

Homosexual Attraction and LDS Marriage Decisions

Ron Schow

BEN HAS WRESTLED HONORABLY and honestly with this matter, trying to make all of the conflicting personal, societal, and religious/church elements fit into something acceptably coherent. It is a formidable challenge, one faced by a number of Latter-day Saints.

It is clear that our culture, in which everyone is expected to marry, puts enormous and excessive pressure on homosexuals to marry. I am aware of the pressure on homosexuals because in the last fifteen years I've been studying this issue of same-sex attraction (SSA) and meeting with homosexuals in our culture. Universally, they report feeling the pressure to marry. Many homosexuals also report on their marriages which have ended in failure. For example, in 1994 I surveyed an LDS homosexual group of 136 where 71 percent were returned missionaries (indicating their commitment to the Church) and 36 had tried marriage. They had been married an average of nine years and had an average of 2.5 children. Only two of the 36 were still married.¹

Recent conversations with Latter-day Saint homosexuals confirm that far too many are choosing to marry despite the fact that both Presi-

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1. Ron Schow, "1994 Survey of 136 LDS Same Sex Oriented Individuals," in *The Persistence of Same Sex Attraction in Latter-day Saints Who Undergo Counsel*

dent Hinckley and Elder Oaks have cautioned about such marriages. Elder Oaks reinforced President Hinckley by quoting him: "Marriage should not be viewed as a therapeutic step to solve problems such as homosexual inclinations or practices."²

Evergreen, a resource group committed to promoting change therapy for homosexual Latter-day Saints, helps create this problem by promoting the idea that persons can "transition out of homosexuality." This idea is also promoted by many ecclesiastical leaders, most of whom are not well informed about the nature of homosexuality. The extent of the problem is seen in the fact that Evergreen receives over 150 requests for help each month from those with homosexual attractions; 40 percent of these requests come from men who are married. Only 10 percent of the calls come from women. The remaining 50 percent are from single men.³ This pattern indicates a great deal of social pressure on LDS men with homosexual attractions to marry heterosexually, with unfortunate outcomes for many of them and their spouses and children.

It is possible that Ben can achieve a successful marriage, but, unfortunately, the odds are against him and Jessie. An increasing body of data, some mentioned above and some that I will summarize below, reinforces this pessimistic forecast. Much pain—directly and indirectly—results when these marriages fail.

Why do so many marital relationships of this kind fail? Primarily because the homosexual attraction of one spouse creates a major difficulty, despite hopes that such attraction will diminish over time. In reality, the great majority of those who are homosexually oriented cannot fundamentally alter their feelings by desire, therapy, or religious practice. Unfortunately, our culture continues to exert pressure to marry based on two essential misunderstandings about homosexuality—that it is a condition that is chosen and the expectation that, after marriage, these feelings will

ing or Change Therapy, edited by Ron Schow, Robert A. Rees, William Bradshaw, and Marybeth Raynes (Salt Lake City: Resources for Understanding Homosexuality, 2004), 31–41.

2. Gordon B. Hinckley, quoted in Dallin H. Oaks, "Same Gender Attraction," *Ensign*, October 1995, 13.

3. David Pruden, Evergreen executive director, personal communication to Ron Schow, October 2002.

go away. The reality is that homosexuality is not a choice and, except in rare cases, is not subject to change.

An LDS Family Services therapist who spoke to us about his clinical experience likely has had the most extensive experience in working with single and married homosexual Latter-day Saint men—approximately eight hundred men in more than thirty years.⁴ Approximately half of these clients left counseling after one or two sessions; the other half, who were in therapy for one to three years, include roughly two hundred single men and two hundred married men. Among the two hundred single men, only 10 percent were able to marry. Almost all of them (nineteen of twenty) identified themselves as bisexual. Of the two hundred married males (a large portion of whom, it is probably safe to speculate, were likely bisexual), only half were able to stay in their marriages, although there is no information as to what kinds of accommodations they had to make to do so, nor how many of these marriages will ultimately endure.

Thus, marriage seems risky for homosexuals and even bisexuals since we presume that some will end their marriages without trying therapy and that those receiving skilled professional assistance still achieve only this level of success. Based on many personal interviews, I know that many of these mixed heterosexual/homosexual marriages, even when they do not end in divorce, result in marriages in which there is no true intimacy nor a mutually nourishing relationship.

One of the reasons so many homosexuals enter into such high-risk marriages is that they are encouraged to do so by many LDS counselors, therapists, and ecclesiastical leaders who are ill informed about the nature of homosexuality and the dangers of homosexual-heterosexual bonding. Far too often, these marriages end in broken homes and with broken hearts. It is imperative that those who are in positions to counsel with homosexuals and the heterosexual partners with whom they are considering marriage know the facts about choice and the persistence of homosexual feelings along with the risks of homosexuals marrying heterosexuals.

Ben's situation is a case in point. He affirms that he did not, and would not, choose willingly to be attracted to men because such feelings create so much difficulty in his life. Ben's story also affirms that even with

4. His findings are summarized in "Summary of Data," in *The Persistence of Same Sex Attraction*, Table 1, 10-11.

noble efforts, homosexuality is not a condition where the feelings will go away.

Ben and Jessie have made a decision and deserve our understanding because of the pressure in our culture for them to make a successful marriage; but this decision has set them on a very difficult path. The outcome of this decision may significantly affect their own lives as well as that of their daughter Sophie. Based on my extensive work with homosexuals for more than a decade, I submit that, if Ben is actually gay and not bisexual, their marriage faces formidable obstacles.

Understanding Homosexual Attraction

It is important to understand some fundamental background information about sexual orientation. Humans experience a spectrum of sexual attraction. The HH (Homosexual-Heterosexual) Scale, defined originally in 1948 by Alfred Kinsey and his associates, uses seven points to define this range. Those on the heterosexual end of the continuum (0) are attracted only to the opposite sex. A minority on the other end (6) are attracted only to the same sex. Between (1-5) are those attracted to both sexes, with 3 representing an equally dual orientation. As applied historically, position on the scale is determined half by behavioral history and half by phenomena such as fantasies and dreams.

Most professionals agree that the HH Scale is an overly simplified approach to what is in reality a much more complex matter. Nevertheless, it has some utility as long as we understand that it cannot completely capture the inherent complexity of human sexuality. Since libido also varies in strength, one could likewise speak of a scale for this dimension of sexuality that goes from low to high. In a slightly different approach, we can put two bar graphs side by side with one bar representing homosexual attraction and the other representing heterosexual attraction. One can have high levels in both (bisexual and fully sexual), low levels in both (asexuality), or some combination of the two.

The vast majority of homosexual-heterosexual marriages fail. However, as Ben attests, some, with strong determination, choose to try and beat the odds. Such hopes of success are, in part, based on claims that some homosexuals have achieved successful marriages characterized by adequate sexual compatibility.

Such claims, however, must be examined in the light of (1) the complexity of homosexual feeling as it manifests itself in individuals (the HH

Scale); (2) the relative importance that individuals attach to sexual intimacy as an element in the marital relationship (strength of libido and capacity for sublimation of sexual desire); and (3) other important factors such as whether individuals have personal compatibility and maturity adequate to withstand challenges to the marriage which are far greater than average.

1. *Bisexuality*. In most mixed hetero/homosexual marriages that can claim some degree of success, the partner with same-sex attraction is really bisexual and is able to emphasize his or her heterosexual attraction sufficiently to create sexual intimacy. Thus, heterosexual-homosexual couples considering marriage should carefully explore the possibility that the homosexually attracted partner is bisexual.

The LDS family therapist previously cited, and Dr. Beverly Shaw (past president of AMCAP, the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists), who have worked with hundreds of Latter-day Saints with SSA, report that bisexuality may make some marriages workable.⁵ This is because such individuals have the ability to bond romantically (are capable of expressing genuine emotional and physical intimacy) with partners of the same *and* the opposite sex. Those at 5 or 6 on the HH scale, however, are at much higher risk of marriage failure than those at 4 or below.

These reports support my own study, mentioned above, from the thirty-six LDS homosexuals who had tried marriage. At the time of the survey, only two were still married. Seventy-eight percent were 5 and 6 on the HH Scale, indicating that essentially they were not attracted to the opposite sex and therefore probably should not have married.⁶

2. *Libido*. The importance attached to sexual satisfaction is another variable affecting the success of these marriages. When both parties have little interest in or need for sexual intimacy, marriage may become a more realistic possibility. The partners may also be able to deemphasize sexual intimacy through sublimation of sexual feelings. Other kinds of compatibility such as mutual interests, strong friendship, and non-erotic attachment may also be important factors for those who do not have strong libi-

5. Ibid., and Beverly Shaw, "Counseling with Homosexual Latter-day Saints: My Experience and Insights," in *The Persistence of Same Sex Attraction*, 15-16.

6. Schow, "1994 Survey of 136 LDS Same Sex Oriented Individuals."

dos. Prospective couples should be aware, however, that the homosexual desires may intensify over time and present a risk later in the marriage.

Myths, Misunderstandings, and Stereotypes

The widespread failure of homosexual-heterosexual marriages, together with the psychological stress single homosexuals feel because of extraordinary pressures to marry, are largely attributable in LDS culture to ignorance about homosexuality and to unexamined beliefs about marriage and family life.

Many young couples consider marriage or enter marriage unaware of the liabilities and challenges they face. Here are a few of the myths and misunderstandings involving homosexuality and marriage.

1. *Sex in marriage will solve the problem, or, conversely, sex isn't that important.* Because of the Church's appropriate emphasis on premarital chastity, young people generally have not experienced sexual intimacy in a committed relationship. Thus, they have little understanding of what marriage without sexual intimacy or with unsatisfying sexual expression might mean. Few homosexual-heterosexual marriages survive without at least some degree of mutually satisfying sexual expression.

2. *Homosexuality is a personal challenge only.* A young man who just ended his eight-year temple marriage as part of coming to terms with his homosexuality told me that he deeply regretted his own lack of understanding that made him treat his gayness as a "personal issue." As a result, although he expected some difficulty and was prepared for it, he did not disclose his homosexuality to his wife before their marriage. He didn't realize, he says, "the impact that my own struggle would have on other people. Nevertheless, I wonder if any straight woman or man can really understand in advance the implications of entering into a mixed orientation marriage. I think a lot of gay men contemplating heterosexual marriage underestimate the impact that their actions have on their future spouse."

With considerable after-the-fact remorse, he explains finally coming to terms with his wife's anguish: "It was only after I came out to my wife that I realized how much she had suffered and endured over the years in asking questions like why didn't I find her desirable or why our sexual relationship never seemed satisfying. Was it a failure on her part? she wondered. She had sadness about feeling alone, confused and hurt in ways that were nearly impossible to articulate."

This young man emphasized the falsity of a prevalent myth: "I saw

my struggle with (and against) homosexuality as my own cross to bear. I felt I was the one who was suffering, struggling, and trying to make things right. What I failed to recognize was that my wife was also part of the same struggle even though she lacked basic information."

3. *Anyone with the basic capacity to marry, should get married.* This same young man also articulated another view held widely within the Church and inculcated through years of socialization of youth: "There is such a strong bias toward marriage and married couples in the church, that it is almost unthinkable to consider alternatives to the idealized father-mother-children arrangement." As a young man, he saw "no other alternative" than temple marriage and children. "The fact that I was gay was irrelevant. Getting married is what faithful LDS returned missionaries do."

This belief is so strong that it becomes extremely difficult to get past the "faith" that "things will work out" and ask hard questions about, "How will they work out? What will this require of me? Of my wife? In our role as parents?" The young man quoted above lamented his naivete: "Looking at the pain that my little family has experienced leaves me convinced that we need better answers, more openness, and real honesty."

4. *The gay lifestyle is one of wanton promiscuity.* Ben expresses this stereotype when he phrased his options as either temple marriage or "a rampant life of unrestrained queerness." Some may feel, when recognizing their same-sex attraction, that their choices are equally limited. Obviously, there are many choices between these two extremes.

5. *"Homosexuality" is not the same as "homosexual behavior."* The Church has made an important policy shift wherein there is censure of behavior but not of homosexuality per se. This shift is reflected in Church handbook terminology, and yet many members and some leaders are not clearly making the distinction. The 1976 *General Handbook of Instructions* listed "homosexuality" as "grounds for Church court action," as did the 1983 edition.⁷ Not unreasonably, some local leaders interpreted homosexuality itself, even on the part of celibate persons, to be an actionable offense. However, in 1989 the *General Handbook of Instructions* for Church leaders used the phrase "homosexual relations" in that same list of

7. *General Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976), 71; *General Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1983), 51.

grounds for disciplinary councils.⁸ The 1998 handbook uses the terms “homosexual activity,” “homosexual acts,” “homosexual relations,” “homosexual activities,” and “homosexual behavior” as being problematic.⁹ As the language of this current handbook makes clear, it is behavior, not homosexuality per se, that is proscribed.

President Hinckley also made this clear in 1998 when he said, referring to homosexual inclinations, “If they do not act upon these inclinations, then they can go forward as do all other members of the Church.”¹⁰ Church members, therefore, do not have to “give up” or “overcome” homosexuality—only homosexual behavior that is incompatible with Church standards of sexual morality. Such “going forward” does include, of course, a life of sexual abstinence.

6. *Understand the healing power of the atonement.* Some commentators suggest that the “cure” for homosexuality lies in the healing power of the Savior to remove same-sex feelings, arguing that the atonement is sufficient for such requests.¹¹ Such arguments show a fundamental misunderstanding of the atonement. Its purpose is not to change conditions of mortality like sexual orientation, but rather to help us live with life’s challenges, repent of our sins, and surrender our hearts to the Lord so that ultimately we can be sanctified through his sacrifice.

7. *Consider divorce realistically.* There is a strong and appropriate discouragement of divorce in Mormon culture, but couples who marry without a clear understanding of the implications when one partner has bisexual or homosexual feelings need to understand that sometimes divorce is the best solution for both partners. Fear of divorce’s stigma should not

8. *General Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, March 1989), Section 10, p. 4.

9. *Church Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), Vol. 1:81, 96, 129, 159.

10. Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking about Us?” *Ensign*, November 1998, 71. He was responding to Question 2: “What is your Church’s attitude toward homosexuality?”

11. The Evergreen mission statement, which appears on all of its conference programs, begins: “Evergreen is founded on the belief that the atonement of Jesus Christ enables every soul the opportunity to turn away from all sins or conditions that obstruct their temporal and eternal happiness and potential.” Programs in my possession; emphasis mine.

compel husbands and wives to stay in marriages that are not mutually loving and fulfilling.

Promising Developments

Even though there is currently much pain and uncertainty over the issue of homosexuality in Mormon culture, there are several developments which, given time and encouragement, may lead to a more enlightened situation. As noted earlier, it would be helpful for members of the Church to understand that individuals do not choose same-sex attraction and that, generally, SSA feelings do not go away. Ben's essay confirms both concepts. I see no doctrinal reason why this information should not be shared widely with members of the Church.

An encouraging sign is Deseret Book's publication in late 2004 of *In Quiet Desperation* by Fred and Marilyn Matis and Ty Mansfield. The Matises are the parents of Stuart Matis, an LDS man who committed suicide outside the Los Altos Stake Center in San Jose, California, in 2000, after years of struggling against his homosexual orientation. The book strongly confirms that SSA is not a choice and generally will not diminish or vanish in adulthood. According to Marilyn Matis, "When Stuart was thirty-two years old, he finally accepted his feelings of attraction to other men. He said he cried all night long when he realized his feelings of attraction had not gone away—nor had they diminished in any way since he had first recognized them."¹²

The book's preface describes Ty Mansfield: "You will read the reflections and impressions of [another] young man who presently wrestles with same-gender attraction. It will become obvious that he has spent hundreds of hours on his knees, in counsel with priesthood leaders, and in deep and pondering study of the holy scriptures in an effort to cope with feelings of attraction that he did not choose."¹³

Because Deseret Book is owned by the Church, its publication of this book with its strong message that SSA is not chosen and does not diminish over time is, in my opinion, a good sign.

The following First Presidency statement issued in October 2004 suggests that, at least to some extent, Church leaders understand that ho-

12. Fred Matis, Marilyn Matis, and Ty Mansfield, *In Quiet Desperation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 11.

13. *Ibid.*, xiii.

homosexuality is not a choice and that it often results in loneliness: "We of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reach out with understanding and respect for individuals who are attracted to those of the same gender. We realize there may be great loneliness in their lives."¹⁴ The word "respect" suggests that they feel homosexuality is unchosen. Realistically speaking, both married and single people can experience "loneliness," but this statement at least seems to suggest that homosexuals will not be able to marry.

In December 2004, during an interview on CNN Television, Larry King asked President Hinckley if gays are "born that way." The president answered. "I don't know. I'm not an expert on these things. I don't pretend to be an expert on these things."¹⁵ It is helpful when the prophet makes clear that understanding the causes of homosexuality requires "expertise" (in other words, it is not a matter that has been settled by revelation), and that the Church's position on homosexuality may include the possibility that individuals *are* "born that way."

Another promising development is that some bishops have begun to offer sound wisdom based on extensive experience. Robert Rees, who was bishop of the Los Angeles Singles Ward for five years, recently reported: "My experience with the 50 or so homosexuals with whom I have had a close relationship over the past 20 years can be summarized as follows: I have not met a single homosexual Latter-day Saint who chose or was able to change or alter his or her sexual orientation. I also have not met a single homosexual Latter-day Saint who had not tried valiantly, generally over a long period of time, to change his or her orientation."¹⁶ It is likely that Bishop Rees has more experience with this issue than any bishop in the church.

Recently, in my area (southern Idaho), a bishop in a university stake bishops' council urged his fellow bishops to avoid encouraging gay persons to marry. Although some of the bishops objected, the stake president

14. First Presidency Statement, October 19, 2004, retrieved October 20, 2004, from www.lds.org/newsroom/showrelease/0,15503,4028-1-20336,00.html.

15. Gordon B. Hinckley, interviewed by Larry King, December 26, 2004, retrieved January 15, 2005, from <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0412/26/lkl.01.html>.

16. Robert A. Rees, "My Experience in Working with Homosexual Latter-day Saints," in *The Persistence of Same Sex Attraction in Latter-day Saints*, 16.