopeless aesthetic reject, not as the voice of queer wisdom. I can't call myself a big fan of Barbra Streisand. I tried drama in high school and was horrible at it. It's not only the stereotypes, either. I'm practically clueless about the nuances of queer culture, save for a few terms and practices I've learned about from books and movies. I know, for example, that a ring on the right-hand ring finger has another cultural connotation besides "widowed."

Yes, there is a sense of identification when I read E. M. Forster or listen to Elton John, but there's always this nagging feeling that they wouldn't consider me one of them. I don't think I'd fit in at a Village People concert any more than I do in elders' quorum or on a basketball court. The fact of the matter is that I'm as distanced from gay men as I am from straight men. I'd like to think that I'm both, but really I'm neither. In the politics of sexuality where gays and lesbians are only beginning to topple the social hierarchy dominated by straights, I fall into some hidden crevice, not even recognized enough to be repressed. I'm practically nonexistent.

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I'd always assumed that I'd go on a mission, come home, meet a girl, get married, and have a family just like normal Mormon guys. I really looked forward to this, even craved it, feeling I'd been robbed of a normal family as a child. Along with this scenario went the assumption that somewhere along the way I'd *become* a normal Mormon guy, my attraction to men somehow magically disappearing. This fantasy seemed like even more of a reality during my freshman year of college when I was actively working to overcome homosexuality with the help of bishops, counselors, and therapy groups. But then after I'd worked through all the issues, done everything the therapists told me to, and made miles of progress in learning to have normal healthy relationships with men, even with my father, nothing really changed.

Don't get me wrong—I was a happier, more confident person, much better equipped to deal with homosexual attraction than I had been in high school—but the attraction was still there, as strong as ever. Somewhere along the line, perhaps while I was on my mission, I came to accept that I would very likely be attracted to men for the rest of my life. As much as I believed in the healing power of the Atonement and the possibility of real, lasting change, I didn't feel, nor do I now feel, that the kind of change I'd wished for is part of the plan for me. My resolve now was to reach a point similar to John Nash's situation at the end of the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. Speaking of the hallucinations that have plagued him most of his life, he says, "No, they're not gone, and maybe they never will be. But I've gotten used to ignoring them, and I think as a result they've kind of given up on me."

So I came home from my mission less sure that marriage and family

were in my future. I'm not sure what kind of life I envisioned for myself—a lonely celibacy, I suppose—but for a month or two I'd resigned myself to it.

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Here's where Epiphany Number One comes in. This must've been in January, because I'm pretty sure it was before Jessie came home from her mission. I'd attended one of those BYU firesides where they tell you to get married. I pretty much tuned out the entire thing because it didn't apply to me, but then I got home, sat on my bed, and had a distinct impression that yes, it did apply to me. Yes, I was gay, but that didn't mean I was excluded from Heavenly Father's desire for his children to marry and have families.

I thought of a sister missionary who had been in my district for nearly eight months and was coming home soon. I really admired her intelligence and her love of reading, and her complete disregard of whether people thought she was cool or not. She seemed like the type of person I'd like to marry. So I planned it all out. I'd email her when she got home, and we'd build our friendship while she was in Maryland. Then she'd come out to BYU and we'd start dating and then we'd get engaged and then we'd get married.

I think more than anything I liked this plan because it seemed like a Normal Mormon Guy type of thing to do (or at least a Normal BYU Student type of thing—it's hard to distinguish after being in Utah Valley for so long).

To my surprise, the following months happened exactly as I'd planned. This is quite disturbing, now that I think about it. It must have disturbed me then, too, because on the morning of the day that we were to mail out the wedding invitations, I was still worried that I was marrying Jessie for the wrong reasons. I didn't want to marry her just to prove to myself and others that I was normal, or to avoid hurting her feelings, or because it was the right thing to do. I wanted to marry her because I loved her and I wanted to be with her. Which I was pretty sure I did.

What it came down to was making a decision between doing what my heart wanted or doing what my libido wanted. I wished I could have both, but I knew that was impossible. On this particular morning in October, the libido was winning. I was just about ready to call the whole thing off. I felt like I was standing on a cliff and all I could see in front of me was impenetrable darkness. It terrified me.

And now we get to Epiphany Number Two. Oddly enough, inspiration came in the place I was least likely to be thinking of spiritual things—the men’s locker room showers. I was washing my hair, staring at the wall, when it struck. I wouldn’t say it was a voice, but it was the closest thing to a still small voice I’d ever experienced. I can’t even say that it came to me in words, so I’m not sure how to quote it, but it was something like, “Jump. Jump into the big, scary, unknown darkness. Don’t look back.” (It might have been more along the lines of “Just do it,” but I refuse to believe that the Spirit works for Nike.)

So Jessie and I were married in the Salt Lake Temple two days before Thanksgiving. And then we lived happily ever after.

Mostly. Not all the time, of course. All the problems, all the concerns, all the doubts we had before we got married didn’t go away. She still is usually more interested in kissing than I am, and I still feel bad because of that. I feel even worse about the way I can’t help noticing the well-built men who jog bare-chested during the summer. Or how good some men look in a white shirt and tie. Occasionally I allow myself to wallow in self-pity over how hard my life is as a gay married Mormon.

Really, though, my challenge is not that unique—it’s irrelevant whether I’m attracted to men or women. The goal is to be attracted only to my wife and no one else, male or female. This makes things more complicated, yet in a way simpler, than when I was single.

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This evening, after a roast-beef-and-potatoes meal, Jessie and I took our nine-month-old daughter across the street to the library where I work. As I pushed Sophie’s stroller through rows of picture books, Jessie and I talked about favorite authors, infant sleeping patterns, my job, and our budget. My co-workers smiled at Sophie and commented on her cuteness. My life is surprisingly typical of a straight Mormon male. Hardly even a hint of queerness to it.

Is all this normalcy only an act, a facade covering up repressed desires? Maybe. I don’t know. What I do know, though, is that I’m happy. Whatever my reasons, this is the life I chose and I plan on keeping it.