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Homosexuality: An LDS Perspective

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The purpose of this article is to review what the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), particularly members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, have communicated regarding homosexuality. An extensive search was conducted of references to homosexuality in the recent LDS literature. Sources include General Conference proceedings and Brigham Young University devotional and fireside speeches, along with excerpts from books written by Church leaders, and official Church publications offering guidance relevant to the topic. The prevalent themes discussed by Church leaders over the past 20 years are summarized.

It is important to recognize that these messages were given for the guidance of the general Church membership and as instructive support to ecclesiastical leaders; they were not targeted specifically for mental health professionals. Thus, counsel is focused on individual spiritual development and personal guidance rather than on specific therapeutic intervention or mental health treatment strategies.

Although many leaders have discussed the Church position on topics related to homosexuality, each providing specific perspectives and insights, space limitations for this article prevent all references from being presented. References were selected that seem to be most representative of the major homosexuality themes discussed by

Church leaders. For those desiring to read further, an extensive bibliography has been attached. A question format was used for this paper as a means of organizing themes.

What Constitutes Homosexuality?

To understand the Church's position on the practice of homosexuality, it is helpful to understand how Church leaders have defined homosexuality. In the Church manual *Understanding and Helping Those Who Have Homosexual Problems: Suggestions for Ecclesiastical Leaders* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [LDS Church], 1992), the First Presidency clarified the parameters of what the Church considers to be homosexuality: "Homosexual problems include erotic thoughts, feelings, and behavior directed toward persons of the same sex" (p. 1). The First Presidency, in an earlier document (LDS Church, 1981), specified three categories within this overall designation: (1) *Early memory homosexuality*—a condition in which an individual reports having had "persistent homosexual feelings or behaviors since his earliest memories"; (2) *Situational homosexuality*—a situation in which an individual experiences "occasional, temporary homosexual feelings or behaviors through curiosity"; and (3) *Rebellious homosexuality*—a lifestyle in which participants have "chosen to fully accept a homosexual lifestyle. They have little, if any, motivation to change . . . and are openly active, even promiscuous in their homosexual behavior" (p. 3). The Church advises that these differences should be understood by ecclesiastical leaders who are counseling with individuals experiencing homosexual problems.

To What Extent is Homosexuality a Moral Issue?

Many Church statements regarding homosexuality link it directly with other violations of moral law concerning sexual purity. Church authorities urge members to obey the commandments regarding morality as a preventive measure for resisting homosexual behavior, as well as fornication, adultery and other moral transgressions. In the Church's recent publication giving guidelines for ecclesiastical leaders (LDS Church, 1992), the First Presidency admonished:

We call upon members to renew their commitment to live the Lord's standard of moral conduct. . . . Our only real safety, physically and spiritually, lies in keeping the Lord's commandments. The Lord's law of moral conduct is abstinence outside of lawful marriage and fidelity within marriage (p. 1). (See also Hinckley, 1987, p. 47; Benson, 1988, p. 280).

In an article in the *Church News* ("Apostle Reaffirms," 1987) Elder Oaks confirmed this position, adding that this standard of morality includes *within* as well as *between* sexes. He indicated that just as Jesus admonished His followers not to look upon a woman to lust after her, "I assume that includes a man looking on a man to lust after him" (p. 10).

How serious is homosexual behavior in comparison with the sins of fornication or adultery?

General authorities have consistently classified homosexuality along with fornication and adultery in nature and severity. President Kimball (1982) grouped them under the designation *unchastity*, and stated: "Sexual life outside of marriage, whether it be heterosexual or homosexual, is . . . [futile]" (p. 270). The pamphlet *For The Strength of Youth*, published by the First Presidency (LDS Church, 1990), used even harsher terms:

Homosexual and lesbian activities are sinful and an abomination to the Lord. . . . The Lord specifically forbids . . . sex perversion (such as homosexuality, rape, and incest). (In the pamphlet, reference is made to Romans 1:26-27, 31.) (LDS Church, 1990, p. 15).

Church leaders have consistently denounced homosexuality as a *sin*. Ezra Taft Benson (1988), the current Prophet and President of the LDS Church, provided a similar expression: "We are of God. God Himself has set the boundaries of this sacred act. Sex outside of marriage is wrong. Every form of homosexuality is wrong" (p. 280). As President Benson (1988, pp. 283-284) continued his explanation, he placed homosexuality in a grouping with other serious moral sins, stating that a member of the Church should "not commit adultery 'nor do anything like unto it'" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 59:6). He interpreted *like unto it* as "fornication,

homosexual behavior, self-abuse, child molestation, or any other sexual perversion” (Benson, 1988, pp. 283-284).

President Kimball (1969/1987) went beyond groupings and lists to openly state the comparison:

Let it therefore be clearly stated that the seriousness of the sin of homosexuality is equal to or greater than that of fornication or adultery; and that the Lord’s Church will as readily take action to disfellowship or excommunicate the unrepentant practicing homosexual as it will the unrepentant fornicator or adulterer (pp. 81-82).

Why is the sanctity of marriage emphasized while homosexual marriages are disapproved by the Church?

Church leaders have frequently emphasized the importance of sexual relations only within marriage. Practiced in accordance with God’s law, this activity is sacred in that one of the primary purposes of sexual intercourse is to multiply and replenish the earth. President Kimball wrote extensively and forcefully regarding the sanctity of marriage and the seriousness of homosexuality. He (Kimball, 1969/1987, pp. 80-81) indicated that marriage—man with woman—is essential to God’s plan, as it is necessary for creating families, the unit through which eternal life and salvation will be achieved. (He referred to Gen. 1:27-28; Moses 3:24; 1 Cor. 11:11; Doctrine and Covenants 49:15-17). In a later publication, President Kimball (1971/1978) further clarified the will of the Lord in this respect:

From the beginning, the Lord has commanded mankind to multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it. And from that day until now, the prophets have denounced and condemned any of the unnatural and improper practices that make multiplying impossible and kill that which is the basis of true civilization—the home and family (p. 18).

Elder Boyd K. Packer (1990) has similarly emphasized God’s plan for men and women:

The legitimate union of the sexes is a law of God. The sacred covenants made by husband and wife with God protect the worthy expression of those feelings and impulses which are vital to the continuation of the race and essential to a happy family life (p. 85).

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1987) has indicated that “the Lord has proclaimed that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and is intended to be an eternal relationship bonded by trust and fidelity” (p. 47). Explaining that this sacred relationship must be male-female, Elder Packer (1978) indicted, “One cannot procreate alone. . . . One cannot procreate with his own gender. These are absolutes” (p. 37). Speaking later at a Priesthood Commemoration Fireside, Elder Packer (1989) elaborated further:

Never can two of the same gender fulfill the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth. No two men or any number added to them, no matter how much priesthood they may think they possess, can do it. Only a woman can bestow upon man that supernal title of father (p. 73).

With respect to same-sex unions, Elder Oaks affirmed the Church’s position on homosexual marriage when he said, “The Church does not ‘recognize homosexual marriages’ because ‘there is no . . . scriptural warrant for homosexual marriages’” (“Apostle Reaffirms,” 1987, p. 10).

Thus, according to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, the husband-wife marriage relationship is the only bond within which life can be brought forth according to God’s plan to accomplish His eternal purposes. Homosexual marriages are not in harmony with the sacred charge given to Adam to bring forth the human family. President Kimball (1969/1987) voiced the eternal consequence of widespread homosexuality:

If the abominable practice became universal it would depopulate the earth in a single generation. It would nullify God’s great program for his spirit children in that it would leave countless unembodied spirits in the heavenly world without the chance for the opportunities of mortality and would deny to all the participants in the practice the eternal life God makes available to us all (p. 81).

How valid is the claim of some who insist that homosexual behavior should not be considered a sin since individuals “are born that way and cannot change”?

President Kimball, Elder Packer, and other leaders, have vigorously denounced this claim. In speaking of those who have engaged in repeated homosexual behavior, President Kimball (1971/1978) said:

Some continue until, when the changing gets difficult, they admit their inability to cope with it and yield. They rationalize that they are of another class of people; that the Lord made them that way; that they cannot change. The powerful Lucifer has had his day. He whispers into their ears: “This is no sin. You are no transgressor. I am no devil. There is no evil one. There is no black—all is white for you” (p. 10).

Elder Packer (1976), speaking at the October General Priesthood Session, also contradicted this position, placing the situation in an eternal perspective and indicating that some say they are just “‘that way’ and can only yield to those desires. . . . While it is a convincing idea to some, it is of the devil. . . . There is no mismatching of bodies and spirits. . . . No one is predestined to a perverted use of these powers” (p. 101).

President Kimball (1971/1978) described the final downfall of such persons. “When one so far succumbs that he says, ‘This is the way I wish to live. Here I find my satisfactions. I commit no immorality. I will not change,’ then the tragic moment has come” (p. 16).

In more recent years, Church leaders seem to have been careful to distinguish between homosexual thoughts and feelings and homosexual *behavior*. They have acknowledged that some people may experience homosexual thoughts and feelings from a very early age; nevertheless, the Church leaders have warned that such people are responsible for controlling their behavior. In the guide *Understanding and Helping Those who have Homosexual Problems* (LDS Church, 1992), those who are counseling individuals with homosexual tendencies are advised that in order to help someone repent, they must help that person “overcome common rationalizations such as: ‘I am not responsible for my behavior because I was

born this way” (LDS Church, 1992, p. 3). Bishops and other helpers are instructed to guide the person in understanding that “although some struggle with unwanted homosexual thoughts and feelings, there is no conclusive evidence that anyone is born with a homosexual orientation” (LDS Church, 1992, p. 3).

Some Church leaders who have written and spoken strongly against the notion that homosexual people were simply “born that way,” do acknowledge that susceptibilities to homosexual thoughts and feelings may exist as part of the trial inherent in the plan of salvation. Elder Oaks, for example, speaking at the Third Annual Book of Mormon Symposium (1987), affirmed that some receive strong temptations, but he still placed responsibility for ultimate handling of the temptation on the individual:

Perhaps these persons, as the saying goes, were “born that way.” But what does this mean? Does it mean that persons with susceptibilities or strong tendencies have no choice, no free agency in these matters? Our doctrine teaches us otherwise. Regardless of a person’s susceptibility or tendency, his will is unfettered. His free agency is unqualified. It is his freedom that is impaired. Other persons are more free; though they unwisely sample the temptations, they seem immune to the addiction. But regardless of the extent of our freedom, we are all responsible for the exercise of our free agency (pp. 45-46).

Elder Oaks (1987) brought out purpose behind the difficulties that many experience:

We are here to be tested, and this cannot occur without opposition in all things . . . if we did not have opposition, we could not exercise our free agency by making choices. . . . Without opposition in all things we could not achieve righteousness. All things would be a compound in one, a mixture—no distinction between wickedness and holiness. In that state of innocence, mankind would be “having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin” (2 Nephi 2:23)” (p. 42).

Moreover, the publication, *Homosexuality* (LDS Church, 1981) indicates that, “To believe that . . . [homosexual behavior] is inborn or heredity is to deny that men have agency to choose between sin and righteousness” (p. 2).

Elder Packer (1990) has acknowledged that feelings and inclinations do not necessarily disappear immediately because one

desires to choose the right; they may continue as a temptation. “You may not be able, simply by choice, to free yourself at once from unworthy feelings.” But he continued to admonish, “You *can* choose to give up the immoral expression of them” (p. 86). He further explained this position:

All of us are subject to feelings and impulses. Some are worthy and some of them are not; some of them are natural and some of them are not. We are to control them, meaning we are to direct them according to the moral law (p. 85).

Elder Oaks (1987) has stressed that susceptibility does not free us from accountability, that we have within us the power to overcome such temptations:

But whatever our susceptibilities, we have the will and the power to control our thoughts and our actions. This must be so. God has said that he holds us accountable for what we do and what we think, so these must be controllable by our agency. . . . A person who insists that he is not responsible for the exercise of his free agency because he was “born that way” is trying to ignore the outcome of the War in Heaven. . . . Individual responsibility is a law of life. . . . God holds his children responsible to control their impulses so they can keep his commandments and realize their eternal destiny (p. 46).

President Kimball (1971/1978) explained the eventual consequence of failing to assert this all-important control of our actions in face of any level of temptation we may experience:

If you have yielded long enough, you know well that you have been “hooked”. . . . You do the bidding of your master. Do you revel in the thought that you are in ugly servitude? If you have given up and cannot express your will, then boost up your courage, and seek for help (p. 21).

Thus, although Church leaders have consistently demonstrated understanding for those who experience unbidden homosexual thoughts and impulses, they are uncompromising in their insistence that such occurrences can and should be subdued. Although addiction may result from repeated offenses, the Brethren hold out an assurance that help is available, pleading with those in “servitude” to seek for the assistance they need.

What factors appear to cause, or at least influence, a susceptibility toward homosexual attractions and tendencies?

The Church's earlier position statement (LDS Church, 1981, pp. 1-2) indicated Church recognition that homosexuality seems to be influenced, in part, by unhealthy emotional development. The first four "elements" below were listed in that document as possible contributing factors. The fifth and sixth elements below are added by the authors of this paper to reflect statements from Church leaders.

Dysfunctional family background

Many individuals who experience problems with homosexuality have not experienced a warm, supportive, affectionate relationship with their fathers. Other background factors in homosexuality may include overprotective or dominant behavior on the part of mothers, and strained relationships between the mother and father.

Poor relationships with peers

Many individuals with homosexual difficulties see themselves as different from their peers. They feel isolated and lonely; they fail to develop healthy social attitudes and effective social skills.

Unhealthy sexual attitudes

Such attitudes may be modeled on unhealthy attitudes or behaviors of an individual's parents. Sometimes parents' attitudes or behaviors have been misinterpreted, resulting in similar effects.

Early homosexual experience

Many of those who are involved in homosexual behavior developed a preoccupation with masturbation when they were quite young or were introduced to homosexual behavior early in life by a peer or older acquaintance.

Selfishness

In a BYU Devotional address, Elder Packer (1978) expressed a possible link between selfishness and homosexual behavior. "Have you explored the possibility that the cause, when found, will turn out to be a very typical form of selfishness—selfishness in a very subtle form?" (p. 36). President Kimball (1982) provided his

perspective regarding the relationship among homosexual urges, sinful acts, and ultimate emptiness:

This abnormal involvement with a person of one's own sex can be only barren and desolate, having for its purpose only temporary physical satisfaction. There is no future in it but only a stirring moment and a dead past. There can be no posterity, no family life, no permanent association, and, of course, nothing that can give eternal joy. It is lonely because it is wrong and because it is selfish (p. 275).

Biological and genetic influences

Some Church leaders have strongly condemned simple biological or genetic deterministic explanations for homosexuality—that biological or genetic factors completely cause, determine, or predestine homosexual behavior (Oaks, 1987, pp. 45-46; Packer, 1976, p. 101). However, these Church leaders have also indicated a recognition of the complexity of the problems associated with homosexual behavior and have not closed the door on the possibility that biological or genetic factors could predispose or make some people more susceptible than their peers to homosexual attractions which place them at a higher risk for involvement in homosexual behavior (Oaks, 1987, pp. 45-46; Packer, 1990, p. 85).

When an individual has a sincere desire to change, what steps are necessary for change and growth to take place?

Acceptance of responsibility is a necessary first step. According to Church leaders, an individual who has been practicing homosexuality must understand and accept the principles of free agency and personal responsibility before processes for cure and forgiveness can begin.

Faith in God and faith in oneself are anchor points for the repentance process. It is important for a person to believe that change can occur and homosexual behavior can be overcome. Faith in God and in oneself, accompanied by hope, leads to repentance and change.

Elder Packer (1992) has provided reassurance of the faith we can have in God's willingness to forgive: "I know of no sins connected with the moral standard for which we cannot be

forgiven” (p. 68). President Kimball (1971/1978, pp. 3, 27; cf., 1982, pp. 275-276) likewise encouraged faith, focusing on the Lord’s love and on the support available through the Church: “Homosexuality and like practices are deep sins. They can be cured; they can be forgiven. Remember, the Lord loves you; the Church loves you. We are most anxious to assist you” (p. 27).

President Kimball (1972/1977) stressed also the importance of recognizing the strength within oneself: “We have within ourselves the power to rise above our circumstances, to change our lives. Man can change human nature. Man must transform his life” (p. 176). In a later publication President Kimball (1982) reaffirmed this position:

Homosexual practices are enslaving. There are those who tell you there is no cure and thus weaken your resolves and add to your frustration. They can be cured. They can be eventually forgiven. Your problem can be solved. . . . A homosexual can change himself (pp. 275-276).

Repentance and the search for forgiveness are essential aspects of overcoming the practice and effects of homosexuality. Although President Kimball (1982) was consistently reassuring on the availability of change and forgiveness, he did not diminish the seriousness of the transgression or the depth of the repentance that would be involved.

Again, contrary to the belief and statement of many people, this sin, like fornication, is overcomable and forgivable, but again, only upon a deep and abiding repentance, which means total abandonment and complete transformation of thought and act (p. 274).

President Benson (1985) explained more of the nature of the personal change involved in the process of this deep repentance; it involves more than environmental change, and the necessary transformation requires Christ’s intervention.

The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. . . . The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature (p. 6).

Persisting in the face of adversity and seeking divine assistance are stressed by the Church authorities as they advise those who have homosexual problems. President Kimball (1982) helped Church members who have homosexual difficulties to understand the persistence required to overcome such problems. He compared the repentance process for homosexuality to that for comparable sins, stating that if “one has such desires and tendencies, he overcomes them the same as if he had the urge toward petting or fornication or adultery” (p. 274). For those who were finding the route to repentance difficult, President Kimball (1969/1987) gave this remonstrance:

Certainly it can be overcome, for there are numerous happy people who were once involved in its (homosexual) clutches and who have since completely transformed their lives. Therefore to those who say that this practice or any other evil is incurable, I respond: “How can you say the door cannot be opened till your knuckles are bloody, till your head is bruised, till your muscles are sore? It can be done” (p. 82). (See also, LDS Church, 1981, p. 9.)

In *Understanding and Helping Those Who Have Homosexual Problems* (LDS Church, 1992), the Church affirmed that the Lord will help those who sincerely desire to change:

Change is possible. There are those who have ceased their homosexual behavior and overcome such thoughts and feelings. God has promised to help those who earnestly strive to live his commandments: “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13) (p. 4).

President Benson voiced the same reassurance of the Lord’s willingness to assist us, as quoted in *Understanding and Helping Those Who Have Homosexual Problems* (LDS Church, 1992): “God’s gifts are sufficient to help us overcome every sin and weakness if we will but turn to Him for help” (p. 2).

How optimistic are the Church leaders for success in helping members to overcome a homosexuality problem?

LDS leaders consistently emphasize the importance of promoting healthy personal and spiritual development which prevents or reduces the likelihood of a person's becoming involved in homosexual activity. They counsel young members to develop worthy moral values and appropriate interpersonal and sexual habits by seeking and maintaining healthy friendships, listening to the counsel of their parents, and keeping the commandments, including those that emphasize controlling their thoughts. To give them the spiritual strength to resist temptation and to repent when they have yielded to it, members are encouraged to develop and strengthen their testimonies, and to listen to the Spirit.

Perhaps less optimism is expressed in the Church literature regarding potential success for rehabilitating those deeply engaged in homosexual behavior if they have little or no desire to change. However, leaders constantly remind us that it is never too late if the person has a desire to repent and abandon the behavior, or is willing to try to develop that desire. Individuals involved in homosexual practices are counseled to seek help from the Lord and from their local Church leaders in acquiring motivation and moving through the change and repentance process. A person who is sufficiently motivated can change, can forsake homosexual behavior, can repent, and can receive forgiveness.

The position the Church takes and encourages for others, was reaffirmed by Elder Oaks ("Apostle Reaffirms," 1987): "Love the sinner. Condemn the sin" (p. 10). President Gordon B. Hinckley (1987) added his voice: "We advocate the example of the Lord, who condemned the sin, yet loved the sinner" (p. 47).

Do Church leaders encourage members who are struggling with homosexual tendencies to seek professional counseling?

In the statement *Understanding and Helping Those Who Have Homosexual Problems* (LDS Church, 1992), members are instructed to seek the inspired guidance of Church leaders. However, they also suggest:

. . . members often need professional help from qualified therapists who understand and honor gospel principles. When adequate professional help is not available in the ward or stake, an LDS Social Services agency may provide consultation, therapy, or referral to therapists in the community (p. 5).

Most Church leaders seem to agree that professional counselors can play an important role in helping individuals experiencing problems with homosexuality. However, since not all therapists in the community possess personal values consistent with Gospel principles or with the Church's position regarding homosexuality, ecclesiastical leaders will likely be selective in making referrals.

The Church has supported efforts of the LDS Social Services and other consulting professionals to research the issues and to offer a reparative therapy approach which assumes that homosexual behavior can be changed. Therapists who acquire appropriate preparation can counsel individuals who struggle with homosexual problems and can serve as a useful resource to such people and ecclesiastical leaders.

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