

WHAT DO WE KNOW OF GOD'S WILL FOR HIS LGBT CHILDREN?: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LDS CHURCH'S POSITION ON HOMOSEXUALITY

Bryce Cook

Perhaps no other social issue in recent times has experienced such rapid change in public opinion as that of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. To many, it has been the civil rights struggle of our time, to others—particularly conservative religious people—it is seen as a sign of the moral decay of our time. The LDS Church has been greatly affected by this issue, garnering much negative attention in the media due to its public fight against same-sex marriage and the perception that it treats LGBT people unfairly.¹ Its positions and policies, particularly

A version of this article was first published online.

1. In using the term “Church” as the entity that promulgates the positions and statements discussed throughout this essay, I am generally referring to the members of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency who are authorized to make policy and pronounce doctrine for the Church. While it is generally held that such policy and doctrine require the unanimous consent of the members of these governing bodies, it is also understood that individual members of these councils often have differing personal opinions. The lack of publicity associated with the Church’s launch of its original mormonsandgays.org website and the inconsistent messaging and tone in Church initiatives and statements on this subject seem to indicate differences of opinion among the top leadership in how to address LGBT issues. For additional examples, see Gregory Prince,

the November 2015 policy that labels members in same-sex marriages apostates and prohibits their children from receiving Church ordinances, have caused some members to question the Church's stance and others to leave the Church.

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

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

"The Exclusion Policy and Biology vs Behavior," *Rational Faiths* (blog), Jan. 13, 2016, <http://rationalfaiths.com/biology-vs-behavior>.

2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Acting on the Truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, Feb. 2012, <https://>

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

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

The Church distinguishes between same-sex attraction and homosexual behavior. People who experience same-sex attraction or identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual can make and keep covenants with God and fully and worthily participate in the Church. Identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual or experiencing same-sex attraction is not a sin and does not prohibit one from participating in the Church, holding callings, or attending the temple. . . . We may not know precisely why some people feel attracted to others of the same sex, but for some it is a complex reality and part of the human experience.³

www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-leadership-training/2012/01/acting-on-the-truths-of-the-gospel-of-jesus-christ?lang=eng.

3. "Overview," *Same-Sex Attraction*, <https://www.lds.org/topics/same-gender-attraction>. Along with updating this gospel topic entry in October 2016, the Church released an entirely new version of its website devoted to this issue, mormonandgay.org. The original website, mormonsandgays.org, was released in December 2012 without any Church-wide announcement or links to the site from the Church's main webpage, and many members and leaders were unaware of its existence.

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

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

Sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife. Any other sexual relations, including those between persons of the same gender, are sinful and undermine the divinely created institution of the family. The Church accordingly affirms defining marriage as the legal and lawful union between a man and a woman.⁴

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

Historical Background

For much of recent history, the Church's views on homosexuality have reflected those of the larger American culture. In the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, homosexuality was generally viewed by society, including the medical profession, as a mental disorder or a sexual deviancy. The American Psychological Association's DSM-I, published in 1952, classified homosexuality as a "sociopathic personality disturbance." The revised DSM-II of 1968 reclassified it as a "sexual deviation." In December 1973, the APA removed homosexuality from the DSM but allowed for a diagnosis of Sexual Orientation Disturbance for individuals who were uncomfortable with their same-gender attractions and wanted

4. "Same-Gender Marriages," *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 21.4.10.

to change.⁵ This legitimized sexual conversion therapies that the APA has since determined are “unlikely to be successful and involve some risk of harm.”⁶ By the 1900s, most states had criminalized homosexual behavior by enacting sodomy laws, which drove homosexuals deeper into the closet.⁷ However, by the 1970s, LGBT people began to assert their rights to live authentically and without persecution, mainstream media started portraying homosexuals more favorably, and societal views slowly began to shift.

As opinions began to evolve in the larger culture, the Church’s stance remained unchanged, with Spencer W. Kimball, Mark E. Petersen, and Boyd K. Packer being the Church’s primary voices on this topic throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Reflecting their generation’s view of homosexuality, they spoke about the subject with disdain and disgust. They saw society’s softening views on homosexuality, including decriminalization, as evidence of its moral deterioration, as a rapidly spreading contagion that was infecting society and even the Church and was thus a dangerous threat to marriage and family.⁸ However, in demonizing

5. See Jack Drescher, “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality,” *Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2015): 565–75, available at <http://doi.org/10.3390/bs5040565>.

6. See Judith M. Glassgold, et al., *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*, Aug. 2009, available at <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf>.

7. See William N. Eskridge Jr., *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America, 1861–2003* (New York: Viking, 2008).

8. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 40. See also, Spencer W. Kimball, “President Kimball Speaks Out on Morality,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1980, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/11/president-kimball-speaks-out-on-morality?lang=eng>. In another talk, President Kimball stated: “There are said to be millions of perverts who have relinquished their natural affection. . . . This practice is spreading like a prairie fire and changing our world” (Spencer W. Kimball, “Voices of the Past, of the Present, of the Future,” *Ensign*, June 1971, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/06/voices-of-the-past-of-the-present-of-the-future?lang=eng>).

homosexuality, they also demonized homosexuals, which caused untold despair and self-loathing among young gay Latter-day Saints.

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

This "curable-disease" mindset—based on obsolete psychological thought from the 1950s and 1960s—was embraced by Kimball and other Church leaders because it aligned with their spiritual views of homosexuality.¹¹ Seeing homosexuality as a psychological or spiritual malady, they taught that the cure was intense repentance, self-mastery,

9. Clair Barrus, "The Policy on Gay Couples, and the Priesthood Ban: A Comparison," *Worlds Without End: A Mormon Studies Roundtable* (blog), Nov. 3, 2016, <http://www.withoutend.org/policy-gay-couples-priesthood-ban-comparison>.

10. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 42.

11. Spencer W. Kimball, "Love vs. Lust," *BYU Speeches*, Jan. 5, 1965, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball_love-vs-lust. In this speech, Kimball cites a 1964 article from *Medical World News* about the "strength of the patient's desire to modify" homosexual desire, stating: "This statement by the Public Health Committee of the New York Academy of Medicine agrees with our philosophy. Man is created in the image of God. He is a god in embryo. He has the seeds of godhood within him and he can, if he is normal, pick himself up by his bootstraps and literally move himself from where he is to where he knows he should be." He speaks at length about curability. Note: BYU removed the text of this speech and left only the audio. A text version is archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20030519075029/http://mentalhealthlibrary.info/library/same/samelds/samelds2001/links/kimball/kimball.htm>.

and even marriage to the opposite sex. This belief informed the Church's ecclesiastical approach and leadership training, as well as the thinking of Mormon mental-health therapists, for years to come—and it was probably the most psychologically and spiritually damaging of all the Church's teachings on homosexuality.

While the curability mindset has since been mostly abandoned by the Church, it still persists among those who cannot believe that God would create gay people without providing a means to be cured. They simply cannot see a place for homosexuals in the Mormon concept of eternal families. Boyd K. Packer famously expressed this sentiment in his October 2010 general conference address: "Some suppose that they were preset and cannot overcome what they feel are inborn tendencies toward the impure and unnatural. Not so! Why would our Heavenly Father do that to anyone?" The statement was revised days later in the Church's official transcript.¹² With the passing of Elders Kimball, Petersen, and Packer, and the continued evolution in our understanding of homosexuality, many fundamental aspects of the Church's position, such as cause and curability, have changed.¹³ In addition, the harsh, condemning rhetoric of Elders Kimball, Petersen, and Packer gave way to the softer, more compassionate tone of Elders Oaks, Holland, and Christofferson. Many in the general Church membership also began to soften their stance as they observed openly gay coworkers, neighbors, and their own family members living happy, productive lives once they cast off the shame and

12. Boyd K. Packer, "Cleansing the Inner Vessel," Oct. 2010, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/cleansing-the-inner-vessel?lang=eng> (compare audio/video talk at 9:00 to text that starts with, "Some suppose they were preset and cannot overcome what they feel are inborn temptations. . ."). See also, Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Packer Talk Jibes with LDS Stance after Tweak," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 25, 2010, <http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/home/50440474-76/packer-church-question-speech.html.csp>.

13. See Ryan T. Cragun, Emily Williams, and J. E. Sumerau, "From Sodomy to Sympathy: LDS Elites' Discursive Construction of Homosexuality Over Time," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 2 (2015): 291–310.

condemnation they were raised with. While most Mormons continue to believe that homosexuality should be discouraged by society, a 2015 Pew Research Center survey shows that acceptance among Mormons grew by twelve points—from 24 percent to 36 percent—between 2007 and 2014, the largest increase among all other denominations.¹⁴

However, as Church leaders saw their members following society's trend toward greater acceptance of homosexuality, including same-sex marriage, they began to speak out strongly again—focusing their attention on the evils of same-sex marriage, which they saw as a threat to traditional marriage. The Church also began entering the political arena, fighting same-sex marriage legislation and lobbying for ballot initiatives and legislation that defined marriage as only between one man and one woman. The political action started with Hawaii in 1994 and culminated with a bruising public battle over California's Proposition 8 in 2008, which sought to define marriage as only between a man and a woman. The Church and its members were the largest donors in the Prop 8 fight, which won at the ballot box but was soon overturned in court.¹⁵ Ironically, this political fight may have done more to garner sympathy for gay people and galvanize public support for same-sex marriage—including its ultimate legalization in the US—than any other event.

After Prop 8, the Church tended to stay out of the public political arena on these issues, and instead focused on teaching the doctrine of traditional marriage and family with greater emphasis and frequency within the Church, although it continued to quietly file amicus briefs in anti-gay-marriage court cases around the country. Rather than get-

14. Caryle Murphy, "Most U.S. Christian Groups Grow More Accepting of Homosexuality," *Pew Research Center*, Dec. 18, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/18/most-u-s-christian-groups-grow-more-accepting-of-homosexuality>.

15. Neil J. Young, "Mormons and Same-Sex Marriage: From ERA to Prop 8," in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism Since 1945*, edited by Patrick Q. Mason and John G. Turner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 144–69.

ting involved in public lobbying itself, the Church has encouraged its members to stand up for traditional marriage as a necessary foundation for religious freedom, its recent rallying cry.

While still reaffirming its stance that same-sex marriage and homosexual behavior are grievous sins, the Church in the last few years has taken a number of steps that demonstrate improved understanding of, and greater compassion for, its LGBT people. In 2012, the Church quietly released its original *mormonsandgays.org* website that acknowledged same-sex attraction as “a complex reality” but not a sin unless acted upon. The following year when the Boy Scouts of America changed its policy allowing gay youth to participate (and after some previous mixed messages indicating the Church might pull out of the BSA), the Church affirmed its support for the policy change.¹⁶ In 2015, the Church began to argue for a “fairness for all” approach to housing, employment, and transportation laws, balancing religious freedom with reasonable safeguards for LGBT people.¹⁷ It released a public statement and employed lobbyists in support of a proposed LGBT nondiscrimination and religious rights bill in Utah and applauded its passage.¹⁸ That same year, Elder Christofferson announced that Church members could publicly advocate for gay marriage without having their membership threatened, as long as their effort didn’t attack the Church.¹⁹

16. “Church Responds to Boy Scouts Policy Vote,” *Mormon Newsroom*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-responds-to-boy-scouts-of-america-policy-vote>.

17. “Transcript of News Conference on Religious Freedom and Nondiscrimination,” *Mormon Newsroom*, Jan. 27, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/publicstatement-on-religious-freedom-and-nondiscrimination>.

18. “Church Applauds Passage of Utah Senate Bill 296,” *Mormon Newsroom*, Mar. 12, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-issues-statement-on-utah-house-bill-296>.

19. “Elder Christofferson KUTV,” YouTube video, posted by KUTVPhotographers, Mar. 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XybDk3CEoHg>.

This progress came to a halt on June 26, 2015 when the US Supreme Court issued its decision that made same-sex marriage legal in the United States. On that very day, the Church responded with a press release stating, “The Court’s decision does not alter the Lord’s doctrine that marriage is a union between a man and a woman ordained by God. While showing respect for those who think differently, the Church will continue to teach and promote marriage between a man and a woman as a central part of our doctrine and practice.”²⁰ From that point on, the tide seemed to turn. The doctrinal emphasis on traditional marriage and the proclamation on the family became a constant theme. The previous messages of tolerance and empathy were drowned out by the familiar refrains of the gay agenda and destruction of the family.

To make matters worse, on November 5, 2015, the Church issued the policy that labeled members in same-sex marriages apostate and barred their children from receiving Church ordinances and serving missions, effectively pushing their families out of the Church. The policy was spiritually and psychologically traumatizing to the Mormon LGBT community. As John Gustav-Wrathall, the president of Affirmation, described it, “In the months since the policy I’ve seen widespread signs of trauma and depression within the LGBT Mormon community, including documented suicides. Many feel the Church just wants to get rid of LGBT people.”²¹ A sharp increase in LDS youth suicides raised significant

20. “Supreme Court Decision Will Not Alter Doctrine on Marriage,” *Mormon Newsroom*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/supreme-court-decision-will-not-alter-doctrine-on-marriage>. The Church also issued a letter to be read in Church meetings in all units in the United States and Canada beginning Sunday, July 5, 2015 reaffirming its position on marriage. See “Church Leaders Counsel Members after Supreme Court Same-Sex Marriage Decision,” *Church News*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/church-leaders-counsel-members-after-supreme-court-same-sex-marriage-decision?lang=eng>.

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

concerns among parents of LGBT children and garnered much media attention.²² As if to balance the recent hardline rhetoric, the Church finally responded with a conciliatory statement and an unprecedented series of articles in the Church-owned *Deseret News* on LGBT issues, including references to resources it had previously not endorsed.²³

In October 2016, the Church released an entirely new version of its mormonandgay.org website, which many in the Mormon LGBT community regarded as a significant improvement over the prior version.²⁴ However, given the existence of the November policy, many felt the new website was a minor step toward rapprochement.

With this backdrop, we must acknowledge how, perhaps more than ever, we as a Church community need to confront our position and beliefs about homosexuality head on. We need to ask hard questions about why depression, suicide, and loss of faith seem to be the outcomes of a position that is believed to be of God. While the official position has improved vastly from President Kimball's generation, have we gone as far as the Lord wants us to go? Is there still more he would tell us if we had the humility and courage to ask?

As noted, Church leaders have drawn a very clear line in how far their position on homosexuality can evolve, stating that the current

22. See Michael Barker, Daniel Parkinson, and Benjamin Knoll, "The LGBTQ Mormon Crisis: Responding to the Empirical Research on Suicide," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 1–24 and Benjamin Knoll, "Youth Suicide Rates and Mormon Religious Context: An Additional Empirical Analysis," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 25–43.

23. "LDS Church Leaders Mourn Reported Deaths in Mormon LGBT Community," *Deseret News*, Jan. 31, 2016, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865646414/LDS-Church-leaders-mourn-reported-deaths-in-Mormon-LGBT-community.html>.

24. In addition to the revised content, the URL was changed from mormon-sandgays.org to mormonandgay.lds.org, sounding less confrontational and linking directly to the Church website.

position on marriage is God's will and therefore cannot and will not change.²⁵ However, we are, like other Christians, selective in which biblical commandments we take literally. Certainly, we do not accept other ancient biblical commandments the way we do those pertaining to homosexuality. Among scriptural passages that are no longer accepted are those that uphold slavery, mandate capital punishment for dishonoring parents, specify female purity rituals, and decree which foods are kosher. For example, Deuteronomy 22:23–29 stipulates that if a man rapes a married or betrothed woman, he is subject to the death penalty; but if he rapes an un-betrothed virgin he can make reparations simply by paying her father fifty shekels of silver and marrying her. Surely, we no longer accept this biblical law as just.

Furthermore, even within its short history, the LDS Church has changed many of its doctrinal positions, deemphasizing or repudiating teachings once thought to be doctrine.²⁶ The ban on Black Latter-day

25. From the “Frequently Asked Questions” page on mormonandgay.org: “Will the Church ever change its doctrine and sanction same-sex marriages?” The answer provided interestingly does not start with “no” but states that “marriage between a man and a woman is an integral teaching of the [Church] and will not change” (<https://mormonandgay.lds.org/articles/frequently-asked-questions>). In a video on the site, Elder D. Todd Christofferson states: “There shouldn’t be a perception or an expectation that the Church’s doctrines or position have changed or are changing. It’s simply not true, and we want youth and all people to understand that. The doctrines that relate to human sexuality and gender are really central to our theology. . . . So homosexual behavior is contrary to those doctrines— has been, always will be—and can never be anything but transgression” (“Purpose of this Website,” <https://mormonandgay.lds.org/videos?id=6326466338746981852>).

26. See Charles R. Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*”: *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011). For an excellent treatment on how moral standards and religious doctrines have changed through longer history, see Craig Harline, “What Happened to My Bell-Bottoms?: How Things That Were Never Going to Change Have Sometimes Changed Anyway, and How Studying History Can Help Us Make Sense of It All,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2013): 49–76.

Saints from holding the priesthood was thought to be the mind and will of God, but now many of the teachings that supported that ban are passed off as “speculation and opinion.”²⁷ Even after the ban was lifted, interracial marriages were discouraged, which is no longer the case.²⁸ General Authorities once soundly condemned birth control, but now Church leaders counsel that “the decision as to how many children to have and when to have them . . . should be left between the couple and the Lord.”²⁹ Certain doctrines and moral standards that were once considered God’s will have been dropped, while others once considered against God’s will are now held to be moral and acceptable by the Church.

How do we know if a doctrine or standard taught today is an unchangeable eternal truth or just a sociocultural tradition that will one day change? Given the above precedents, we must be willing to ask some sincere and probing questions about the Church’s current stance on homosexuality. Are we justified in resisting societal acceptance of homosexuality, or are we simply holding to past traditions and views that are causing harm to those affected? Is it really God’s will that his children born with a homosexual orientation be required to live their entire lives in celibacy without the emotional, physical, and spiritual attachment of someone they are naturally attracted to? Do we have the courage of

27. “Church Statement Regarding ‘Washington Post’ Article on Race and the Church,” *Mormon Newsroom*, Feb. 29, 2012, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/racial-remarks-in-washington-post-article>.

28. “Interracial Marriage Discouraged,” *Deseret News*, June 17, 1978, available online at https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=_RxVAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=YIADAAAAIIBAJ&pg=5866%2C5012493.

29. “Same-Gender Marriages,” *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 21.4.10. For earlier condemnations of birth control, see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 273 and Harold B. Lee, *Report of the SemiAnnual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 1972* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 63.

a President Kimball to ask these questions and consider whether the current position is truly God's will or whether it, too, could be in error?

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

1. Being gay is not a choice. A person's sexual orientation, or attraction to one sex or the other, is instinctive and innate. It typically begins to manifest at an early age and grows in great intensity with sexual maturation. While the etiology of sexual orientation is not yet fully understood (although strong evidence exists of a biological/genetic component), we have the testimony of countless gay people—including members of our own church—who have told us that their sexual orientation is innate and not chosen, and that intensive and persistent effort to change it has not succeeded.

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

If you do not know any gay people personally and have not had the opportunity to really talk to them about their life experience, particularly those who are in committed same-sex relationships, I would encourage you to educate yourself.³⁰

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

The primary source of doctrine in our church is canonized scripture (the four standard works) and continuing revelation from the words

30. I highly recommend Brent Kerby, ed., *Gay Mormons?: Latter-day Saint Experiences of Same-Gender Attraction* (n.p.: Brent Kerby, 2011). You can also watch/listen to gay Mormons relate their own experiences at the website *Far Between*, which fosters an “on-going dialogue about what it means to be LGBTQIA/SSA and Mormon” (<http://farbetweenmovie.com>).

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

The two most direct passages in the Bible come from the law of Moses and an epistle of Paul. Leviticus 18:22 states: “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.” In Romans 1:26–27 (NIV), Paul speaks of women who “exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones,” and of men who in the same way “abandoned natural relations with women” and “committed shameful acts with other men.” While much of the conservative Christian world cites these scriptures as primary evidence of God’s prohibition of homosexual behavior, perhaps somewhat surprisingly LDS Church leaders rarely do. For instance, the Church’s mormonandgay.org website, its most comprehensive resource on this topic, does not cite the Romans and Leviticus passages. Nor does the LDS.org Gospel Topics entry for “Homosexuality” (which redirects to “Same-Sex Attraction”). A search of general conference talks in the last forty-five years yields only five references to the Romans and Leviticus passages—three were from Elder Russell M. Nelson, two were from Elder Boyd K. Packer, and one from President Spencer W. Kimball.

Why is it that current Church teachings on homosexuality and same-sex marriage rarely cite the two main biblical passages that most evangelicals (and likely most Mormon laity) rely on as evidence of God’s prohibition of same-sex relationships? Perhaps Church leadership (and correlation) recognize that more rigorous biblical scholarship does not adequately support the conventional interpretation, or at least that those scriptures do not really address the modern development of love-based

same-sex relationships. While it is beyond the scope of this article to engage in a thorough exegesis of these passages (there are many other sources that do this quite ably), I will give a brief summary of some of the arguments made by some biblical scholars as to why these passages should not be used as evidence against same-sex marriage.

The Leviticus passage is one of many prohibitions given to the children of Israel to set them apart from their Canaanite and Egyptian neighbors as God's covenant people (Leviticus 11:9–12). Like other ancient moral codes, the law of Moses had specific restrictions pertaining to diet and sexual relations. Some of them we follow today; others we do not. For instance, menstruating women were considered unclean, as was anything or anyone they touched. Having sex with a menstruating woman was strictly forbidden and required excommunication of both participants (see Leviticus 15:19–27; 18:19; 20:18).³¹ No Latter-day Saint considers these laws to be binding today, even though they are in the Bible.

The belief in biblical inerrancy is what allowed generations past and present to cite scripture in support of such atrocities as slavery, genocide, treating women as property, and putting homosexuals to death. The Mormon belief that the Bible is “the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” allows some latitude for us to discern God's word from the cultural trappings. Therefore, we need not be inextricably bound by the Leviticus passages on homosexuality any more than we are by the passages regarding ancient dietary codes and sexual mores.

Paul's discussion of homosexual sex in Romans (and in a few other places) was likely addressing the sexual practices common in his time and culture. Greco-Roman society did not view homosexuality as a distinct sexual orientation. Indeed, the Greeks and Romans accepted forms of homosexual behavior that would be unacceptable by today's

31. See also Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky, “Homosexuality,” in *The Bible Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–40.

standards, including prostitution, master-slave sex, and pederasty.³² It is these practices that Paul was speaking against, not the modern development of egalitarian, love-based homosexual relationships, a concept unknown in those times. By decrying various forms of sexual promiscuity, including the homosexual behaviors common in his time, Paul was calling for Christians to reject lasciviousness and promiscuity in favor of chastity.

Other biblical teachings on marriage (and celibacy) can help us understand how we might be able to accept a departure from biblical tradition. Jesus explicitly taught on three separate occasions, including in the Book of Mormon, that anyone who divorced and remarried, or even someone who married a divorced person, was guilty of adultery (Matthew 5:31–32; Matthew 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–12; 3 Nephi 12:32). This teaching is straightforward and unambiguous, yet our church does not prohibit divorce (even of a temple sealing) as the Catholic Church does. Why has our church been willing to make exception to this clear teaching from the Savior himself? Nothing in the LDS canon or latter-day revelation changed what Jesus taught about divorce. Historically speaking, this acceptance is likely related to our past practice of polygamy, which allowed quite liberal divorce policies. But it may also relate to evolving cultural attitudes and an acknowledgement that mortal life and relationships can be messy and imperfect, often falling short of the ideal. The Church allows mercy and understanding for members who fall short of the ideal of life-long marriage to the same person. Might the same mercy be extended to our gay brothers and sisters whose situation does not fit the heteronormative ideal?

After hearing Jesus' condemnation of divorce, his disciples observed, "it is not good to marry" (Matthew 19:10), which prompted further

32. See Matthew Vines, "The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality," <http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript> and J. R. Daniel Kirk, "Slave Sex in Ancient Rome," *Storied Theology* (blog), May 5, 2015, <http://www.jrdkirk.com/2015/05/05/slave-sex-in-ancient-rome/>.

teaching from Jesus on the subject of celibacy. Jesus' response to his disciples' observation was that "All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given" (Matthew 19:11). In other words, celibacy is not a universal requirement but can be a gift to some people. He then explained how some eunuchs (or those who have no desire or attraction for a woman) were born that way, some were made eunuchs of men (a common station in the ancient world) and, perhaps most interestingly, some "made themselves eunuchs [or celibate] for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Matthew 19:12). He again reiterated that this was not a universal principle, stating, "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (Matthew 19:12). What might this mean for our gay brothers and sisters? Perhaps there are some who feel they are among the few "to whom it is given" to live a life of celibacy in order to fully devote themselves to Christ and his gospel and willingly make themselves celibate "for the kingdom of heaven's sake." But we must remember that the ability to make this great sacrifice is a gift given to few and not a universal requirement—at least it is not required of any of our heterosexual members. Most of us believe that "it is not good that . . . man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18) and that marriage and lifelong companionship with the one we love is a crowning experience of mortal life. Should it be any different for our gay brothers and sisters?

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

homosexual relations is to teach us that the greatest and most meaningful expression of human sexuality is found in an exclusive, committed, love-based relationship (i.e., marriage). Therefore, in studying any of the Bible passages that regulate sexual conduct, we should consider how the law of chastity informs them and whether the deeper meaning of that law applies to all who abide by it, regardless of sexual orientation.

Regardless of how we view biblical mandates on homosexuality, the Church's teachings on the subject of homosexuality and same-sex marriage generally do not draw on the scriptural prohibitions. Rather, Church leaders have developed a theological argument based on teachings about eternal marriage, the plan of salvation, and gender complementarity. These themes are set forth in various documents, including "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (1995), "The First Presidency Statement on Same-Gender Marriage" (2004),³³ "The Divine Institution of Marriage" (2008),³⁴ and the letter from First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve to all Church units in the US and Canada after the US Supreme Court's ruling legalizing same-sex marriage (2015).³⁵ Of these documents, "The Divine Institution of Marriage" is the most comprehensive and, in the Church's own words, "outline[s] its doctrine

33. "First Presidency Statement on Same-Gender Marriage," *Mormon Newsroom*, Oct. 20, 2004, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/first-presidency-statement-on-same-gender-marriage>.

34. "The Divine Institution of Marriage," *Mormon Newsroom*, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/the-divine-institution-of-marriage>. The Church's website does not date this document. An original PDF version provides the date and context for the document, which was in support of the Church's political campaign for Proposition 8 in the state of California. The current document has been modified somewhat extensively from the original, available here: https://www.uvu.edu/religiousstudies/docs/mormonamerican/llds_newsroom_the_divine_institution_of_marriage.pdf.

35. "Church Leaders Counsel Members After Supreme Court Same-Sex Marriage Decision," *Mormon Newsroom*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/top-church-leaders-counsel-members-after-supreme-court-same-sex-marriage-decision>.

and position on marriage.”³⁶ Therefore, my examination of the Church’s position will focus on the concepts contained in that document.

One stated purpose of the document is to affirm that “intimate relations are acceptable to God only between a husband and a wife.” In response to that statement, one might ask, “why?” Why is sex between a married man and woman acceptable to God, while sex between two married men or two married women is not? Are we absolutely certain of God’s will on this subject? How can we require celibacy of them exclusively? To these questions, the Church has given no direct answer. Have they asked God in humility for an answer? Some members of the Church may cite the proclamation on the family as the revelatory answer to these hard questions. But it has never been canonized as scripture, and when President Packer referred to the proclamation as a “revelation” in his October 2010 conference address, that reference was deleted from the official transcript (along with other incorrect statements).³⁷

Celibacy—what the Church requires for gay people—has been, ironically, called a false and apostate doctrine by some Church leaders.³⁸ All members are expected to be sexually abstinent until marrying, but only gay people are required to be celibate all their lives. As one concerned father of a gay son describes it:

Celibacy is the prescribed solution for the question to which we have no revelation. It is not mentioned in the Proclamation. It is not [taught] in the Bible. Neither celibacy nor homosexuality is mentioned in any work of modern scripture. . . . There is no modern apostle or prophet who has

36. “Supreme Court Decision Will Not Alter Doctrine on Marriage,” *Mormon Newsroom*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/supreme-court-decision-will-not-alter-doctrine-on-marriage>.

37. Packer, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel” (compare audio/video talk at 00:45 to paragraph three in the text). See also, Stack, “Packer Talk.”

38. See, for example, the entries for “Apostasy” and “Celibacy” in Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958). There is no entry for “celibacy” in the Gospel Topics section of LDS.org.

expounded on how to live a celibate life. There is no handbook, guide, or Church website addressing the subject. It is just expected. It is what you are left with when the commandments leave you nothing else.³⁹

In sum, celibacy appears to be the fallback position when prophetic vision, theological innovation, and godlike empathy fail. Rather than envision what might be possible, it is easier to default to “that’s how it’s always been.” This same reasoning was used by those who once defended slavery, objected to women’s suffrage, feared the civil rights movement, and upheld the priesthood/temple ban as God’s will. This way of thinking is aptly described by the proverb “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18).⁴⁰ And in this case, we see people literally perish.

The celibacy requirement made logical sense with the old way of thinking about homosexuality—when it was thought to be like a contagion that would ensnare others unless it were essentially quarantined by forced celibacy and public opprobrium. But with the greater light and knowledge given by both science and listening to gay people’s lived experience, society—and the Church—have mostly abandoned that line of thinking, realizing that gay people do not choose their sexual orientation and that there is nothing inherently immoral about being attracted to one’s own sex. Nevertheless, the Church’s doctrine has evolved to a point that leaves gay people in a kind of no-man’s land where their being gay is, thankfully, not considered sinful anymore, but giving expression to their natural affections and capacities for love

39. Thomas Montgomery, “The Doctrine of Celibacy,” *No More Strangers: LGBT Mormon Forum* (blog), Oct. 19, 2014, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/the-doctrine-of-celibacy>.

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

and human intimacy—even in lawful monogamous marriage—is still considered a “grievous sin.”⁴¹

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

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

The first problem with the procreation argument is that it is only applied to homosexuals but not to heterosexuals. Heterosexual couples who do not have the biological capacity to procreate (due to menopause, disease, injury, etc.) are still able to marry. Even couples who do not desire children can be married. According to the Church’s position, God still accepts these marriages that are entered into solely for love and companionship. The Church’s handbook of instructions emphasizes that “sexual relations within marriage are divinely approved not only for the purpose of procreation, but also as a way of expressing

41. See for instance, Elder Christofferson’s interview on the policy: “We regard same-sex marriage as a particularly grievous or significant, serious kind of sin that requires Church discipline” (“Church Provides Context on Handbook Changes Affecting Same-Sex Marriages,” *Mormon Newsroom*, Nov. 6, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/handbook-changes-same-sex-marriages-elder-christofferson>). As discussed later, even with a softer, more compassionate tone, this teaching still sends the message that gay people are inherently defective.

love and strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds between husband and wife.”⁴² Thus, the Church does not require marriage and sexual relations within marriage to be solely for the purpose of procreation with respect to heterosexuals. If heterosexuals who have no ability or intention to procreate are allowed to marry solely for love and companionship, why can’t homosexuals also be allowed to marry solely for love and companionship? If they have the same capacity as heterosexuals to form loving, lasting unions, and their intimate relations within those marital unions also serve “as a way of expressing love and strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds,” then how do we know that such unions are not divinely approved?

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

Finally, there is the unfounded fear that because gay people can’t procreate, society’s acceptance of same-sex marriage would result in rapidly declining birthrates and the depopulation of nations.⁴³ This logic seems to be based on the old “contagion” view of homosexuality

42. “Birth Control,” *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, 21.4.4.

43. “If the abominable practice became universal it would depopulate the earth in a single generation” (Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 40). “One generation of homosexual ‘marriage’ would depopulate a nation, and, if sufficiently widespread, would extinguish its people. Our marriage laws should not abet national suicide” (Dallin H. Oaks, “Principles to Govern Possible Public Statement on Legislation Affecting Rights of Homosexuals,” Aug. 7, 1984, 19). “If [homosexuality were] practiced by all adults, these life-styles would mean the end of the human family” (James E. Faust, “Serving the Lord and

and that acceptance of same-sex marriage would somehow influence heterosexuals to change their sexual orientation or stop procreating. This view is hard to fathom. For those of us who are heterosexual, can we imagine becoming attracted to our own sex and losing all attraction to the opposite sex simply because we know happily-married gay people? Whether married or single, gay people—who have always existed as a small minority of the population—aren't going to affect national birthrates and aren't going to cause straight people to turn gay.

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

The Marriage document states that “[t]he special status granted marriage is nevertheless closely linked to the inherent powers and responsibilities of procreation and to the innate differences between the genders. By contrast, same-sex marriage is an institution no longer linked to gender—to the biological realities and complementary natures of male and female.” Complementarianism is the theological view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, religious leadership, and elsewhere. The Church appears to accept complementarianism as doctrine and further holds that the complementarity of male and female provides a rationale for denying marital unions to those of the same sex.

The first problem with this rationale is that it seems to imply that true romantic/emotional/spiritual love can only exist between male and female, and that a same-sex couple—because they do not have complementarity of biological sex—are incapable of that kind of love. Simple observation of gay couples, particularly those who have been together many years, easily dispels this myth.

Resisting the Devil,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1995, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1995/09/serving-the-lord-and-resisting-the-devil?lang=eng>).

The Church frequently cites the creation narrative in making its argument. In Genesis, we read of God creating Adam and stating, “It is not good that the man should be alone,” then making a woman as a “helpmeet” for him, who is later referred to as Adam’s wife (Genesis 2:18). But is it correct to interpret this account as an edict against same-sex marriage? Such an interpretation reads more into the narrative than is actually there. Just because God created a man and woman in the beginning and intended for them to pair up and procreate doesn’t mean that the gay people he created aren’t also intended to be able to pair up according to their natural-born attraction. Some may argue that this account illustrates a divine pattern for marriage that same-sex marriage violates. But that divine pattern—a marriage between one man and one woman—was broken repeatedly in the Bible (and of course in our own church) by the practice of polygamy. In addition, that original biblical pattern had to allow for incestuous marriage among Adam and Eve’s children and posterity, which was later strictly prohibited in the law of Moses and by the standards of most societies. We must avoid taking this story too literally or extrapolating it to situations to which it does not apply (a practice known as proof texting).

Some look to the future state of an eternally married man and woman, the potential to become like our Heavenly Parents, and the mention of “continuation of the seeds” in Doctrine and Covenants 132:19 as evidence of some kind of spiritual procreation that precludes same-sex marriage in the afterlife. Even if these theological ideas are taken literally, they are not weakened or negated by allowing a small number of God’s children who do not fit that mold the opportunity to marry in this life. Moreover, there are three degrees in the celestial kingdom, and only one requires the “new and everlasting covenant of marriage” (D&C 131:1–4, which early Church leaders and members took to mean plural marriage but has now been defined as eternal marriage between one man and one woman). So even taking a very literal approach to this scripture, there are still two degrees in the celestial kingdom that do not require

marriage between a man and a woman (or women), which could leave room for same-sex married couples as well as single individuals. While I do not favor interpreting Doctrine and Covenants 131 this way, since it puts people on a different standing through no fault of their own regardless of their faithfulness and character, it nevertheless reminds us that there is more to the celestial kingdom than we typically focus on.

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

The impossibility of establishing with certainty Smith's position on spirit birth as opposed to spirit adoption is one of many points of indeterminacy in the Mormon past, and a reminder of how much fog enshrouded a narrative that is at times depicted as clear and unfailingly linear in the modern church. It is possible that Smith was undecided relative to two scenarios of human creation. More likely, perhaps, is the fact that neither adoption nor procreation is an adequate human analogue for the process by which Smith believed eternally existing intelligent element (or beings) to be transformed into individual human spirits.⁴⁴

Are we justified in imposing such a drastic restriction on our gay brothers and sisters in this life based on doctrinal speculations that may be more metaphorical than literal and about which we have little to no actual revelation?

Allowing gay people the right to love and marry in accordance with their "biological reality" need not threaten the doctrines that spring from the creation narrative of Adam and Eve or the eternal nature of the family

44. Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 157; see also, 107–10, 156–65. See also, Taylor Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 106–49.

or eternal progression. Those doctrines still apply to the vast majority of God's children who are heterosexual. Allowing gay people the same blessings and benefits that heterosexuals derive from marriage would not negate, devalue, or change in any way these doctrines as they apply to heterosexuals. We would just have to humbly acknowledge that at the present time we do not have answers for how those doctrines relate to God's LGBT children but that we are confident he has a wondrous plan for them and loves them as much as he does his heterosexual children.

3. The Families and Children Argument: Redefining marriage will further weaken the institution of marriage and undermine the family.

For this argument, the Marriage document cites a number of academic studies, books, and articles that are frequently cited by conservative religious and political groups opposed to same-sex marriage and LGBT rights. While General Authorities and Church members have traditionally distrusted academia—particularly the social sciences—on issues of family and marriage, the Church has embraced sources that align with its position. However, by citing only those sources and ignoring the numerous studies and personal experiences that reach different conclusions, the document lacks intellectual integrity.

Moreover, if the Church is going to step out of the realm of doctrine and theology and into the realm of academic research and political punditry, it can no longer hold its position to be inerrant, unchallengeable, or equivalent to the voice of God. To the extent that its position relies on science and reason (which is generally a good thing in my opinion), it should be subject to thorough examination such that, ultimately, "truth will prevail." Or as Brigham Young said, "Be willing to receive the truth, let it come from whom it may"⁴⁵—even if such truth doesn't support the current position.

Before addressing the specific claims in this section, I should note that using families and children as an argument against same-sex mar-

45. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (1997), 16.

riage is a non-sequitur. Unlike heterosexual marriage, children do not automatically result from a same-sex marriage. And banning same-sex marriage will not stop some gay couples from having children. Therefore, if the Church opposes gay couples raising children, that should be the subject of its prohibition, not same-sex marriage. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that with the improved social standing, stability, and rights granted by legal marriage, more gay couples who choose to marry may desire to have families than ever before. Therefore, I address the following arguments.

First, the Church states:

Extensive studies have shown . . . that a husband and wife who are united in a loving, committed marriage generally provide the ideal environment for protecting, nurturing, and raising children. This is in part because of the differing qualities and strengths that husbands and wives bring to the task by virtue of their gender. As an eminent academic on family life has written: “The burden of social science evidence supports the idea that gender differentiated parenting is important for human development and that the contribution of fathers to child rearing is unique and irreplaceable. . . . The complementarity of male and female parenting styles is striking and of enormous importance to a child’s overall development.”⁴⁶

This is the gender complementarity argument applied to parenting. The Church cites a number of studies in support of the first statement, which seems like common sense. One could hardly argue that a loving, committed marriage does not provide the ideal environment for raising children; however, such a claim does not demonstrate that two wives or two husbands cannot have a loving, committed relationship that would also provide an ideal environment for raising children. In fact, gay couples who choose to have or adopt children do so with great forethought—it’s not something that can happen by accident as it so often

46. “The Divine Institution of Marriage.” The source cited is David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 146.

does with heterosexual couples. In my experience knowing a number of same-sex couples who have had children, they are some of the most devoted and loving parents I have ever seen.

With respect to the gender complementarity argument in parenting, this fails to consider that not all heterosexual marriages have distinct gender roles and characteristics. For instance, the man in the marriage may not exhibit all the traits society or the Church considers to be masculine (e.g., emotionally reserved, athletic, career-minded, aggressive) but instead may exhibit many of the traits considered to be essentially feminine (e.g., sensitive, nurturing, artistic, passive). By the same token, two husbands or two wives in a same-sex union may exhibit the full complement of masculine and feminine traits, thereby qualifying for the supposed benefits such traits offer.

Regardless, studies show that children raised by same-sex couples do not differ markedly from those raised by heterosexual parents, as summarized in this research summary by the American Psychological Association over twelve years ago:

Results of social science research have failed to confirm any of these concerns about children of lesbian and gay parents. Research suggests that sexual identities (including gender identity, gender-role behavior, and sexual orientation) develop in much the same ways among children of lesbian mothers as they do among children of heterosexual parents. Studies of other aspects of personal development (including personality, self-concept, and conduct) similarly reveal few differences between children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual parents. . . . The picture that emerges from research is one of general engagement in social life with peers, parents, family members, and friends. . . . Overall, results of research suggest that the development, adjustment, and well-being of children with lesbian and gay parents do not differ markedly from that of children with heterosexual parents.⁴⁷

47. "Sexual Orientation, Parents, & Children," adopted by the APA Council of Representatives, July 28 and 30, 2004, <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/parenting.aspx> (citations omitted). See also, "What Does the Scholarly Research

Social science research simply does not jibe with the Church's conclusion.

Finally, the Marriage document concludes:

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

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

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

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

Gratefully, the answer is that same-gender attraction did not exist in the pre-earth life and neither will it exist in the next life. It is a circum-

Say about the Wellbeing of Children with Gay or Lesbian Parents?,” *Columbia Law School Public Policy Research Portal*, <http://whatwewknow.law.columbia.edu/topics/lgbt-equality/what-does-the-scholarly-research-say-about-the-wellbeing-of-children-with-gay-or-lesbian-parents>.

stance that for whatever reason or reasons seems to apply right now in mortality, in this nano-second of our eternal existence. . . . [You're] not stuck with it forever. It's just now.⁴⁸

Straight people may take some comfort in this doctrine because it helps them reconcile the obvious unfairness gay people face in this life through no fault of their own. If they can just remain celibate in this life, all will be made right in the next when they are changed. However, like the hurtful folk doctrines white Church members fabricated about black people's lack of valiance in the premortal existence to reconcile the unfair and discriminatory way they were treated in the Church, this belief is actually quite damaging. First, many gay people consider being married to a person of the opposite sex for eternity a horrific prospect. To see it from their perspective, consider how a straight man would feel about being changed to homosexual in the afterlife and being married to another man for the rest of eternity.

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

Given these doctrinal considerations, and particularly if we acknowledge that sexual orientation is not chosen, can't be spread like

48. "Interview with Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Lance B. Wickman: 'Same-Gender Attraction,'" *Mormon Newsroom*, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/interview-oaks-wickman-same-gender-attraction>. The website does not list the date of this interview.

a contagion, and that gay people are just as capable as heterosexuals of forming committed, meaningful marriage relationships, we must be willing to ask the following questions:

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

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

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

In addition to believing that God can provide an answer, any serious consideration of such admittedly difficult questions requires godlike empathy, humility, and courage. President Kimball's experience leading up to the 1978 revelation provides an instructive model. Once black people became more than an abstract doctrinal issue to him and he came to know and understand them as real people, he developed a godlike empathy for them.⁴⁹ It wasn't until he obtained that empathy, and was humble enough to admit the Church might be wrong, that he had the capacity to actually question the Church's position and to begin studying the issue and petitioning the Lord for more understanding. As President Hinckley said of President Kimball:

Here was a little man, filled with love, able to reach out to people. . . .
He was not the first to worry about the priesthood question, but he

49. Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 37–38, 40.

had the compassion to pursue it and a boldness that allowed him to act, to get the revelation.⁵⁰

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

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

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

I had a great deal to fight . . . myself, largely, because I had grown up with this thought that Negroes should not have the priesthood and I was prepared to go all the rest of my life until my death and fight for it and defend it as it was.⁵¹

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

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

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

50. *Ibid.*, 44.

51. *Ibid.*, 48.

How shall the Church know when these adventurous expeditions of the brethren into these highly speculative principles and doctrines meet the requirements of the statutes that the announcers thereof have been “moved upon by the Holy Ghost”? The Church will know by the testimony of the Holy Ghost in the body of the members, whether the brethren in voicing their views are “moved upon by the Holy Ghost”; and in due time that knowledge will be made manifest.⁵²

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

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

For those who feel so certain about our current understanding of God’s will on this subject, we would do well to remember Elder McConkie’s words after having to retract what he said prior to the

52. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “When Are Church Leaders’ Words Entitled to Claim of Scripture?,” *Church News*, July 31, 1954, 10, as cited in footnote 6 of D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” Apr. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/the-doctrine-of-christ?lang=eng>. See also, James E. Faust, “. . . And The Truth Shall Make You Free,” *New Era*, Mar. 1975, <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1975/03/and-the-truth-shall-make-you-free?lang=eng>.

1978 revelation: “Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.”⁵³

III. Examination of the Moral Basis for the Church’s Position

The Church would likely assert that the moral basis for any of its policies or positions is axiomatic if they are based on true doctrine. However, as explained above, there have been many teachings or doctrines—whether contained in the scriptures or taught by latter-day Church leaders—that have been discarded or modified because they are no longer believed to be true and have even been harmful. As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said, “to be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.”⁵⁴ Here I will set aside the question of whether the Church’s current position on homosexuality is God’s will and examine it solely on the basis of moral reasoning. In other words, what conclusion could an honest, moral person arrive at using only her God-given intellect and ability to reason?

First, I have found that those who see same-sex relationships as sinful and immoral focus solely on the sexual aspect of the couple’s relationship. They are generally unfamiliar with gay people and therefore can’t even conceive of a gay person being in a loving relationship similar to that of a loving heterosexual couple. To them, being gay is only about sex. The result is that they see gay people primarily as sex objects instead

53. Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” *BYU Speeches*, Aug. 18, 1978, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie_alike-unto-god-2.

54. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” Oct. 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>.

of whole human beings, and they see their relationships as based only on lust and not on love, kindness, and mutual respect. This view is a twisted and unfair basis on which to make a moral judgment. What if this same perspective were used to view young straight couples, newly married and deeply in love? In judging the morality of a gay couple's relationship, we should use the same perspective that we use to view a straight couple's relationship. We should view them as whole human beings who have an innate desire for emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical attachment with another human being. We should view their love in terms of mutual affection, kindness, respect, compatibility, complementarity, commitment, and stability, as well as physical attraction. If we generally observe these characteristics in their relationship, we may then conclude that there is no reason their relationship is any less edifying, beneficial, and moral than that of a similarly-situated straight couple.

Human judgment about what is moral or immoral, however, is more often a matter of gut instinct than it is about reason. Sexuality is one area that arouses strong positive or negative feelings in people. Heterosexuals may feel revulsion or discomfort at the thought of same-sex intimacy and may interpret those feelings as their spirit recoiling at something unnatural and immoral. However, this fails to consider the fact that homosexuals may have the same feelings about opposite-sex intimacy.

Furthermore, are such gut instincts always to be trusted? Would it be proper, for instance, to judge interracial marriage as immoral just because you personally feel internal discomfort at the thought of intimacy with someone of another race? In fact, such feelings may have been at the root of early Church doctrines (and civil laws) that declared interracial marriage a sin against nature and denied black people the priesthood and temple blessings. As John Turner notes, "Although fragmentary documentation obscures the reasons for [Brigham] Young's hardening position [on race], his revulsion over the specter of interracial procreation apparently played a major role in his thinking. Perhaps

most fundamentally, a church that emphasized forging links between the generations and eternal sealings between its members would not find it easy to incorporate black Americans within this ecclesial family.”

⁵⁵ Today of course, the Church disavows the idea that mixed-race marriages are sinful.⁵⁶

Like the child who is developmentally incapable of comprehending adult human sexual intimacy, a heterosexual person may be incapable of fully comprehending same-sex intimacy. If heterosexuals get to judge the morality of romantic relationships based on what feels right and natural to them, shouldn't gay people be able to use that same basis to judge their relationships? Some might protest that this line of reasoning is essentially, “if it feels good, do it.” But that is not what I'm suggesting. Rather, gay people should be able to judge the rightness and morality of their relationships the same way heterosexuals do—based on their own gut instinct but still within certain cultural and moral bounds. That basis does not give an automatic moral pass to do whatever they want to do with whomever they want, just as it doesn't for heterosexuals. The same rules regarding consent, age, emotional and mental capacity, and mutual respect still apply, but the rules should apply equally, whether gay or straight. Therefore, if someone wants to rely on their gut instinct as an indicator of morality, let them judge that morality for themselves and not for others whose gut instincts may differ.

Another argument against same-sex relationships is that they are “unnatural” because they go against nature's intended purpose for the

55. John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 223. Brigham Young often advocated the death penalty for mixed-race marriage, as in this statement: “Shall I tell you the law of God in regard to the African race? If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot. This will always be so” (Brigham Young, Mar. 8, 1863, *Journal of Discourses*, 10:110).

56. “Race and the Priesthood,” *Gospel Topics*, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

sexes. However, whether something is or is not natural is not a good indicator of morality. Think of the many medical advances, such as artificial joints, artificial hearts, and in vitro fertilization, that are unnatural but are not considered immoral. As a missionary in the missionary training center, I remember watching a short documentary about a woman who was born without arms but who had mastered the ability to use her feet to prepare her family's meals, do her children's hair, bottle feed her baby, put on her makeup, drive a car, and, in short, do just about anything a mother with arms could do.⁵⁷ She was doing things with her feet that at first glance, appeared unnatural and even off-putting. Using her feet to peel and cut apples or to caress her baby's face was not what nature had intended for feet. But by the end of the film, I saw her as an inspiration and felt convicted for my initial feelings of discomfort. Certainly no one could say that the "unnatural" way in which she used her feet was immoral. Is it possible to countenance gay sexuality in the same light?

Those who view homosexuality as unnatural would probably cite two main reasons: (1) it cannot produce offspring, which is nature's objective for sexual relations, and (2) gay sex itself is inherently unnatural. Sexual reproduction evolved as a very effective means of ensuring propagation of the species—so, yes, sex for the purpose of having offspring is "natural." However, the vast majority of human sexual activity, including within healthy, stable marriages, is not for the purpose of reproduction but solely to express love and desire. Does that make such sexual activity unnatural? If the outcomes of a committed, loving same-sex relationship are just as positive and edifying as those of a heterosexual relationship, the ability to have children shouldn't determine the "naturalness" of those relationships, whether gay or straight. In addition, a number of genetic and evolutionary theories explain how homosexuality is an advantage in human societies (and actually strengthens wider family units) and therefore continues to exist in a minority of the population.

57. *A Day in the Life of Bonnie Consolo*, directed by Barry J. Spinello (Barr Films, 1975).

Based on these evolutionary advantages, homosexuality can certainly be considered “natural.”⁵⁸

Whether gay sex is seen as “natural” comes down to very personal and subjective opinion that mostly hinges on one’s own sexual orientation. To a straight person, the thought of same-sex intimacy feels unnatural, whereas to a gay person, heterosexual intimacy feels unnatural. Additionally, heterosexual couples may engage in the same types of sexual activity that gay couples do. For a short time, temple worthiness interviews included advice to married couples not to practice “unnatural, impure, or unholy practices” and specified that oral sex was in that category; however, months later that instruction was removed.⁵⁹ The Church has decided—like it did with the very personal and intimate decisions on birth control and family size—to leave practices within the bedroom for individual couples to choose.

Finally, the Church’s prescription for gay people—celibacy—is clearly not natural. Having to forgo human intimacy, physical affection and touch, romantic love, and lifelong companionship goes against human nature.

One way to judge the morality of something is to ask if it causes harm. Does a committed, monogamous same-sex relationship cause harm? The Church has stated its belief that same-sex marriage harms society and families because “children and youth will find it increasingly difficult to develop their natural identities as men or women. Some will

58. William Kremer, “The Evolutionary Puzzle of Homosexuality,” *BBC Magazine*, Feb. 18, 2014, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26089486. See also, James O’Keefe, “Homosexuality: It’s about Survival, Not Sex,” *TEDx Tallaght*, Nov. 16, 2016, <http://www.tedxtallaght.com/apps/videos/videos/show/18991711-homosexuality-it-s-about-survival-not-sex>.

59. Letter from First Presidency, Jan. 5, 1982, available at <http://rationalfaiths.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Jan-5-19821.pdf>. See also, “Prophetic Counsel about Sex Within Marriage: A Brief History,” *Mormon Matters* (blog), Mar. 17, 2008, <http://www.mormonmatters.org/2008/03/17/prophetic-counsel-about-sex-within-marriage-a-brief-history>.

find it more difficult to engage in wholesome courtships [and] form stable marriages.”⁶⁰ There is simply no basis or evidence for this claim. Rather, it is likely based on the outdated “contagion” belief that people, especially youth and children, are recruited or converted to be gay, for which there is no evidence.

Once all of these erroneous notions are dispelled, it may be possible to see same-sex marriage as a benefit to civilization. Traditionally, society has valued the institution of marriage based on the belief that it causes young single people—who may be prone to more profligate, reckless living that endangers the physical and emotional health of themselves and others—to settle down, become responsible, and think about others above themselves. If marriage really accomplishes this, why wouldn’t we want it for gay people as well as straight people? Would we rather keep gay people on the margins of “acceptable” society, where hookup culture and risky behavior abound, or would we prefer that they have the same opportunity and expectations as straight people to enter into committed marriage relationships?

The great majority of LDS parents of gay children that I know want their gay children to have stable, committed relationships that will result in a greater likelihood of physical and emotional health and well-being—just as they do for their straight children. And those kinds of relationships are more likely to come from legal marriage. As LDS parents, we have taught our children from their earliest years the importance of finding a worthy husband or wife who will love and cherish them, and that the greatest joys in life come from a fulfilling marriage and family life. Should it surprise us that our gay children have internalized those teachings, seen the good examples of their parents, and desire what we have?

In sum, setting aside all religious implications for the moment, if we accept the two basic premises previously introduced, that (1) being

60. “The Divine Institution of Marriage.”

gay is not a choice, and (2) gay people have the same capacity as straight people to enter into committed, loving relationships, we must ask ourselves how a love-based, committed same-sex relationship is any different or less moral than a love-based, committed heterosexual relationship. To go a step further, we should be willing to ask ourselves whether it is moral to deny gay people the right and opportunity to experience what almost every human being desires in terms of romantic love, physical and emotional connection, and lifelong companionship with someone they are naturally attracted to. Surely, any heterosexual can appreciate the way Berta Marquez describes the joy of her marriage:

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

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

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

the emotional, spiritual and companionate love that makes life worth living. I hope you will see with new eyes.⁶¹

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

The doctrinal and moral sections of this article primarily use reason and logic to examine the Church's position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. This section attempts to examine the Church's position from an empirical perspective, based on observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic. Jesus advocated this approach in judging whether something was of God when he taught, "by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:16–20; see also, Galatians 5:22–23; Moroni 7:14–19). Elder M. Russell Ballard has further stated that, "A church, or any way of life, should be judged by the fruits or results that it generates."⁶² Therefore, if the Church's position on homosexuality is based on eternal truth and is morally sound, we would expect that living that way would produce "good fruit," while being in a same-sex relationship would produce "bad fruit."

Ideally, an empirical approach would be based on studies and surveys that employ scientific methods.⁶³ However, I will share my personal

61. As shared in the Mormons Building Bridges Facebook group, Oct. 12, 2015. See also, Laura Root, "Being Mormon, Lesbian, and in Love..." *Rational Faiths* (blog), Dec. 30, 2016, <http://rationalfaiths.com/being-mormon-lesbian-and-in-love> and Chris Janousek, "I'm Homophilic," *No More Strangers* (blog), Mar. 20, 2014, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/im-homophilic>.

62. M. Russell Ballard, "Faith, Family, Facts, and Fruits," Oct. 2007, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2007/10/faith-family-facts-and-fruits?lang=eng>.

63. Links to such studies, which consistently show highly negative outcomes associated with gay people trying to live according to the Church's position, can be found at the independently-created Gays and Mormons website here: <http://gaysandmormons.org/scientific-research>. Critics of these studies may argue that survey respondents are self-selected rather than randomly selected or that study authors have an agenda. However, it is notable that no studies

observations as someone who has two gay sons, helped found an LDS LGBT support group with over 500 members,⁶⁴ and actively participates in Affirmation, the largest and oldest LDS LGBT organization in existence. In the thirteen years since my oldest son came out, I have read and studied extensively on this subject, I have met and personally know hundreds of LGBT people, I have read the personal accounts and experiences of hundreds more, and I belong to a number of social media groups specifically for LDS LGBT people and their friends and families. I recognize such observations are anecdotal. But you don't have to take my word for it. If you start talking to gay people and others who are familiar with these issues, you will hear the same stories, and I believe they will confirm my observations.⁶⁵ Here are my observations of the

or surveys have been published by groups or individuals who advocate for the Church's position as a way of life for gay people.

64. See ALL: Arizona LDS*LGBT, <http://www.ALLArizona.org>.

65. Brent Kerby, *Gay Mormons?*. Many firsthand accounts can be found online, including the following: Root, "Being Mormon, Lesbian, and In Love"; Kayden Maxwell, "Hero Journey," *No More Strangers* (blog), Oct. 11, 2014, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/a-gay-mormon-teen-age-16-writes-an-essay-for-english-class>; Sarah Lewis, "That Weak Things May Become Strong," *Each Day is an Adventure When You're a Lewis* (blog), Jan. 11, 2017, <http://eachdayisanadventurelewis.blogspot.com/2017/01/that-weak-things-may-become-strong.html>; John Bonner, "Letter to 14 Year Old Me," *Life Outside the Book of Mormon Belt* (blog), Jan. 12, 2016, <https://outsidethebookofmormonbelt.com/2016/01/12/letter-to-14-year-old-me-by-john>; Jena Peterson, "Authenticity Through Connection," *Rational Faiths* (blog), May 31, 2016, <http://rationalfaiths.com/authenticity-through-connection>; Jonathan Manwaring, "How My Gay Family Members and Friends Have Changed Me," *Northern Lights* (blog), Dec. 5, 2014, <http://ldslights.org/gay-family-members-friends-changed>; Berta Marquez, "A Polyphony of Three," *Affirmation* (blog), Nov. 19, 2015, <http://affirmation.org/polyphony-of-three-bertha-marquez>; "Our Families: Trey and Guy," *Affirmation* (blog), Mar. 1, 2013, <http://affirmation.org/affinity-march-2013/#1>; "Theresa and Rachel: Our Story," *No More Strangers* (blog), June 3, 2013, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/theresa-and-rachel-our-story>; Matthew Balls, "Jeffrey," *Far Between*, <http://farbetweenmovie.com/jeffrey>; John Gustav-Wrathall, "Doubt

fruits most commonly associated with gay people who are raised in the Church and are trying to live the Church's position of lifelong celibacy:

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

Extreme guilt and self-loathing (even when living Church standards)

Depression and despair with occasional suicidal thoughts

Extreme religiosity and scrupulosity (perfectionism and unhealthy obsession with righteous living and rule-keeping in hopes of changing or proving worthiness)

Later stages (realizing sexual orientation isn't changing)

Periods of depression and despair with suicidal thoughts, sometimes leading to suicide

Social/emotional detachment, inability to form relationships with others

Stagnation, apathy, hopelessness

Overcompensation, perfectionism, overachievement

Obsessive/compulsive behavior associated with pornography and masturbation made worse by feelings of shame, worthlessness, and hopelessness

A perpetual cycle of shame, trying to suppress innate sexuality and live according to the Church's standards but always falling short (periodic hookups, pornography, etc.)

Loss of faith, anger and bitterness against the Church and God

Abandonment of Church membership to preserve emotional and mental health

Your Doubts," *Young Stranger* (blog), Jan. 14, 2014, <http://youngstranger.blogspot.com/2014/01/doubt-your-doubts.html>; John Gustav-Wrathall, "The Pillars of My Faith," *Young Stranger* (blog), Aug. 4, 2014, <http://youngstranger.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-pillars-of-my-faith.html>.

In example after example, I hear of sadness and despair. However, it is not being gay that causes the emotional trauma and mental anguish; it is being gay and raised in a religion and culture that tells you from the time you are an innocent child that your feelings of love and attraction are degrading and sinful, something you must extinguish and bury deep inside. Unlike your straight friends and siblings who revel in their crushes, falling in love, showing physical affection, dating, and marrying, you are taught that the love and attraction you feel is from Satan and if expressed—even in a loving, monogamous marriage—it will cause society’s downfall and the destruction of the family, and you will be declared an apostate, an enemy of the Church.

I belong to a private Facebook group for active LDS parents who have LGBT children. There are over 850 members at last count, with parents joining every day. In reading the stories of these parents, particularly those whose teen children are just coming out as gay, one of the most common themes is that before coming out the children begin pulling away from the Church. While saddened that their children pull away from the Church they love, these parents come to realize that they would rather have an emotionally healthy, well-adjusted gay child out of the Church than a suicidal, emotionally unhealthy child in the Church.

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

A common refrain among religious people is found in this statement by President James E. Faust: “The false belief of inborn homosexual

orientation denies to repentant souls the opportunity to change and will ultimately lead to discouragement, disappointment, and despair.”⁶⁶ This view is understandable and logical if “acting on” one’s homosexuality is believed to be sinful and against God’s will. In this view, gay people may find momentary pleasure in living counter to God’s laws, but ultimately, they will come to find out that “wickedness never was happiness” and will reap the bitter fruits of their unrighteous choices. But what if we find the opposite to be true? What if we observe that gay people living in long-term, committed same-sex relationships are just as happy as their straight counterparts? What if we find that gay couples who live the law of chastity in the same manner required of straight couples (no sexual relations outside of marriage and total fidelity within marriage) receive the same blessings and positive outcomes as straight couples who live that law?

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

Happiness and fulfillment

Stability and commitment

Sincere love and concern for each other

Greater emotional and spiritual well-being

Light in their countenance, the fruits of the Spirit in their lives

In other words, the blessings and benefits of marriage appear to be available to all those who are willing to abide by the covenant of exclusive commitment, regardless of whether they are gay or straight.

In addition to the positive fruits that marriage—heterosexual or homosexual—brings to individuals and families, it also strengthens our

66. James E. Faust, “Serving the Lord and Resisting the Devil,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1995, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1995/09/serving-the-lord-and-resisting-the-devil?lang=eng>.

communities and society as a whole. John Gustav-Wrathall gives three reasons that gay marriage should be embraced by all: First, promoting stable, long-term pair bondings increases the likelihood that gay people will form lasting relationships and decreases the likelihood that they will enter into unstable opposite-sex relationships. Second, families create a more stable society. Individuals in a family take care of each other, provide for each other, and nurture each other rather than relying on the state to provide for them. Finally, marriage promotes morality and spirituality. It encourages individuals to bridle their sexual passions and live in committed, enduring relationships. But it also fosters spiritual development. “In many ways, those commitments [to my husband] paved the way for me to come back to the Church,” writes Gustav-Wrathall. “I believe living in a way that honored my love for him made me more sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit.”⁶⁷

Gay people are not immune from the marital and relationship problems that all people face. Indeed, I am aware of some same-sex marriages that were perhaps entered into too hastily and have ended in divorce. However, the joy gay couples are finding in the right to marry may actually be injecting new life into an institution that seems to be dying out in much of secular society.

Until relatively recently, society in general took much the same position as the Church on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The Church now sees society’s departure from that position as evidence of moral decay. However, the reason we as a society (including a growing number in the Church) are moving away from the Church’s position is that we have been able to observe for ourselves the lives of gay people rather than relying solely on tradition and the cultural prejudices of past generations to inform our views. Gay people are members of our family, our friends, our neighbors, our coworkers, and our sons and daughters.

67. John Gustav-Wrathall, “Why Same-Sex Marriage Will Strengthen Marriage for Everyone,” *Young Stranger* (blog), May 27, 2011, <http://youngstranger.blogspot.com/2011/05/why-same-sex-marriage-will-strengthen.html>.

As they have been able to live their lives more openly and authentically, rather than in fear and hiding, we are able to see for ourselves that they are really no different than we are, that they are better off living with the same freedoms and opportunities that we have—without shame, without condemnation, and without being made to feel that their lives are bringing about the downfall of society and destruction of the family.

If we judge the Church's position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage by its fruits, can we still unequivocally say that this position is of God? Like the Church's earlier teachings about black people, its position on homosexuality is creating great spiritual and emotional harm. If Church leaders do not accept these fruits as I and many others have observed them, then, with the stakes so high, I hope they commission reliable studies and surveys, conduct large-scale interviews of gay people, talk to LDS parents who have gay children, and determine whether its position truly has a positive or negative impact on the lives of gay people. In short, I pray that they will "study it out in their minds" and ask the Lord to confirm their conclusions (D&C 9:8–9).

V. Where to From Here?

The Church has evolved significantly on this issue. And aside from the emotional and spiritual trauma caused by the November 2015 policy, the Church has taken a number of positive steps that have led to greater understanding of and compassion for our gay members of the Church. However, no matter how much the Church encourages love and understanding—no matter how much it tells gay people that there is no sin in being gay while at the same time continuing to tell them that their deep inner desire for love and companionship is considered a defect—this message will continue to cause hopelessness, shame, and bitterness. It will continue to result in depression, suicide, and loss of faith.

More education on this issue and more love and empathy for our gay members will help mitigate some of the negative symptoms they experi-

ence. But the reality is, as long as gay members are treated as unequal to straight members, as long as they are taught from the time they are young that their core natures are essentially a defect that will be fixed in the next life, their psyches and spirits will be damaged. And most of them will leave. Can we really expect otherwise? Would we do any differently if we were in their place? Prior to the 1978 revelation on the priesthood, wasn't it logical to expect that the majority of black people would find the Church a hostile and damaging place because they couldn't receive the same blessings as white members and were taught that they carried the curse of Cain and were spiritually inferior to whites in the premortal existence? Should we expect our gay members to respond any differently given what the Church teaches about their nature?

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

Following such a doctrinal change, at some point temple sealings for same-sex couples would inevitably be the next question to arise. However, since Joseph Smith's teachings about the relations between couples in the afterlife and the nature of spiritual procreation are still so vague and undeveloped, these theological/doctrinal issues may be addressed later. There is ample historical and theological basis for exploring such possibilities for LGBT people.⁶⁸

68. See Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology."

The longer this change takes, the more we will lose gay people, their family members, their friends, and other sympathetic Church members, particularly younger people who do not see same-sex marriage as a threat to society or a sin against God. And unlike black people who had the choice of not joining the Church during the priesthood/temple ban, gay babies are born into the Church every day and at increasing numbers as the Church grows. Their departure—along with that of their families and those who care about them—ultimately harms us as a community. It leaves a gaping wound in our church, the body of Christ.

Some may argue that if the current doctrine is God's will, it is out of our hands, and that regardless of the despair, the suicides, the mental anguish, the bitterness, the ultimate loss of faith and loss of members, we cannot change what God has decreed.⁶⁹ But do we really believe these fruits are acceptable to God and in accordance with his revealed will, or are we leaning too much on our own heterosexual understanding? Do we believe in continuing revelation or not? Do we not have enough scriptural and historical precedent demonstrating that revelation comes not just when God decides but when we seek it? Think of most of the major revelations given to Joseph Smith, think of the 1978 revelation to President Kimball—all came in response to questioning, seeking, and petitioning the Lord for answers to sincere and sometimes difficult questions. We must remember these fundamental precepts of our Church:

69. In a religious freedom conference held in Arizona on January 21, 2017, Elder Dallin Oaks gave several reasons why the Church must resist societal change on traditional marriage, including: "We believe in revelation from God and we have no power to alter revealed doctrine when it collides with man-made laws or cultures. . . . We also have no power to alter revealed prophetic directions on the application of that doctrine to the circumstances of our day. And we should also note, revelation is the province of God and comes not as we will, but when and how He decides." A recording of the proceedings was provided by a personal acquaintance. For a summary of the conference, see Jill Adair, "Elder Oaks Urges All Church Members to Defend Religious Freedom," *Church News*, Jan. 25, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/elder-oaks-urges-all-church-members-to-defend-religious-freedom?lang=eng>.

“We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that *He will yet reveal many great and important things* pertaining to the Kingdom of God. (Articles of Faith 1:9; emphasis added)

“Yea, wo be unto him that saith: We have received, and we need no more!” (2 Nephi 28:27)

“But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.” (D&C 9:8)

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

Regardless, even with what we know now, we need a better pastoral approach for this issue. While it won’t fully stop the outflow of gay members and their families, there are things we can do to slow it. Some wards and stakes around the country are already approaching this issue in more positive ways (although less so since the November 2015 policy). We could extend this simple message: Come worship with us and bring your spouse or partner; you will always be welcome in our ward, you have nothing to fear, and we love you and we need you. That message, along with the decision not to automatically initiate Church disciplinary action unless the person desires it as a way back into full fellowship, would do much to heal the spiritual wounds we have inflicted and make the Church a Zion community.

Even if gay members can’t participate as members in full fellowship, we can treat their marriages and partnerships with respect and dignity, just as we do those who are not married in the temple. These individuals should also be treated with love and respect and allowed to worship with us without any fear of Church reprisal. If a gay person or couple has wrestled with the question of how to live their life and feels a spiritual

pull to attend church again, does it make sense to punish them with the harshest action the Church can take, or to make them feel like they are too unworthy and spiritually damaged to simply attend church with us? How I wish we could at least make this simple change in the interim.⁷⁰

Finally, to those who have sincerely considered this issue and have reached the conclusion that committed, monogamous same-sex marriage is against God's will, I will grant you the respect to believe as your heart and conscience tell you. May I ask the same thing of you? Will you please allow me and others who have spiritually struggled with this issue and reached a different conclusion the right to our agency and personal revelation without judging us to be apostates, unfaithful, or unworthy of being your fellow Latter-day Saints?

Above all, will you recognize the supreme sacrifice our LDS gay members must make to remain active in the LDS Church? To live the Church's position, they must give up a core part of their humanity—their ability to fully and completely love another person—and choose lifelong celibacy, something no one else is asked to do. If, on the other hand, they do not feel the call to sacrifice that part of their humanity, they are then forced to give up full fellowship in the Church and lose relationships with Church and even family members. No matter what choice they make, they lose something precious. May God grant us the inspiration, courage, and grace we need as a church and people to find the right path on this issue—a path that will be in accordance with his will and that will save the lives and souls of our beloved gay members of the Church.

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