



Not So Simple

The Careful Thoughts of a Religious, Gay Christian

Derek Sorensen

And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.

2 Nephi 28:21

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1 Introduction

While I was doing a master's degree at the University of Oxford, Terryl Givens came to Oxford to do research. During his time there, we young single adults had the extreme privilege of being taught by Terryl for our Wednesday-night institute class. This was a vital time of my life, one during which, largely because the topics in this set of essays but for many other things, I was in spiritual turmoil and needed a competent academic that could help me not only get on my feet spiritually, but relish a life of never-ending tension between faith and doubt, knowledge and ignorance, of never-ending cognitive dissonance. Since then I have grown to savor every second of cognitive dissonance and I make sure to keep the dissonance as wide as possible. I have had many beautiful experiences and come to many beautiful insights because of this. It has vastly improved my lifelong, Christian quest through the refiner's fire.

I bring Terryl up because, in our first institute lesson he said he wanted us to ask real questions. Questions that had weight. Question that had consequences in our lives. At the time I was not brave enough to ask these questions myself and am grateful to have had wonderful, supportive companions that provided a safe, intellectually free, and rigorous place to ask these questions. In the spirit of Terryl's request, in this set of personal essays I endeavour to ask real questions. Questions that have weight. That have consequences. Questions that contemplate death, suicide, sex, scripture, prophets. Questions that force us to think beyond our limits of comfort. I write these because these questions have an unending hold on me, and probably will forever unless I find good answers.

That said, I do not give what I believe to be concrete answers. These essays are meant to be expositions of my thoughts. They are meant to provoke more questions, ideally to draw me, you, and anyone else who reads this closer to God through good questions. Indeed it is the experience of my life that there is no better way to draw close to God than to ask the right questions.

These essays operate under a philosophy of knowledge in religion that my readers may or may not share with me, but one that I believe to be the most hon-

est way to pursue God and one that I believe Latter-day Saints follow whether they know it or not. That is that personal, lived experiences carries equal weight to scripture and words of prophets. That the pattern of revelation is personal to the degree that personal experience may be at odds with the words of scriptures and prophets. I see these as two facets of the beautiful diamond of truth. When our experience turns out to be at odds with things we think we know, we enter cognitive dissonance. This is, for me, where the rubber hits the road. It's where the fun, the learning, and the growth happens. I take a practical view on faith, religion, and God. That is, one that is based on experience and what I perceive to be reality.

Intuitively, this should make sense to my Latter-day Saint readers. After all, missionaries teach the passage from Moroni that one must *ask God* to reveal the right path. One can have the audacity to declare one religion true and another false only if it be revealed through God. However revelation, like science, is not a perfect process. It is not uncommon for people of a variety of religions to all claim contradictory revelation that their particular church is God's only church. The cognitive dissonance this has created has provided a wealth of beautiful insights to me.

Thus in these essays I try to square my own personal experience with the words of modern and ancient prophets regarding sex. This is where the fun begins. This is where things get exciting. This is where the work is at, and where the reward is too. This is where Heaven meets Earth in a chaotic, fiery mess. And this is precisely where we, as intellectually responsible, sincere Christians, need to spend our energies.

These essays are meant to be neither faith-promoting nor faith-degrading. Rather, they're meant to be thought-provoking. I make no efforts to spare the reader from ugly details or shield Christian sensibilities to discomfort. My intent is to say it as it is, as a Christian in an endless, beautiful, rewarding search for God. My goal is for you to read this and come out with more questions than you had when you started reading. This is not a comfortable process, but in my opinion it is precisely the Christian way. All in all, this is a brief glimpse

into my thoughts and life, and into the chaos and pain that I experience trying to reconcile my sexuality with my faith.

For my Christian readers who are not members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, these topics are still relevant, but the finer details may be specific to my church. In these essays, I refer to my church as the Restored Church, the Church, or the Restored Church of Christ. I refer to members of my church as Latter-day Saints. I also draw from the Book of Mormon, as well as statements by my church leaders. I reiterate, however, that the focus of this document is first and foremost Biblical and Christian, and most of the discussion is agnostic to any particular Christian denomination.

2 The Scriptures Are Clear, Right?

Many Christians with whom I interact don't think carefully about the intricacies and doctrinal implications of the plight of their gay brothers and sisters because they believe the scriptures to be crystal clear on the subject. In this short essay I would like to address the clarity, or lack thereof, that the Bible affords to the subject of same-sex relationships.

I should begin by saying that, while modern prophets have been clear on the subject, for my fellow members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, neither the Book of Mormon nor the Doctrine and Covenants make any definitive statements. Many point to *the Family: A Proclamation to the World* as the definitive source on the church's stance on gay marriage, but a careful reading of the document shows it to be (perhaps intentionally) vague on the subjects of both gender and sexuality. It only defines roles and protocols for *opposite-sex* couples, but does not explicitly condemn same-sex couples or even those with non-traditional gender expression or identity. Modern prophets have been clear on many things that have been later changed, so the words of modern prophets alone are not sufficient evidence to make any conclusive declarations regarding gay (or transgender) children of God.

This brings us to just the Bible, starting with the Old Testament. The most oft-cited scriptures condemning homosexuality are in Leviticus 18 and 20. Leviticus 18:22 says "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination," while Leviticus 20:13 says "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them." From a superficial reading, these are as clear as can be.

We must be wary of hastily generalizing scriptures to apply to everything we encounter in our modern world, in our case to what we know as same-sex relationships. Culture, intent of the scripture-writer, the diligence and preparation of the people, and common practices of the day have heavy weight in moral matters. As one example, since the word "abomination" is often used to describe

idolatry, some suggest these verses are not condemning homosexual behaviour in general, but only the cultic prostitution connected to pagan temples.

I don't want to get into all the criticisms related to these scriptures, but I do want to point something out that, for me, makes these scriptures a non issue. Any modern Christian who reads the Mosaic Law, found mostly in Leviticus, will see that Christianity does not espouse the vast majority of things written in Leviticus as modern, binding law. Christians see it as a preparatory law. One example among many is that we say nothing of ritual cleanliness or that one is unclean if he touches a woman on her period. As far as I am concerned, Leviticus is not a good place to pull out strong arguments regarding God's laws of morality in our day and age—not to mention that Jesus explicitly states that He *fulfilled* the Law of Moses, so we don't live that law as Christians.

The other canonical place to look in the Old Testament for a condemnation of homosexuality is in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In many strains of Christianity, including my own, we often read this story and interpret it that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for the sin of homosexuality. As before, there are critics of this interpretation, most of them referencing the extreme cultural value on hospitality, saying that Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed for wickedness, including inhospitality. (For an excellent article on the subject, click [here](#).) My summary of this argument is this: Does it strike anyone else that these people may have been immoral because they wanted to rape a stranger coming into their city? From our small glimpse into the story, would that have been even remotely moral if the angels were women and the men wanted to rape them? Of course not!

The canonical New Testament source for condemning same-sex relationships comes from Romans 1:18-32, which says in the New International Version (NIV),

In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

My arguments regarding this verse are similar for those from Leviticus. The first is that it is unclear that this can be applied to committed, same-sex marriages in a modern sense. Cultural context has strong influences on what is and is not moral, so they must be taken into account. It was a custom at the time for powerful men to publicly penetrate both men and women in a show of their status and virility. It was also custom for men to groom teenage boys, giving them money and education in exchange for sex. In Greece, extramarital, bisexual activity was the norm. Our concept of same-sex marriage is wholly distinct from these practices during Paul's time.

My second argument is that, again, there are things which Paul said in the New Testament that we don't give any heed to in our modern Christian world. The first, and most obvious, being divorce. Divorce is categorically forbidden in the New Testament, both by Paul and by Jesus Himself. Jesus calls it adultery to sleep with a divorced person, married or not. Paul also says that women should not speak and should keep their heads covered.

Interestingly enough, we in the Restored Church don't take Christ's admonition that marrying a divorced woman is committing adultery at all seriously, though we do discourage annulling sealings for those who get divorced. Adultery never enters the conversation. In fact, in the 19th century, Utah was a destination for women from other states who wanted a divorce because of the church's remarkably liberal policy on it!

If these three scriptures are the only scriptural basis we have about same-sex marriage, I find the evidence to be unconvincing. I'm reminded of the scriptural evidence from the Pearl of Great Price (Abraham 1:27) that we used to justify the ban on the priesthood to those of African descent. While it may have been convincing at the time, for those of us looking back now we see it as weak evidence, at best, to support the policy.

Arguably, it wasn't until the prophets started to ask the right questions that they got the answer we have today. Many make the case that the ban was lifted because of one particular scholar's work which affected President Kimball's view on the matter. As the story goes, when President Kimball went into the meeting

during which the revelation was received to remove the ban, he left on his desk a highly annotated copy of a scholar’s work which criticized the policy. I am perfectly happy to believe that the events surrounding the priesthood ban were revelation. For me, this highlights just how essential asking the *right questions* is to receiving revelation.

This principle comes through our Church teachings as receiving revelation while we pray, to know *what* to pray for. It is clear from scripture, such as Romans 8:26, and modern prophets, such as in President Nelson’s talk “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for our Lives,” that prayer is not meant to change the mind of God, but rather to change us. During the past year, after coming out, my prayers changed. I went through a period of darkness and depression in which I contemplated a solitary life, suicide, and many of the other topics I bring up in these essays. Through this process my prayers came to a point that I didn’t feel like I was making any progress. They didn’t feel like that enriching, empowering feeling that you get when you pray for the right thing.

It was then that my prayers slowly transformed from “help me bear this burden” to “help me ask the right questions, to gain the correct perspective through which I can see this problem more clearly.” Perspective can make all the difference. Small assumptions about the Gospel fundamentally change how we see people and things. And this process has slowly and surely transformed my view of God, of Jesus, of sex, of myself, and of eternity. For me, asking the right questions has made *all* the difference.

As I make it clear throughout this document, I do not believe that God intends for me to fight my sexuality my whole life. I believe that there is a purpose for my being gay and that I must discover it by asking the right questions. My impression is that there is some fundamental shift in perspective, one that only *adds* to what we have, that makes room for gay members of the Church. For, while in theory there should be room for gay people in our church, one does not have to dig deep into the experience of gay members to see that in practice, there is not.

One thing, however, is certain: We need powerful, new scripture. None

of the cannon sheds definitive light on the subject of same-sex relationships, and as I explore through these essays, the words of the prophets thus far are totally insufficient to give light to and alleviate the suffering of gay members of this Church. We need revelation, because people still kill themselves over this. We need divine guidance to bring our suffering gay brothers and sisters out of darkness, depression, bitterness, and suicide.

I would like to end this essay with a quote from President Boyd K. Packer, from his book *Eternal Love*, one which I believe to be true.

Romantic love ... is not only a part of life, but literally a dominating influence of it. It is deeply and significantly religious. There is no abundant life without it. Indeed, the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom is unobtainable in the absence of it.

Let us, together, ask the right questions.

3 Can I Be Changed?

The title of this essay is a question that has been asked by countless Christians through the ages. Some with addictions, some battling with outrageous tempers, or finding monogamy insufferably difficult. Some without a natural inclination toward spiritual things, or who find empathy to be difficult, and, of course, some who have struggled to marry their sexuality and/or gender identity with the teachings of our wonderful Church.

I want to start this essay by unambiguously declaring the answer to the title's question to be *yes*. God can and does change people in all sorts of ways, every day. Despite this glorious truth, most of us struggle to change and will do so for all our lives. God's motives, being higher than our own, aren't always clear, but I believe that when we don't find change that comes readily, it is often instructive to ask why. The real question here is not *if* we can be changed, but *why* in practice many sincere Christians are *not* changed.

Of course, I refer to the fact that gay Christians do not change to become straight. Conversion therapies are widely recognized to be ineffective and traumatizing. To date there is no medicine or hormone therapy that I know of that can change sexual orientation. There are people, most notably those on the *Mormons and gays* website, who persist in opposite-sex marriages as a response to revelation or a feeling of duty. I should say that I believe these relationships to be perfectly valid and important expressions of free will—particularly if they are inspired by God. I have no problem believing that God would instruct some people into opposite-sex (or mixed-orientation) marriages and also believe that he has inspired others to stay in same-sex relationships. Neither of these things conflict with my underlying belief that God guides and loves His children personally, and that these questions of sexuality and morality are yet totally unclear.

To recognize the complexity of this question, it is crucial that we understand that we understand relatively very little about sexuality as a biological phenomenon. Historically, human behavior hasn't fallen into easy categories of

homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual, as purely biological traits. There are some notable examples of ancient and modern cultures in which it has been mainstream for men to have sex with both genders. One of these is ancient Greece and Rome, who encouraged men in their armies to have intercourse with each other to foster a sense of brotherhood and unity. More common was the practice of *paiderastia*, where older men would have sex with boys who hadn't yet finished puberty. The relationship was symbiotic: the man enjoyed the boy's beauty, while the boy received money, education, or work in return. This practice was not exclusive to Greece; it is present in Afghan culture today. Most men in the United States would cringe at the thought of having sex with a teenage boy. Whether they feel the attraction but suppress it on moral grounds, or feel truly revolted by it, these examples show that culture can have a strong influence on a person's sexuality.

Scientific research has also shown links between sexuality and conditions in the womb, which is why the more older brothers a man has, the more likely he is to be gay. Some hypothesize that this is an evolutionary marker to increase family unity and decrease the likelihood that brothers kill each other over mates. Regardless of the cause, be it biological, social, cultural, or a complex mixture of these and other factors, we must recognize sexuality as something that is not moved on by choice. While a person's sexuality can be fluid, changing over time, it changes as it were on its own volition, independent of any desires, prayers, petitions, or therapy on the person's part.

These things are important to keep in mind, but my question is primarily spiritual. This question is, in my mind, of fundamental and absolute importance. If I can be changed, and God wants me to be changed, then it should be my life's work to accomplish the will of God. If, however, I can be changed, but God does *not* want me to be changed, then my life's work should, in conforming to His will, include learning all that I must learn from my experiences. Understanding the will of God with respect to my sexuality is crucial to being able to make any sort of plans. It completely changes the way I think about and interact with the world. As I have made clear before, I find the latter proposition to be

the only viable one, since sincere Christians are, in general, *not* changed to be heterosexual despite herculean efforts.

At this point, most people I know throw up their hands and give up—and with good reason. This is the point that we arrive at the frontier of the morally ambiguous unknown. *Why does God not change me, and what purpose could my sexuality have?* Nowhere, in scripture or the words of modern prophets, is there even a shred of a response to this question. The typical response I get here is that God works in mysterious ways, or that I need to suffer to understand other people's suffering, or that Jesus will help me bear this burden, and will fix me in the end. The Apostles will talk of no blessing being denied me if I'm faithful. I must be honest and say don't find any of these even remotely compelling.

The reason is because of death. People kill themselves over this. The people who believe the things I just mentioned often (not always, but also not infrequently) kill themselves. These people are faithful, good men and women. They are temple-going, scripture-reading, calling-fulfilling, prayer-saying, covenant-keeping members of the Church. If they had to fulfill some sort of faithfulness test so that Jesus would sustain them, they would have filled it. But this is the reality we live in: God does not change His gay children to be straight. Many of His gay children kill themselves in our church. *Why?*

There are no clear answers for this question, and if it doesn't cause some cognitive dissonance for you, you probably aren't facing this reality head on. In John 10:10, Jesus said "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." If something is causing a person to kill themselves, there is something seriously wrong. Jesus did *not* come into the world to give us commandments that would drive us to suicide.

I hesitate to influence your thinking on this subject, but as these are my essays after all, I will end with the following open-ended questions, which might be useful or might even be totally off track. What if I'm not *meant* to change or seek to be changed? What if God hears a gay man praying to be changed and says, "Son, I have a different role for you to play. I won't change you *because I don't have to.*" What if there are special roles in society, in the Church, in our

families that we can play, all while having sexually full relationships within a marriage? What if our role in society is different and complementary to that of straight couples? Regardless of whether these questions are on the right track or not, can you see how much richness and joy we could get from asking, and answering, the right questions?

4 Am I a Defect of Nature?

There is no reason to be shy with my wording, especially in a setting serious as this, so in this essay I attempt to address the question: Because of my sexual orientation, am I a defect of nature? Before digging in, let us first acknowledge that there is nothing inherently wrong with being a “defect of nature.” Admittedly, the word “defect” doesn’t have a nice ring to it, but in one way or another, we are all “defects” of some kind. I have scoliosis, for example. Others are born with blood disorders or are inherently prone to alcoholism or disease. These may be defects of nature, but they are at the core of what it means to be human.

I suppose that to talk about what is and isn’t a “defect of nature” we should know what it means to be normal. Each of us has in our minds some concept or ideal against which we measure anyone and determined if they are “normal” or not. Spines should be straight, minds should be resilient, eyes should see, stomachs should contain acid and digest, and lungs should efficiently capture oxygen. Since we are all defects in one way or another, it shouldn’t sting for me to call myself a defect because of my sexuality. After all, shouldn’t sex be for procreation, at least? Certainly, my body doesn’t naturally lend itself to using semen the way it “ought” to be used.

Even if we want to say that some bodily function is “normal” if it fulfills its purpose correctly, this isn’t straightforward. It all depends on *how useful* a certain trait is or how much it *impedes* us if we have it, given our current circumstances and societal demands. For example, a child with attention deficit disorder will get medication in order to focus, because he can’t fit easily into society if he can’t learn to read. We explicitly consider it to be a disorder now, but it would not be hard to imagine that if we lived in times where physical labor was paramount, the skinny boy who loved books and thinking would have the disorder, while the one with attention deficit would be useful, and thus “normal.” It seems to me that whatever gives us an advantage to performing well in our current society and world is what is normal, and that which impedes

us is a disorder. This concept of “normal” seems inherently evolutionary to me.

Even more, it’s unclear what to do with defects. As I mentioned, my spine isn’t straight, so I try to keep my back strong. If I had bad eyes, I would want glasses. If I have a mental disorder, I should try to get it resolved. In each of these, the reason that I should do anything at all is that it makes me more effective and better suited for the world in which I live. It’s a practical matter. However, some defects help us in our world. Indeed, the main principle of evolution is that good defects drive progress!

If I am a defect of nature, because of my sexuality, my life gets considerably more interesting. The main questions become: Should I remedy this? Should I suppress it? Is it useful in some way? Does it complement me spiritually? Is this a weakness, so that I can see Jesus’ strength like Moroni (Moroni 10:32) and Paul (2 Cor. 12:9) say? If it is a weakness, is this something that God is patient with and I should recognize it? Would God rather I kill myself than give in to this weakness? Or is this a strength? Is this a “good” defect that I should embrace?

Within the Church we often think of being gay as unnatural, in particular from the standpoint of the Plan of Salvation. I am happy believing either way. If it is unnatural, I need to find a way to live happily, not kill myself, and come to Jesus, recognizing that weaknesses are a part of life. But if it’s *not* unnatural, we have all kinds of questions to answer, and that’s really exciting!

If I am honest, I find it substantially more interesting, productive, and healthy to ask how I can view, express, live with, and come to Jesus in view of my sexuality in a positive way. The whole point of community within Christianity is that we complement each other with both our strengths and our weaknesses. Our defects, together, weave a beautiful tapestry of humanity and strength. Surely—*surely*—my sexuality functions in a far more important role than as something I should suppress and learn to lean on Jesus in order to not kill myself. *Surely*, just as Zion is inherently made up of people with complementary strengths, weaknesses, and characteristics, Zion can make room for gay children of God who wish to come to Jesus and also face the reality that relationships,

sex, and romance are an inherently central part of life. In Zion, is there not a place for everyone to contribute, and to thrive? Is there not a place for *me* in Zion?

I believe whole-heartedly that we as Christians are missing out on wonderful, sincere, powerful, competent souls in our tapestry of Zion because we cannot make room for the reality that we each have fundamental, inherent needs for companionship and closeness; that sex is a deep and beautiful expression of humanity that also constitutes a deep need; and that there are people who would like to be in Zion but are compelled to leave because the clash between these needs and their religious belief system will drive them to suicide. I *cannot* believe that this is the Zion that God wishes for us, His children.

5 When Is Sex Moral?

There is only one piece of rhetoric that I find compelling as a purpose for sex that, in a non-arbitrary fashion, prohibits sexual relationships between members of the same sex. That is that sex is only for procreation, and nothing else. A good friend paraphrased some of a Catholic theologian's work as follows: "One Catholic scholar points out that the [Catholic] church's ban on homosexuality is just an extension of its ban on birth control ... The idea is that the Catholic church is against all non-reproductive forms of sex. Interestingly, the scholar went on to argue that because protestant religious groups allow birth control, their views on homosexuality derive from discrimination. If sex for mere pleasure is allowed, then it should not make a difference who that sex is with. If the operative difference is marriage, then gays should simply be allowed to marry."

The point this scholar was making, one that I happen to agree with, is that any purpose that you give to sex other than procreation will exclude, in an arbitrary fashion, same-sex relationships. I think most people will agree with me that procreation is *not* the only purpose of sex. If it were, sex would be inappropriate after menopause, when a woman is not ovulating, or for infertile couples.

Those in marriages for which sex plays its role will tell you that, aside from procreation, there is a uniting and binding effect of sex on the relationship. This is alluded to in Genesis, when it says that "they shall be one flesh." One in flesh, in purpose, in perfect unity. As Latter-day Saints, we see our Heavenly Parents as perfectly united, in addition to the perfect unity of the Godhead. Unity is a theme throughout the scriptures—unity with God, with our families, as Zion, with Jesus. In many ways the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be seen as an endless journey for unity between us and others.

As far as I can tell, the Church doesn't make strong statements about the role of sex in marriage. There isn't a standard policy on birth control, either for or against it, but in my experience birth control is ubiquitously accepted within the church as appropriate. The reason that most people will cite is that

the purpose of sex is two-fold. Indeed, Elder Holland describes in his talk, “On Souls, Symbols and Sacraments” how sexual intercourse constitutes a binding of souls and is therefore a sacrament by itself, not including its role of procreation. Interestingly enough, however, women on insurance plans paid for by the Church do not get coverage for birth control.

Another claim that I have heard often is that, since sex is a sacrament according to Elder Holland, then the purpose of sex in terms of unifying a couple isn’t just physical and emotional, but spiritual. And since righteous couples can be married for eternity, this makes sex beautiful and important for its own sake. In this case, since homosexual couples cannot get sealed, this seems to hold weight, and I am almost convinced by it. The problem here is that, if it were for binding the souls, sex would not be appropriate outside of a *covenant* (*i.e.*, temple) marriage. Nor would no-fault divorce be ever appropriate. Yet, sex is considered appropriate inside civil marriages, and divorce is becoming more common and accepted. One can be divorced and remarried without any violations of chastity as understood within the Church. As I see it, the only way to be logically consistent and also say that sex is for binding souls together eternally is to require that couples only have sex if they are married by covenant—that is, by the Church and not necessarily the state.¹

As I am sure the Latter-day Saints reading this will see, sex within the church is branded neither as a procreative-only nor covenant-marriage-only. Sex is good inside a legal, opposite-sex marriage (regardless of orientation), and has two purposes: the first is procreation, the second is unity. While it may not be taught over the pulpit or doctrinally sound, this is certainly the prevailing attitude toward sex.

Prominent sex therapists in the church, including Jennifer Finlayson-Fife and Anthony Hughes, recognize the absolutely integral role that sex plays in

¹I should mention here that, even if Catholics changed their stance say that sex is good for binding souls and for children, they would be more logically consistent than we are, as they do not recognize civil marriages as a valid marriage. A Catholic should be married by the Church before having intercourse.

marriages. In his book *You, Me, and We* Dr. Hughes relates stories of how he counsels couples in healthy sex lives, in particular combating the pervasive view that sex is “only for the man” and that women are not inherently sexual beings as men are. Both of these sex therapists recognize that sex is a beautiful, innate desire, which is Godlike and exalting. In a marriage, it is something that should be embraced, and we should rid ourselves of any shame surrounding it.

Within my generation, the view that sex is beautiful, something to be cherished and looked forward to rather than be ashamed about, is catching on. More and more women recognize that they are sexual beings just like men, and I sincerely believe this to be a good direction for our Church culture to move into. Sex *is* beautiful, and we do ourselves a massive disservice when we surround discussions on sex, pornography, masturbation, *etc.* with shame and guilt. My impression is that this cultural shift is in part from authors like Finlayson-Fife and Hughes, but it also has come as we have seen how truly unhelpful analogies like “You’re like a piece of gum—who wants to chew gum that’s already been used before?” are, especially to victims of sexual assault and rape.

To me it is self-evident that sex should be celebrated and cherished, and that it should be used as a unifying force in marriage. It should be seen as godlike and exalting. And most of all, analogies which carry shame on those who commit sexual sin are not helpful, nor Christian.

The question is, then, if you buy into the idea that sex is *not* purely for procreation, why is it the case that sex is moral for those in opposite-sex marriages, but immoral for same-sex couples in a committed, faithful, and legally binding marriage (or union)? Why are sexual urges beautiful, righteous, godlike, and exalting for someone attracted to the opposite sex but devilish, perverted, and inherently sinful for those attracted to the same sex? Indeed, why is it morally permissible for someone attracted to the same sex to betray that innate desire and have sex with someone of the opposite sex, when that same thing is wholly immoral for a person attracted to the opposite sex?

Are my sexual urges really very different from your own? Do you *really* think that, within the confines of a faithful, committed marriage (or union), it is more

moral for me to go against my sexual urges and engage in sexual relations with someone of the opposite sex than for you to do the same?

The more I think about it, the more I see logical inconsistencies in our view of sex, and the more self-evident it becomes that for the *very reason* that I am attracted to men, it is far more honest, authentic, integral, and moral for me to have sexual relations with a man within a committed marriage than it is for me to do so with a woman. To do otherwise would be inauthentic, unfair, and genuinely dishonest. My experience in Christianity has taught me that, by and large, the closer one gets to God, the more that person can live truly authentically. And most of the time, an interpretation of Christianity that encourages the opposite is flawed.

6 Will I Be Resurrected Gay?

This question had not really crossed until after I came out on Facebook in February 2018. After making the post, I became painfully aware that all my friends and acquaintances who'd seen my post now knew of a deeply personal, incessant, dark struggle which I had to face every day. I was grateful to receive overwhelming support from my friends and family in the whole thing, which was awesome and truly something without which I would probably have been debilitated.

However, along with the support came a difficult burden: Before coming out, I could think on this issue and then put it away, hiding it from the faces of all of my friends and family, to revisit it later. It didn't seriously disrupt my personal life, my personal relationships, even my religious life. I knew social norms, I knew how I ought to talk and behave with women, and I knew easy and comfortable ways to bond platonically with men. I could maintain norms by asking women out periodically and being open to talking about my (heterosexual) love life.

After coming out, everyone I loved and spent time with knew of this battle. It was out in the open in such a way that I simply could not put the issue away. It dominated my thoughts. It made its way into everything and would not leave me alone for even a minute. It was difficult to focus at work. It affected the way I interacted with people, knowing that they knew this about me and not wanting to do anything that would make them uncomfortable. It put a slight strain on my relationships with men, in particular, because I didn't want to give the wrong signal to anyone.

It also dominated my thoughts because I was now forced, every minute of every day, to square my lifestyle and my future plans with this new, vivid reality for me. The change was abrupt, and difficult. I contemplated my activity in the Church, my desire to be faithful to God, my desire to fulfill my family's expectations of me, my desire for children, for affection, for family. Aside from my deeply rooted Christian faith, I had to square that my relationships

weren't going to be mainstream, that any family I constructed—even if I did with a woman—would have to be outside the normal bounds of procreative relationships and natural inclinations.

I also had to square rhetoric that I was hearing about marriage, sex, and relationships—how it's innately beautiful, something God wants for His children, how “there is no abundant life without [romantic love]” (Packer, *Eternal Love*)—with my personal experience. My personal experience has deeply influenced my thinking on this topic, as I think it should shape everything an honest Christian should see in the Gospel, with God, and with Jesus.

The thing that weighed most heavily on me was that, not matter where I was going forward, there would be intense pain. If I decided to not compromise my current Spiritual, religious Christian world-view then I was almost certainly doomed to a life of solitude, as I realized early on that a marriage with a woman would never be right. I spent several weeks contemplating such a future. At times, it sounded fun. I found a future of total financial and personal freedom to be empowering and somewhat exciting. I could have beautiful properties, sponsor scholarships, and contribute time, energy, and money to meaningful causes. I could sponsor visas for lower-class immigrants and dedicate my life to my students and to extra-familiar people. Such a life certainly has immense potential to free a person to dedicate themselves entirely to others, since it is not difficult to earn enough money to support a single person.

Despite this exciting vision, I quickly dropped into a deep depression, one that to this day I still feel. In my mid-twenties, I have plenty of people in a similar stage of life with whom I could relate and develop rich, beautiful relationships. However, I knew that in my mid-forties, mid-fifties, mid-sixties, these people would no longer abound. I would be a 3rd, 5th, 7th wheel for the rest of my life, poor “Uncle Derek” who never married and has to come to *our* family things because he has nowhere else to go.

In contemplating this reality, and in the depths of depression, I realized that such a reality could be rich, and beautiful, and wonderfully fulfilling—though admittedly, tragic in its own way. That life was not the thing that had me

depressed. It was the fact that I was *planning* on such a life. That I was purposefully denying myself of physical and emotional intimacy because nearly all of my peers would eventually move on, abandoning our friendship, for something both physically and emotionally more intimate. It was the consequence of *planning* for that reality, never aspiring or even hoping for a deeply intimate partner with whom I could, forever, share my deepest corners. These thoughts, among many others, led me to darker places than I have ever been.

For the first time in my life, I seriously considered including suicide into my plans. At twenty-five years old, I didn't feel a need to take my own life. Instead, the persistent thought plagued me: *I think that when I'm about fifty years old, I'll be ready to call it a day. I could kill myself then and have had a good life.*

This line of thinking persisted in my plans for my future until I had a sudden realization. Through all of this reasoning, I had been operating on an important assumption: *In my life to come, I will not be gay.* That day the thought struck me: *What if I die, and nothing has changed? What if I'm even resurrected gay?*

For non-Latter-day Saint readers, my church teaches that, at death, one's spirit joins a *spirit world*, where we all await judgment. This spirit world will be very similar to the one in which we currently live, the main difference being the absence of physical bodies. With this in mind, the question becomes two.

(1) Is there sex in the afterlife? If so, then (2) Will I be gay after I die?

I should say that at the moment this thought entered my mind, the feeling I had was that nothing would change if I were to die. Indeed, that death would do nothing for this more fundamental crisis I was facing and thus could never be the answer. God had a different place for me to get to, a place where I could embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ and not hate the fact that I exist as I do.

For me, my serious thoughts of suicide mostly ended there. I have had rash moments of excruciating pain since then, where I feared for my life and what I would do, but after that moment I have operated under the assumption that death would change nothing, that indeed any sexual experience I had in the afterlife would be this way.

I consider this revelation to me. It may not be the case that I will actually be

resurrected gay or that we will even experience sex after this life, but it is plain to me that I ought to assume that nothing will change by death and that shift in viewpoint has been a blessing to my life. Indeed, it has brightened my life substantially. However, this does nothing for the actual question at hand. *Are* we resurrected with sexuality? If so, are gay people “fixed?” If we’re resurrected with gender, are trans people “fixed?”

These are absolutely critical questions to answer, for two reasons. If indeed gender and sexuality are enduring characteristics, it could help people like me shift in mindset *away* from considering suicide knowing that death would change nothing. Equally important, however, is this: If I will be resurrected gay, then my sexuality is an enduring, eternal characteristic. What does that imply about the things that God wants for me? About the lifestyle He would have me have? Surely sex is good—should I not nurture this part of me?

If for nothing else, so that I don’t kill myself?

7 Martyrs

Not long after coming out on Facebook, I started on a difficult journey. There was quite a bit of emotional backlash from the sudden change from being able to tentatively deal with the conflict between church and sex to being faced with all sorts of fundamentally difficult and important decisions, all day, every day, and within every relationship. As I began to cope with these new changes, I stabilized but could tell that what I was doing would not be sustainable. As I mentioned in the sixth essay about resurrection, I got the sense that I was on the path toward suicide.

Around this time (in April) I encountered a book entitled *In Quiet Desperation*, coauthored by Ty Mansfield and Fred and Marilyn Matis. Before talking about the contents of the book, I want to emphasize my desire to be respectful, non-judgmental, and as non-invasive as possible to the deeply personal and excruciatingly painful experiences presented in this book. I know that, having only read the accounts in this book, I don't know even close to the full story. However, I did gain some insights I would like to share, and I hope that you will see my intentions as honest and respectful.

I will admit that I only read the first half of the book, which is an account by Fred and Marilyn Matis about their son Stuart, a friend of his, and some other family members who were all grappling with their homosexuality during the infamous Proposition 8 crisis in California. I cannot recommend reading this account highly enough, though I will warn any prospective reader that it may take you into dark places.

At least, that's what it did for me. The account is heavy. It describes Stuart's struggle, the pain brought from a dogmatic community viciously opposing same-sex marriage in what they saw as a moral invasion by a debaucherous, libertine, and godless portion of society. In our journey as a society and a church since those times, we have discovered that there are many devoted, wonderful gay people with a strong moral foundation. At the time, this cultural misunderstanding caused tremendous pain.

Stuart was uncompromising in his dedication to God, to his covenants, and to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The impression of him that I got from reading this book reminded me of my most faithful, dedicated, disciplined, and Christlike friends. If I had known Stuart, I am certain that I would have looked up to him in many ways.

This is where I may be crossing the line, and I apologize to anyone who knew Stuart intimately that this might offend or seem to be way off the mark. I don't want to speculate about someone else's life so liberally. But what was clear to me after reading the account was that Stuart's faithfulness to Jesus did *not*, in the end, ease the agony that he suffered while trying to keep his covenants. In fact, the pain became so intense that he chose to end his own life to be, "for the first time in 20 years, free from my pains."

This story sent me in a downward spiral, into the darkest places that I have ever been. I could see many parallels between my life and Stuart's, between my and Stuart's attitudes toward God, the Church, and Jesus. As I read the story, in utter terror I realized that the methods I was using to cope, the attitudes I was adopting, that would keep my faith and worship habits delightfully intact, would lead me to the same fate of suicide. Thanks to this story, I recognized that the default recommendation of the Church to "be faithful, and everything will be fine" would not work, was not helpful, and that everything would *not* just be fine. In other words, that Jesus would *not* ease this pain for me, nor help me bear it.

As a Christian, I do believe that Jesus "descended below all things." I absolutely believe the words of Alma,

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. (Alma 7:12)

I *do* believe, unequivocally, that He *could* remove my pain, that He *could* support

me in this. Indeed I can enthusiastically echo the words of Alma to his son in the Book of Mormon that

I have been supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and in all manner of afflictions; yea, God has delivered me from prison, and from bonds, and from death; yea, and I do put my trust in him, and he will still deliver me. (Alma 36:27)

What I was observing at that time was that, even though Jesus could uphold me to keep my covenants and be faithful in a celibate life, that He would not do so. This lead me to the following dilemma, something that I would encourage each of you to ponder on seriously. It is the following: If a commandment pushes me toward suicide, should I break the commandment or die for my faithfulness to God?

Most people's first reaction to this (the reaction I was met with by all of my friends and family when I put it in this context) was an unequivocal *you should not kill yourself*. I can see the aversion to suicide, but this question has real weight, because it can be thought of in a different way that makes it a nontrivial question to answer.

Christianity glorifies its martyrs, and in my opinion rightly so. Important, meaningful global movements do *not* usually happen without incredible people whose conviction is so strong that they will give their lives entirely, in life or death, to this cause. It is to those martyrs that we can thank a portion of the proliferation of Christianity, the establishment of the Restored Church of Christ, the translation of the Bible for the common person, and Protestant movements. People who have the noble conviction to high ideals so strongly that it carries them past death are, in my mind, some of the most deserving of our respect and admiration in this world.

That said, glorifying martyrs has its drawbacks, and because of these many people categorically reject anything that may involve martyrdom. Indeed, it is this glorification that fuels many terrorist bombings in our world today. Are they not martyrs, dying for a cause for which their conviction is all-consuming?

In the same sense then, if I drive myself to suicide because of a commandment from God, am I a martyr to those ideals?

Most people, when they hear this, can sense that something is not right, and reject this proposition. It is different to walk bravely into opposition that has the power to kill you, rather than to drive yourself into darkness. God wants us to live, to experience the good from the evil, so that we can learn. Jesus died so that our weaknesses would not have a hold on us. And He came that we might *live*, and do so more abundantly. (John 10:10)

Indeed the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about life, supporting challenges, and being victorious over our weaknesses. Anyone who seriously reads and studies the life of Christ, His message, and the writings of other messengers and prophets realize that commandments are there for us, to help us grow, to keep us safe, to give us *life*. Of course, it's a hell of a road, and it's not always sunshine and daisies, but it is not only livable but a joyful road to those who live it right. Because of Jesus, life is *all about* not worrying about mistakes, because they've been paid for. We can freely make mistakes, without worrying, on our road to eternal progress. So surely, *surely*, we should not avoid mistakes so ardently that we want to kill ourselves. In my estimation, that is extreme and missing the mark.

I think this principle can be seen in Jesus' Parable of the Talents. In this parable, the ones who are willing to take the risks to multiply the money they started with are those that get the reward. The one who is too afraid to act because he might lose the money gets no reward. Jesus came into the world *not to condemn the world*, but to save the world, and thereby has freed us from the terror of making irreversible mistakes. We should move forward, joyfully and courageously, seeking to progress, being willing to make mistakes as we learn, and praising the name of Jesus for making that road possible.

Furthermore, murder is surely more immoral than sexual sin. We can reasonably prioritize and accept the sexual sin of committed same-sex relationships (if this is indeed a sin) in place of suicide from a simple, moral standpoint and be totally justified within the Christian framework as it is currently understood

in the Restored Church.

This brings us to a fascinating place. It is clear that, for gay people, chastity can drive us to suicide. That was the experience of those in Fred and Marilyn Matis's account, and indeed it is my experience. If suicide is, indeed, not the path that Jesus and God would have us take (as I do most fervently believe), then what is? If homosexual relationships were truly immoral, would Jesus truly put us in a place where we have to choose between it and death? Where we are genuinely compelled to be immoral to avoid dying?

That doesn't sit right with me, and is one of the core reasons for which I have no problem believing gay relationships to be moral, and am unconvinced that we are anywhere close to having the answers that God would have us have right now. What seems to me to be the only logical conclusion from these facts is that we, as a church, and as leaders, are clearly not asking the right questions. This has changed my prayers fundamentally from asking what I should do within my current paradigm of gospel truth to asking the Lord to shift my gospel paradigm to lead me to a place where I can *ask* the right questions. I challenge each of my readers to do the same.

8 Life is Messy

I find it so fascinating that people have rich spiritual experiences in a variety of religious traditions and belief systems. It's not uncommon for someone to use language similar to what we hear in our fast and testimony meetings about their knowledge gained from the Holy Ghost, or from God, about the veracity of a certain religious sect. Instead of finding that unnerving, I find that beautiful and it signifies a great spiritual truth to me: That truth is polyphonic, as God tells different things to different people.

From that phenomenon I deduce that different people are ready for different things at different times, and that spiritual truth is not so straightforward as we are inclined to believe within the Church. Especially within our church, which we believe to be the single, true, and living church. I also believe that revelation is heavily influenced by a person's worldview, fundamental beliefs, desires, and assumptions. Certainly revelation for me is constantly influenced by my own input, which is one of the reasons that I keep emphasizing the need for a *correct* spiritual and Christian paradigm to receive revelation about same-sex relationships.

Among this mix of experiences and revelations that people have are many Christians which see no problem with same-sex relationships. I know people who have felt inspired to leave the church over same-sex relationships, whose bishops counselled them that it was okay to leave and that God didn't need them in the church, who have felt inspired to be active within the church but not separate from their partners, and of course those who have chosen celibacy or who have chosen divorce in order to reactivate. I have no problem believing that any of these instructions could have come to someone through legitimate revelation, depending on their place in life and their needs.

In a broader sense, though, there are many people who have, by revelation, felt to leave our church. There are people who have no spiritual experiences whatsoever and therefore leave. There are people who have felt inspired that Jesus is not the Son of God, people who have converted from our faith to other

faiths, people who have felt inspired that Islam is the only true religion. There are Christians from many faiths who feel called to missions for their church, many of them feeling called to abandon or modify careers to minister as clergy within their own churches. What is obvious to me is that God is leading His children in many different directions and, as a result, we have an extraordinarily rich religious landscape. Furthermore, since God is guiding each of these people in their own ways, it is absolutely essential that we commune with each other across religious and sectarian boundaries to learn from each other, and to absorb the goodness and truth that God has revealed to His children outside of our own faith.

As I have alluded to in other essays, I do not believe that a same-sex relationship is inherently immoral. My reasons for believing this are deep and complex, most of them outlined in these essays, and they are based on what I believe to be revelation. I recognize that other people believe differently, and that these people also base their belief on revelation. I recognize that many people felt like they had to abandon same-sex relationships to come back to Christ. While I could never know, and knowing that it is probably different for every person, from my paradigm it seems possible that one could feel the need to repent, not because they were doing something immoral, but because they were acting against believed moral principles. An essential part of Christian life is to act on what one believes.

This kaleidoscope of spiritual experiences makes our world very messy. While doctrine in the Restored Church teaches about the important role of prophets, it also teaches that our prophets are not the *only* source of goodness and truth. We do not have a monopoly on truth *or* on goodness, and we must learn from the experiences that each of us has with God to understand the much broader mission and perspective that He has for His children. It is because of this that I see universalism as the only viable way to view Christianity. This makes me rejoice in the sacrifice of Jesus, in the freedom that He has given me to not be afraid to make mistakes as I muddle through this messy moral journey, which is full of questions and ambiguities. What an experience! What a life! What

an opportunity to learn to rely on God, when there are not answers or defined paths for me!

One interesting conclusion from this line of thinking is that it is possible for someone else to be following the inspiration of God, and also be living in direct contradiction to your core beliefs about God and Jesus. Our role is not to judge others, but to recognize ourselves as imperfect seekers of a universal knowledge and to truly love others, regardless of any differences that exist between us. That means loving, caring for, spending time with, praying for, and supporting your gay and trans brothers and sisters. It means taking their suicidal thoughts seriously, it means listening to them, it means giving them a space to exercise their agency freely as they give you the same. It means exercising true religion with *all* of our brothers and sisters.

I believe that overcoming these differences, many induced by different revelation, is vastly more important than any specific commandment. Learning to achieve unity with diversity, to love unconditionally, is the greatest challenge a Christian faces in his lifetime. A lifelong challenge, indeed. God has many different paths for His children which simultaneously lead to Him and which may not involve membership or activity in our church. It is essential that we separate ourselves from a Pharisaical fixation on the law and learn to see God's broader purpose with His children.

One of the great challenges of Christianity is to find a way to combine the perfect, beautiful, ethereal principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a messy, imperfect, nuanced, difficult world. This intersection between heaven and earth, that place in which we are supposed to live, feels to me chaotic and nebulous. But the chaos is interesting, and exciting. I am grateful for this messiness, because life is so much the richer for it!

9 Mainstream Thinking

In March of 2016, Elder Holland led a face-to-face devotional for the young single adults of the church, in which most of his time was devoted to answering questions from participants and other young single adults within the church. One of the questions asked him to give thoughts about homosexual members of our church. While his answers were wonderful and insightful for the rest of the devotional, I must disagree with a portion of his response, in which he instructed the audience to not make an “arbitrary distinction” between expecting gay members of the church to live the law of chastity and expecting the same of straight, older, single members. His reasoning for this was that it is “the same law of chastity.” And I understand—commandments are for all of God’s children. Just because it’s harder for one person to live a given commandment than another does not make that person exempt from anything. In that sense, deciding such an exemption is arbitrary, in line with his response.

However, I do want to make one thing clear. Living the law of chastity, as explained currently within the church, is *not* the same experience for a straight, older single person as it is for a gay person. There are many ways to illustrate this difference, but I will be concise: It’s all about hope. Straight, unmarried members of our church hope longingly for a marital relationship and many pray for it constantly. On the other hand, a gay member of the Church committed to living the law of chastity as we understand it lives nervously, praying that *he doesn’t* fall in love, that he never finds someone that would convince him to engage in such a relationship. That person lives, actively trying to isolate himself from others, and from any truly fulfilling romantic relationship.

The difference here is not simply that one has a harder time than another. People who actively live without any intentions of romance—cutting themselves off from others—engage in behavior so mentally unhealthy that it drives them to suicide. I have no problem believing that someone can live a full, healthy, life and never get married. If it were the case that I ended up single for the rest of my life, but I had hope the whole time in the possibility of marriage, I

could live a full, rich life. The key difference is that of hope, of believing that something so innate to you is inherently evil. Since life is on the line here, I submit that the difference between gay and straight members of the Church living chastity is *not* arbitrary. I am happy to live the law of chastity, in the sense of abstinence before marriage, if I can live in hope of potential fulfillment. I could do as Elder Holland suggests, but may not survive it if my intention is to cut off all romance completely.

When I bring this up with others, the most common response I get is that “the Atonement will take care of it.” The prevailing idea is that I should just be strong, hold on, and endure faithfully. If I can do it, I will inherit amazing blessings. Many people see this as a “condition” or a “trial.” An acquaintance of mine recently spoke to a member of the Twelve about the family prospects of gay members of the church, who told him that he imagines that those who endure will be blessed gloriously after death.

Unfortunately, this doesn’t help very much. I have never been a Christian who obeys in hopes for a better world after this one—indeed I can sympathize with those who criticize Christianity for making people focus on a different world and thus suffering in complacency. I do not believe that Christianity should be lived out of a hope for a better world. My experience in Christianity is that it brings fullness, richness, beauty into your life *as you live it*.

Furthermore, in my experience pain is not easier to endure because of some hope for a different world. It reminds me of a conversation I had with a member on my mission to Mexico who had just lost her husband. At loss for words, I tried to comfort her with something like, “Well, you’ll see him again, right? You were sealed.” Her response was, paraphrasing, “Yes, but that doesn’t help the pain now.” In the case of gay members of our church, a similar “wait until you die” does not help abate the pain that can cause some to kill themselves.

As I have mentioned before, I find President Packer’s view on the central, religious role of romantic love to be compelling. Most people I know feel the same way. It has not been uncommon in my past to hear members of the Church reason that it would be too hard to be gay and follow God’s plan, and since

God has clearly commanded against gay marriage and He would not make us live through more than we can bear, He must never make His children gay.

The main difficulty here is that people *are gay*—people, like me, who never chose it, but who are nevertheless gay. Considering this, President Packer’s thoughts on romantic love, and the church’s current stance on homosexual relationships, we are only really left with the reality that I cannot hope for an abundant life now; if I want one, I must wait for death. On the other hand, as I have written in other essays and seen in myself, this issue does lead people to death. Is this not more than we can bear? Even if you disagree with my conclusions, you must see that there is tension here. The Atonement doesn’t fix it for some people. Which of these cited statements or ideas was false?

The unfortunate reality is that many people within the church treat this issue as finished, and they speak about it in a very matter-of-fact way. In my experience, people who view this issue in such black-and-white terms have not had to carefully consider the issue. That people tend to come around when they have a close family member who comes out, and they are forced to grapple with the issues head on, is telling on the evidences that pile up when one thinks carefully. I implore any readers of this essay to avoid this matter-of-fact attitude towards this issue. The purpose of these essays is precisely to dispel this kind of thinking, and show that this issue is much more complex and far-reaching than we would often like to face.

Life is messy, and it doesn’t always square with what we read, think, and believe from the scriptures. I see this as a great source of richness, beauty, and growth. This intersection between heaven and earth can be chaotic. It’s hard to deal with, hard to square, hard to understand. As Elder Maxwell put it in his 2004 Ensign article “These Are Your Days” (emphasis added),

You can have clear faith in the ultimate outcomes at the end of the trail but still find vexing uncertainties in the steps immediately ahead. The Lord knows the end from the beginning and everything in between. *You, however, function in the muddled, mortal middle.*