


Family Fellowship

The Logical Next Step: Sanctioning and Affirming Same-Sex Relationships

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Just this past month, I have had two lengthy discussions with local ecclesiastical leaders of the LDS Church about homosexuality and the church. Those discussions have convinced me that the problem faced by homosexual individuals and their families in their relationship with the church, and the problem faced by the church in its relationship with its homosexual members and their families is not insoluble. I have used the word problem here, advisedly, when in fact, we have before us two conundrums. A conundrum is defined as “a question or problem having only a conjectural answer,” or “an intricate and difficult problem.”

I am going to attempt this afternoon to identify these two conundrums and conjecture about a possible solution that makes

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sense to me, but may be nonsensical to many others. Intricate and difficult problems rarely have simple answers. I am not so naive as to expect everyone to embrace these ideas, but I am willing to make the effort because both the church and its homosexual members are important to me.

Identifying the two conundrums is rather simple. For homosexual members of the

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

The reality of the matter, regardless of etiology, is that a small percentage of our LDS members find themselves romantically interested only in members of the same sex. These individuals are aware that church policy has “zero tolerance” for any sexual activity between members of the same sex, or any of its members outside the bonds of marriage. They realize that “zero tolerance” means that they cannot become romantically involved with someone of the same sex and remain a member of the church in anything approaching good standing. Hence, they may be forced to choose between a romantic relationship and membership in the church. I’ve previously referred to this as a veritable “Sophie’s choice,” because it is so difficult and so painful for anyone who is already integrated into and has developed a testimony of the truthfulness of the LDS Church. Some actually do choose the church and thereby a life of celibacy and service to the church in much the same manner as Catholic priests and nuns, but by far, the great majority choose the relationship and ultimately leave the church

voluntarily or via church discipline.

To my knowledge there is no substantive data on this, but I am privy to a survey done by Ron Schow, co-editor of *Peculiar People*, in 1995 at an Affirmation conference in Las Vegas. The survey sample included approximately 100 Mormons, the majority returned missionaries who identified themselves as gay and dealt with their activity in the church. They ranged in age from 22-66 with an aver-

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age age of 36, and came from fine church families. (6 of their fathers had been stake, mission or temple presidents, 8 of their mothers had been Relief Society presidents, 12 of their fathers had served as bishops or branch presidents, 10 more had a father who served as a counselor in a bishopric.) Their church attendance averaged 93% as children, 94% as teenagers, 94% as young adults, but currently was 14%. This, despite the fact that 65% reported they had counseled with an average of 3.3 church leaders, 40% had gone to LDS Social Services for therapy for an average of 9 sessions, and another 50% had gone for other counseling an average of 18 sessions. To suggest that these previously active, contributing church members have failed in their membership from a lack of sincere effort seems a bit disingenuous to me. These statistics simply corroborate the latest scientific research that suggests that sexual orientation is not readily amenable to change. The exodus of so many good, substantial

members of the church is unfortunate, both for the church and for the individual, and should be a cause for great concern among church leaders.

The conundrum faced by ecclesiastical leaders begins when their gay members choose a relationship. Most ecclesiastical leaders are aware of the intense feelings that have resulted in the choice of a relationship by their gay members. Most are truly empathetic and saddened that these circumstances have occurred, but are also loyal to the church and feel duty bound to adhere to church policy. In many cases they initiate a disciplinary council which usually results in expulsion of their gay members from the church. Anyone who has sat on such a council will testify that they are “gut-wrenchers,” clearly representing some of the most difficult decisions imaginable because of the intensity of the love by the gay member for the church and for their partner. Part of the difficulty for the church leader is their awareness that their gay members are valuable, that they may have been making a solid contribution to the ward, and that the expulsion from membership will likely mean the end of what some would identify as “a beautiful friendship.”

These realities are occurring in many wards and stakes in the church and are the source of much discomfort for the membership. Gays and lesbians and their families are torn between the reality of same sex attraction and their love for the church. Church leaders and members are torn between their love and empathy for their gay members who are forced to make this fateful “Sophie’s choice,” and their duty as leaders to implement church policy and remain loyal to the doctrine of the law of chastity in the church.

The following story will illustrate some of the complexities. This is a story about the LDS Church experience of a gay couple who

are friends of ours. Interestingly, and to add to the complexity, they met at Evergreen, an LDS Social Services supported program for gays and lesbians which stresses behavioral modification and/or celibacy. They have been in a committed, monogamous relationship for the past 6 years. During the first 3 1/2 years of their relationship, they were active and welcome members of their LDS ward in Salt Lake City. Their bishop was aware of their relationship, welcomed them in the ward and encouraged their participation in ward activities. One of the men was called as priesthood organist and played faithfully every Sunday for almost three years. They met with their bishop on a quarterly basis and received encouragement to be faithful and monogamous in their relationship and to continue to concentrate on improving their spirituality and to do the best they could to live Christ-like lives.

Approximately 3 years ago, they purchased a new home in a new stake in south Salt Lake and came under jurisdiction of a new bishop and a new stake president. The new stake president and bishop were not supportive of their relationship. Subsequently, disciplinary councils were called and both men were excommunicated from the church. Neither individual claims to be bitter, but neither one has attended church since their excommunications. Their former bishop was disappointed with the excommunications because the Spirit had told him when he had made it a matter of prayer, that they should not be disciplined, but should be encouraged to stay active in the ward and committed in their relationship to each other. He had read the bishop's handbook and was aware that the purpose of excommunication was to help individuals to repent of their sins, to change their feelings and behavior and to start anew. He was skeptical that sexual orientation was

changeable and felt that these two outstanding young men would be better served by allowing them activity and acceptance by their fellow ward members. In fact, he confided to our gay friends that he would "rather empty the Great Salt Lake with a teaspoon than to excommunicate them from the church." The bishop has been the subject of criticism by, to use the Richard Poll terminology, the "iron rod" Mormons, while at the same time, being supported and praised by the "liahona" Mormons.

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

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

In thinking about various options that might be employed to resolve these two basic conundrums there are some realities that need to be accepted and understood by everyone involved. These realities are:

- (1) The church will not amend the law of

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chastity, which basically proscribes sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage. Bolstered by tradition, scripture and prophetic pronouncement, church leaders will continue to stress the need for compliance to this fundamental law.

(2) Most of our gay and lesbian members and their families will continue to see their same sex attraction as a normal biological variation that is not often chosen and not readily amenable to change therapy. That position is certainly bolstered and supported by the three major professional organizations that deal with homosexuality, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the National Association of Social Workers, who issued a joint statement in their 1994 "friend of the court" brief to the United States Supreme Court that "research firmly and consistently rejects the widespread assumptions that sexual orientation is the same as sexual conduct, that sexual orientation is freely chosen and readily subject to alteration, and that homosexual or bisexual orientation is a mental disorder causing impairment of psychological or social functioning."

(3) The third reality is that current church policy as it relates to homosexuality has and will continue to produce significant pain, anguish, dissent and consternation among both its straight and gay members. That real-

ity is a bitter fruit that is unlikely to go away and will continue to plague the church until some accommodation is made.

(4) It is an irrational concept to believe that allowing gay members of the church who are in committed relationships to remain as members will somehow open the floodgates and usher in a new era where heterosexuals will begin to seek homosexual relationships. People who do not have same-sex attractions are not going to seek a same-sex relationship simply because the church begins to validate committed same-sex relationships.

(5) Church policy as it relates to homosexuality is evolving as our understanding of homosexuality has increased and it is vitally important that no one comes to the current debate under the assumption that policy is fixed and immutable. The very title of my presentation, "The Logical Next Step," implies there have been prior steps.

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

improved the church experience for our gay and lesbian members.

For the remainder of this talk, I will build on the LDS Church experience of my two gay friends to explain why I think the logical next step for the church in its efforts to minister more effectively to its gay members should be some form of sanctioning or affirming of committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. I will speculate about what might be the probable outcomes if bishops and other local ecclesiastical leaders were encouraged, rather than discouraged, to follow the example of my gay friends' former bishop. Let's face it: most bishops will continue to be uncomfortable in providing support for their gay members who have chosen a committed, monogamous relationship without some encouragement from the First Presidency and/or the General Authorities. Such encouragement would not necessitate a change in doctrine, but would require a change in the way the church implements policy as it relates to its "zero tolerance" for intimacy outside the bonds of marriage. It has the potential to provide some reward and incentive for gay members to get into a committed, monogamous relationship that would have some value, rather than no value, from church perspective. If gay members in committed relationships were able to feel that their relationship had some value and that it would enable them to remain members of the church, it is my belief that most of the animosity currently extant, would evaporate overnight. Other benefits to the church would flow naturally. Gay members would continue to be active in the church and would be able to make contributions which are sorely missed presently.

Just this past month I attended a funeral service for one of the great ladies from Family Fellowship, Carol Mensel. Her gay son,

Robert, is an extraordinarily talented musician who left the church shortly after discovering his same sex attraction. He is currently in a committed relationship in Portland, Oregon, where he was the music director for the St. Stephen's Episcopal Church for four years and is currently the conductor of the Portland Gay Men's Choir and the director of the Rose City Freedom Band. The family asked Robert to make the musical arrangements for her funeral. The music was perhaps the best I have ever heard at any funeral. Robert is a Mormon expatriate who, I am convinced, would still be an active, contributing member of the church if, as a church, we were able to place some value on the integrity of his relationship with his partner. He is just one example of thousands. It is inconceivable to me that the church doesn't feel his loss or even care, but many of our former members who are gay will so testify.

Does LDS policy of "zero tolerance" for sexual activity outside of the bonds of marriage necessitate that any or all relationships between its gay members have no value? Present policy makes no distinction between

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committed, monogamous same-sex relationships and promiscuity; no distinction between responsibility and sexual license. It occurs to me that placing no value on com-

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mitted, monogamous same-sex relationships is a root cause for much of the strained relationship between the church and its gay members, as well as their immediate and extended families. One way to place some value on a committed, monogamous same-sex relationship is to institute a policy that allows gay members who are in such a relationship to maintain their membership and activity in the church. Temple recommends and attendance would still be restricted to members who are in full compliance with the law of chastity. We have many members of the church who are unable to qualify for temple recommends for a variety of reasons. How many of our members really comply fully with the law of tithing or live the Word of Wisdom without deviation? Perhaps we would do well to de-emphasize the word "law" and emphasize the word "ideal." Most members who are unable to live these ideals completely, remain active, contributing members and benefit from their participation in the church. Ironically, the church did not oppose domestic partnership legislation in Hawaii, accepting such legislation as a quid pro quo to prevent same-sex marriage from becoming legal. Their lack of opposition is a tacit admission that committed, monogamous same-sex relationships have, perhaps reluctantly, some value already in their eyes.

The realities are that few of our gay members will be able to function in a heterosexual relationship or live in celibacy. A policy that recognizes this reality and stresses responsibil-

ity and fidelity in a committed relationship would create a "win-win" situation for the church, its gay members and their families. If such a policy were in place, it is my judgment that the great majority of gay members would stay in the church and the feelings of bitterness, hurt, anguish and hostility would simply dissipate. Our gay members would be better served by attending church and working on their spirituality than by being excommunicated or cut off from the church. The immediate and extended family members could take some pride in encouraging their gay children to, at a minimum, be in committed relationships similar to the encouragement given to their straight children. Such a position would disarm critics of the church who suggest that, too often, the emphasis on the family comes at the expense of homosexuals and those who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to find or live in the ideal family of a father, a mother and their children. Jonathan Rauch in an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 1994, aptly states that "divorce, illegitimacy and infidelity are the enemies of the family." He points out, however, that "reports and articles by "pro-family" groups devoted obsessive attention to homosexuality while virtually ignoring divorce."

A policy of inclusion of gay members who are in committed relationships would not undermine the family but would allow for the formation and recognition of some non-traditional families, but families nevertheless. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, our gay members are not anti-family but they fail to see "family values" as universal when their own relationships receive no value whatsoever. Gay and lesbian members would, for perhaps the first time, feel welcome and like they have a place in the church. The church could even become a place where gay members with an interest in things of the spirit could meet

and socialize rather than congregating in gay bars. The exodus of so many gay members and their families and friends from the church would cease, and the acrimonious feelings and expressions would certainly diminish. Many individuals, unable to give unqualified support to the church because of this issue would return to the fold and, once again, become its advocates.

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

In creating a “win-win” situation, the church should consider distancing itself from some of the radical elements, both within and outside the church, who continue to spew their homophobic rhetoric and refuse to treat our gay members and other homosexual individuals with the dignity and respect they deserve as human beings. Church leaders who also hold responsible civic positions on school boards and in the state legislature should be encouraged by the church to be sensitive to and aware of the needs of these individuals.

Young people discovering they have same-sex attraction need solid information about homosexuality, not condemnation. The church is viewed by some as abrogating their responsibility to these young members of the church when they oppose inclusion of information about homosexuality in the school curricula and provide no credible information about homosexuality in priesthood and young women lessons. To the credit of current church leadership, the families affiliated with Family Fellowship have seen a noticeable decline in condemnation of our gay family members from the pulpit in our general conferences over the past two years. We appreciate that greatly.

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

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

Those that have heard or read my previous presentation at Sunstone entitled, “Mugged by Reality” will understand why those lyrics have relevance to me. Millie and I have six children that we love very deeply. They all have strengths and weaknesses, but in my judgment they are all responsible individuals. Four of them identify as straight and

two of them as gay. I know not why two are gay, but all six are very similar except for their sexual interests. When people ask me what I want for my gay children, I usually respond as follows: I want them to have the same rights and opportunities as my straight children. I do not believe their sexual orientation is amenable to significant change and I would prefer that they not live alone. Intuitively, it seems to me that they have the same capacity to become involved in a moral relationship as my straight children. The morality of a relationship should be judged on the way the relationship is conducted, not on who is involved in the relationship. In my judgment, it would be immoral for my gay children to attempt a heterosexual relationship in an attempt to comply with church and societal norms. Heterosexual relationships are not “natural” for my gay children and homosexual relationships are not “natural” for my straight children. To insist that my gay children change or act as if they are heterosexual seems inappropriate to me. I have encouraged my gay children to seek out someone they can love and to share their life with that person and to be moral in that relationship. I would have preferred such relationships had the church’s blessing and am so sad and disappointed that it is not possible at present. I lament the fact that my gay children and other gay members of the church do not have a place to meet in the church, and, too often, feel they must congregate and socialize in less than optimal settings.

People are wont to criticize me for relying on my own intuition when it comes to the morality of homosexuality and suggest that I may be going against God. My own intuition also tells me, however, that our current understanding of what God said about homosexuality is incomplete. I’ve read the passages and am not prepared to accept the

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literal interpretation of what was written since it flies in the face of reason and our current understanding of homosexuality. God’s commandments are not arbitrary and should be able to stand on their own merits. When someone’s only defense for suggesting that a committed, monogamous same-sex relationship is immoral because they believe God has declared it so, they are on a “slippery slope.” As Peter Gomes points out in his wonderful new book, *The Good Book—Reading the Bible With Heart and Mind*, a literal interpretation of the Bible as “God’s word” has been used in the past to defend slavery, anti-semitism, and anti-feminism, as well as justification for hostility towards homosexuals. Fortunately, we rarely see literal biblical interpretation used today to justify racial, ethnic or gender prejudices. I’m hopeful that we will make similar strides in our understanding of homosexuality as we learn to read the Bible with heart and mind. A commitment to reason, as well as a commitment to things of the spirit, it seems to me, is indispensable when making judgments about what is just and unjust, moral and immoral. Discussion and dialogue are essential in revealing new possibilities for understanding morality. I offer this expression sincerely and with the fervent hope that it may precipitate more dialogue and, hopefully, contribute to the solution of these vexing conundrums.