

Some Gospel Perspectives on Same-Gender Attraction

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I feel very humble and inadequate to serve as your keynote speaker. I am not an expert on either the biological or psychosocial aspects of same-gender attraction, though I am somewhat familiar with both. Much of what I have to say will no

doubt be dismissed by aggressive members of the gay and lesbian movement and their supporters. That doesn't bother me; I neither expect their approval nor am I dismayed by lack of it.

I speak as a committed Christian, who as a concerned citizen and Church leader, is deeply troubled by the declining morality, decreasing commitment to integrity and unhealthy emphasis on the gratification of personal desires which increasingly characterize our society. The society of this and other nations is, I fear, progressing rapidly towards that state so aptly expressed by Alexander Pope, the 18th Century English poet and satirist:

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

I make no apologies for presenting a religiously-based viewpoint to you. In the debate on same-gender attraction which, in one form or another, is being engaged in across the nation, I do not believe that arguments based on moral convictions, and their religious roots, should legitimately be excluded, a priori. The founders of this nation knew otherwise. They understood that private morality is the fount from which sound public policy flows. Replying to Washington's first inaugural address, the Senate stated: "We feel, sir, the force and acknowledge the justice of the observation that the foundation of our national policy should be lain in private morality. If individuals be not influenced by moral principles, it is in vain to look for public virtue" (Thomas G. West, *The Federalist Papers and the American Founding*, ed. Charles R. Kesler, 1987, pp. 166-67). Religiously grounded values, along with all others, should, therefore, be considered in debates in the public arena on same-gender attraction and judged solely on their merits.

At the onset may I say that debate on the causation

of same-gender attraction seems to me to be largely irrelevant in determining public policy or morally acceptable private behavior. The argument that "God made me this way, and that justifies my behavior" flies in the face of personal responsibility for the exercise of agency in behavioral choice. Furthermore, it fails to recognize that sexual orientation and behavior is extremely complex, very imperfectly understood, and highly unlikely to yield to simplistic explanations, either biological or psychosocial. Additionally, even if homosexual behavior were much more prevalent in our society than all available evidence indicates it to be, that, in itself, would not make such behavior moral—that is, acceptable to God.

I submit that the light of the gospel of Christ best illuminates the path to follow in coping with same-gender attraction. In this part of life, hope for peace and happiness will not be found in medicine, psychology or political activism. It can be obtained only through obedience to revealed truths.

In saying this I recognize that there are many in our society—both homosexuals and heterosexuals—who reject religion, viewing it as oppressive and constraining; and deny revelation and the God who speaks it. Obviously, I do not subscribe to that view. Neither does God. It is both ironic and a testimony to the enduring role of religion that many within the gay and lesbian community seek the blessing of religious institutions, seeing in them "the primary institutions of moral legitimation in our popular culture," to quote the Ramsay Colloquium.

What are the gospel underpinnings which must sustain Latter-day Saint views on same-gender attraction if our actions are to be pleasing to God? They include the following:

1. God loves all of his children, all of the time. His very nature demands it. Whatever the trials and temptations of life, his love will never fail us. It is eternal and unchanging. Those who trust in God and seek to obey His commandments will find He will support and sustain them in every challenge. He will forgive all who come to Him with broken hearts and contrite spirit.
2. Our Father in Heaven has provided a way, a plan, for the eternal happiness and salvation of all of

His children. At the center of the Father's "great plan of happiness" is the gift of His only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who atoned for the sins of humankind, and experienced the pains and temptations which are the common lot of all.

3. For every child of God the atonement of Christ makes it possible to receive eternal life and exaltation through obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.
4. God's commandments, as revealed by His prophets, indicate the path all must travel if they are to find joy and peace. Violation of divine law inevitably results in unhappiness and sorrow.
5. The spiritual and temporal are inextricably intertwined. There is no radical dualism between the body and the spirit or self. The fulfillment of desire is not the purpose of being of the self, nor does the body exist only, or even primarily, for the gratification of desire. Man is that he might have joy, something distinctively different than pleasure or desire.
6. God's prophets, from Moses to Gordon B. Hinckley, boldly and plainly teach that homosexual behavior is sinful in the eyes of God. In making that statement it is well to clearly keep in mind the difference between homosexual behavior, which is sinful, and same-gender attraction, which is not in itself necessarily sinful unless it leads to impure thoughts and unrighteous behavior. The wise words of Elder Dallin H. Oaks come to mind: "All of us have some feelings we did not choose, but the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that we still have the power to resist and reform our feelings (as needed) and to assure that they do not lead us to inappropriate thoughts or to engage in sinful behavior" (*Ensign*, Oct. 1995, p. 9).
7. There is only one standard for human sexual behavior which is pleasing to God. It is no different for those who struggle with same-gender attraction than for those who are heterosexual. In both instances, men and women must abstain completely from sexual relations outside of a lawful marriage between husband and wife. If an individual with heterosexual attraction has no opportunity to marry, he or she must remain celibate throughout this life in order to keep God's commandments. The same is true of those with same-gender attraction, who despite persistent effort cannot overcome that attraction and marry someone of the opposite gender. It is important to note that there are legitimate and

morally acceptable forms of love other than marriage. There is a long-honored tradition—and rightly so—of sexually chaste but deeply rewarding friendships between and among men and women. Nothing I have said should be interpreted as a call to depart from that tradition. The choice before men and women today, as always, is not limited to heterosexual marriage on the one hand or homogenital sex on the other. There is still an honored place for plain, common friendship. The standard, however, is chastity outside of marriage between man and wife.

In restating this standard for you, I am of course aware that many homosexual persons do indeed seek, as best they can, to live lives which are pleasing to God and of service to others. Nor do I doubt for a moment their assertion that they do indeed love their homosexual partner (or partners, since few if any homosexual relationships seem to be characterized by long-term mutual fidelity). "Even a distorted love retains traces of love's grandeur." But it is the expression of that love in erotic homosexual behavior which especially displeases God.

The struggle with same-gender attraction is one of the most trying, difficult and painful challenges faced by God's children. I can never forget sitting up most of the night with a young American doing charitable work in Eastern Nigeria. He had struggled for many years with same-gender attraction, from adolescence through his mission, and his time thereafter in university studies. Though in great personal pain, he had endured in faithfulness, but finally came to me in despair, not knowing how to proceed, hoping only that if he wandered the dangerous roads of Nigeria at night he could be killed and put out of his misery. My heart ached for him.

Same-gender attraction profoundly affects not only the person directly involved but also his or her family members. It entails great spiritual struggle and may require years and even a lifetime of prayer, tears, repentance and diligence.

The question invariably arises as to whether persons with same-gender attraction can ever change. While some assert—not on acceptable evidence—that same-gender attraction is immutable and unchangeable, there is good evidence that some individuals have indeed changed to a normal heterosexual lifestyle and thought pattern. Others, however, despite valiant and prayerful effort, continue to struggle with the challenge of same-gender attraction. Their burdens are heavy, and their tears many. As I counseled my young friend in Nigeria, they can, however, struggle on in faith,

keeping the commandments of God, with the assurance He will strengthen and sustain them. It is not easy, but perhaps it is not intended to be so. Few of life's real challenges are easy to deal with.

The Church's teachings about the inherent dignity and worth of all persons make it clear that the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be protected and defended. All of those who strive to follow Jesus must decry any forms of injustice, oppression or violence directed against homosexuals. We must all go further, reaching out to those who struggle with same-gender challenges, to help and succor them with compassion, respect and love.

Of course, the ultimate responsibility for one's behavior is personal. There are, I suggest, many things a Church member who is struggling with same-gender attraction can do to remain on the path of righteousness. They include the following:

- Strive each day to draw closer to our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son, our Savior. Pray daily. Fast once a month. Attend church regularly. Partake worthily of the sacrament. Worthily attend the temple. Perform service to others. Tell your Father in Heaven of your struggles. Pour out your heart in humble supplication for divine assistance. Tell Him of your challenges and frustrations, and ask Him for help. I promise you that you will receive strength and assurance of the Father's love. Study the scriptures diligently. They testify of Jesus' atoning sacrifice on your behalf. Think often of God's eternal, immutable love for you—a love so great that “He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).
- Be aware of the whisperings of the adversary and keep him out of your life. Do not let him determine how you will behave. He will whisper to you that homosexual behavior is just an “alternative lifestyle.” It is not. Do not fall for the lie that every sexual desire must be expressed, and that to do otherwise is not “natural” or “healthy.” The devil will entice you with the idea that there is no forgiveness for one such as you. There is. He will try to make you believe that the pronouncements of Holy Scripture and of God's modern prophets are out of date, irrelevant, not applicable to you. But they are not irrelevant and they do apply to you and your challenges. They remain God's standard for behavior, for all time.
- Do not waste time and cripple yourself spiritually

by condemning or castigating yourself unduly for having feelings of same-gender attraction. Remember that your total identity and worth as a unique individual is more encompassing than your sexual orientation. Remember, too, that God understands all things, even when we do not, and loves you with a perfect love.

- Engage in wholesome social activities with those of both sexes, who have high moral standards. Avoid as the plague social interaction with persons who justify, encourage or engage in homosexual behavior. Stay away from places where those challenged by same-gender attraction congregate. Flee temptation in every form.
- Shun pornography in every kind or degree. Be especially aware of pornography on the Internet, and do not trifle with it in any way, shape or form. It will first enslave and then degrade you. It is one of the devil's smartest tools.
- Don't try to drown your sorrows in drink or other violations of the Word of Wisdom. Neither happiness or self-mastery is to be found in the bottle or pill. To the extent you dull your senses and impair your ability to reason with drink or drugs, you will increase your risk for self-destructive behavior.
- Avoid an unhealthy obsession with the challenge of same-gender attraction, which easily can become a soul-destroying, self-fulfilling neurosis. Instead, be “anxiously engaged in a good cause” (D & C 58:27) through Christ-like service to others, strengthening family relationships, pursuing education and developing your talents, which are many.
- As appropriate, discuss the challenges you face with parents, other family members, wise Church leaders, and trusted counselors. But don't feel compelled to share your challenge with every Tom, Dick and Harry, and don't talk about it publicly.

Because same-gender attraction profoundly affects the parents of the individually directly involved, it is well to provide counsel for parents. For Latter-day Saint parents, the initial realization that their son or daughter is struggling with same-gender attraction may give rise to deep feelings of dismay, shock, even anger, mourning or fear. Parents can torture themselves with words such as “if only we had....” A sense of failure may lead to a valley of shame and regret. None of these feelings help the child and may indeed drive him or her away from the family and close down vital lines of communication. The

following counsel may assist parents who face the challenge of same-gender attraction in their family.

- Most importantly, love your son or daughter with all your heart. Keep the channels of communication open between you. Shocking numbers of youth end up on the streets, having been rejected by their families. Do not castigate or blame your child, but try with all your strength to see your son or daughter as a whole person, a child of God, with great gifts and talents, but with a challenge in one area of life. Your child needs you more now than ever. As you struggle to respond with love and care, your love will grow even stronger. Treat your child always with respect and kindness. He or she will be yours forever. Nothing can ever change that. Never, never, never give up!
- Remember that you can love and be supportive of your child without supporting any wrongful behavior in which he or she may be involved. You do your child no good by condoning that which is wrong. Such behavior on your part will only drive a wedge between your child and God, and between you and God. Your testimony of the gospel and affirmation of the moral standards of the Church will be one of the best ways to show you truly love both your child and God.
- Remember that it is homosexual behavior, not same-gender attraction in and of itself which is sinful. If your child struggles with same-gender attraction but has not engaged in homosexual behavior, commend him or her for obedience to God's moral standards, and provide support, information, encouragement and moral guidance. Take every honorable opportunity to praise and lift up your child.
- In your hurt and anger, do not criticize the Church's position on same-gender attraction, hoping that somehow this shows support for your child, and will get the Church to alter its position. The Church's position on this major moral issue was arrived at only after long and prayerful discussion by holy men of God. It's position is not theirs, but God's. It is fully consistent with scripture and the teachings of God's prophets from the beginning.
- Do not pressure your child to marry, hoping that this will resolve his or her struggle with same-gender attraction. Marriage, in and of itself, will do little to deal with the challenge. While many persons with same-gender attraction can and have changed, marriage must follow change, not

precede it.

- Seek the counsel of trusted ecclesiastical leaders, both for you and your child. Do not pressure or coerce your child against his or her will to accept any form of counseling or treatment. If professional counseling is desired, LDS Family Services can assist you in finding a counselor who not only is skilled, experienced, and understands the complexity of human sexuality, but also respects the Church's moral standards and values. Remember that counseling for deep-seated challenges takes time to be effective. Don't expect miracles overnight. Learn to persevere. Be patient, loving and forgiving. Pray always for Divine assistance, both for you and your child. There are no quick and easy ways to resolve the challenge of same-gender attraction. Be prepared for setbacks and frustration. But hang on, love always, and don't despair.
- As must your child, don't blame yourself for what has happened. Same-gender attraction probably results from a complex interaction of biological, social and psychological factors which may differ from person to person and over which you, and perhaps your child, may have had little or no control. Over-analyzing the causation issue will not resolve it, but lead only to frustration, tears and resentment.

All that I have said today centers around love: the love of God for all of His children, the love of parents for their challenged son or daughter, and the love which God expects all of us to show for each other, as brothers and sisters in God's family. Paramount, of course, is the love of God, whose love for all of His children is constant and unchanging. Those who trust in Him, and try to obey His commandments, even though they may stumble and fall, will find that He will support and sustain them always. He understands. He forgives all who come to Him with broken heart and contrite spirit, no matter how often that is required. His love reigns supreme.

I close with these words of Nephi, replying to a question about God, put to him by an angelic visitor: "I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:17). In the midst of all the pain, suffering, confusion, misunderstanding and rancor surrounding same-gender attraction, perhaps we find more peace and understanding in that simple yet profound statement from holy writ than from any other.