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HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE GOSPEL

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SEXUALITY IS A COMPLEX AND DEEPLY PERSONAL ASPECT OF THE HUMAN experience, and issues related to same-sex attraction are increasingly at the heart of cultural debates and discussions surrounding The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its doctrines and political positions. Because sexuality and relationships strike at the heart of questions of identity and life purpose, discussion of them can stir up strong emotions and passionate agendas. These agendas run the gamut from more personal ones like clinging to problematic beliefs and identities out of a drive for meaning or self-preservation, to a social or political agenda rooted in beliefs about social rights or social goods, or to a religious agenda in which there is a battle for souls and salvation. Much of the controversy is rooted in oversimplifying or distorting the nature of the dynamics at play, and problematic assumptions are too often simply accepted without serious thought. Once we can understand how these attitudes have harmed our understanding, then we can then move to a better place to understand the Church's teachings.

THE COMPLEXITY OF HUMAN SEXUALITY

Sexuality is complex, multidimensional, and influenced in its development by a host of different factors—genetic, hormonal, psychological, emotional, social, and cultural, just to name a few. Because of that complexity, there is potential for a great diversity of experience from person to person. Also because of that complexity, it may be important to define what sexuality is; the term is often used differently by different people in different contexts. It may also be important to have a more textured and nuanced understanding

of sexuality in order to fully appreciate Church teachings on sexuality and what it means to live the law of chastity.

Just as *personality* is the “ality” of our *person*, sexuality is the “ality” of our *sex*—not only the *act* of sex or of the nature of sexual or companionate desire but also all that makes us unique as men and women, masculine and feminine, including the godly purposes of that gendered and complimentary uniqueness. In addition to the relational aspect of sexuality we may more commonly think about, there are also deeply spiritual aspects of sexuality, so we have to be careful not to inappropriately reduce sexuality simply to erotic or romantic behavior—particularly when we talk with youth and seek to influence their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors around sex and sexuality. In their book *Soul Virgins: Redefining Single Sexuality*, Christian therapists Doug Rosenau and Michael Todd Wilson talk about how our sexuality is ultimately the driving force in our quest for intimacy in *all* of our relationships, including with God, with both men and women, and within ourselves, as much as it might be with a potential spouse.

When we categorize people simply as “gay,” “straight,” or “bisexual,” it assumes that sexuality is one-dimensional and exists upon a single linear continuum of erotic or romantic attraction. It is not and does not. Entertaining this idea frames and perpetuates false ideas around sexuality that have a tendency to reduce and politicize sexuality in ways that induce our culture into a sort of unthinking sentimentality about love, sex, intimate relationships, and societal goods. Therefore, in order to discuss the complexities of sexuality, including nonbiological factors shaping sexual desire, or the malleability or fluidity of sexuality, we need to set aside political correctness and social labels.

That said, potential distortion isn’t limited to popular cultural labels and categories. Even the way we talk about “same-sex attraction”—the historically preferred term in the Church cultural vernacular—can be fraught with limitations and problems because there are many different kinds and qualities of attraction: sexual, romantic, aesthetic, affectional, emotional, and even spiritual. It can be especially problematic when we talk about “same-sex attraction” only in terms of a “trial” or “weakness” or “challenge” that should be “overcome.” To the contrary, some qualities of attraction are good and even godly, and we should *embrace* and *cultivate* them in our lives. For example, the desire for closeness and belonging with others of the same sex is something all people feel to varying degrees. LDS author and speaker Brad Wilcox wrote:

Some have felt relieved as they learn that homo-emotional needs are real and acceptable. The word *intimacy* is often associated with sexual acts, but it doesn’t need to be. Non-sexual intimacy is essential to our growth and development at all ages of our lives. We all need to love and be loved by both women and men. Meeting that need

in healthy ways is one of the foundations of happiness as well as mental and emotional wellness. Often the feelings and attractions we have toward others are evidence of a deep need within us. Once recognized, it is up to us to fill that need in ways that are in harmony with God's plan for our lives and relationships. Similarly, hunger lets your body know of a need for food, but we must choose to meet that need with a healthy and nutritious diet rather than potato chips and French fries.¹

This even extends to appropriate, non-sexual/non-romantic physical affection. When Charles W. Dahlquist II, Dean R. Burgess, and Michael A. Neider were released as the Young Men General Presidency during the Saturday session of the April 2009 general conference, they were holding hands as the camera panned on them.² It was clear they had a very close and special relationship to each other. Is it wrong for men to hold hands? Is holding hands "gay"? Is the *attraction* and *intimacy* and *bond* they may feel with one another something they should overcome since they are of the same sex? To the contrary, I can imagine God smiling upon pure expressions of love, intimacy, and affection between those of the same sex.

There are certainly qualities of attraction or desire that we need to appropriately channel, such as erotic or romantic attraction, but scripture teaches us that our aim should be to "bridle" our passions—not to eradicate them—"that [we] may be filled with love."³ And Church leaders have been more careful to nuance their teachings so members understand more clearly that to feel sexual or romantic *attractions* is never a *sin*, even when toward the same sex, but rather that they're part of the broad range of human experience we're called to *channel* and *transcend* if we're to become divine. Only lustful thoughts or behaviors (regardless of the sex they're directed toward) or sexual expression outside the bounds the Lord has set are considered sinful.

A FOUR-TIERED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SEXUALITY

As stated earlier, when it comes to how we commonly think about sexuality, defining "same-sex attraction" or what it means for some to identify as "being gay" is fraught with limitations. In order to better understand some of the nuances and layers of sexuality that often get conflated, it is helpful to think of sexuality as composed of a loose, four-tiered framework⁴ that includes (1) attraction and desire, (2) persistent patterns of attraction or orientation, (3) behavior, and (4) identity.

ATTRACTION AND DESIRE

Similar to sexuality as a whole, the qualitative experiences we have of attraction and desire are complex, multidimensional phenomena. We are attracted

to, or desire, different things for different reasons—hobbies, life philosophies, professions, jobs, friendships, or romantic partners. Some desires may be rooted in personal gifts, such as having a remarkably mature capacity for empathy and sensitivity to others' feelings and needs, while other desires may be rooted in wounds or weaknesses, such as an addiction to pornography that has conditioned an individual to objectify and lust after certain fragmented traits in others. In human relationships alone, romantic or platonic, there are multiple feelings, emotions, and impulses. It is important to differentiate between these feelings, yet they are frequently lumped together—attraction, desire, love, euphoria, lust, emotional attachment, meaning, and so forth.

Humans are capable of a wide range of tastes, affinities, attractions, and impulses. Culture, emotional maturity, capacity for intimate relationships, and sense of self or identity have as much or more of an influence on how those attractions develop as do genes or biology. For example, some African cultures see heavy women as more sexually preferable to thin women because of a cultural attribution of meaning around wealth and social status attached to weight. Similarly, in some Chinese cultures, muscled, tanned bodies are seen as much *less* erotic or desirable than nonmuscled, pasty-skinned bodies because of social values and attributions around wealth and status—being a farmer as opposed to a white-collar worker. However, in American culture, the opposite tends to be true.

Beyond these more external aspects or objects of desire, there's an entirely distinct quality of attraction and desire we can experience through emotional and spiritual vulnerability and bonding. Even where there may be no immediate attraction to external features or qualities, deep emotional intimacy can actually serve as a wellspring or fertile growing space for romantic and sexual desire. One therapist remarked on how we should not be afraid of experiencing deep feelings for others simply because there's potential for development of sexual feelings, but rather we should find and walk the line of integrity:

We have such rich and deep connections with people, with one another, truly deep loving intimacy. So how to keep that door open, how to keep that heartfelt life there, but not be seduced by the power and attraction of that intimacy? Because it is in that deep intimacy, of course, that sexual attraction and energy can arise and emerge. So how to maintain an integrity in that intimacy, and be true to our feelings of love for one another, and not fall into that well of sexual misconduct? . . . I have many boundaries and ethics that I apply in those situations, particularly through my psychotherapy training.⁵

This can even become confusing or concerning when it occurs between individuals of the same sex who have no inclination to homoerotic attraction

or behavior. Writing about men in particular, Sam Keen, a former editor of *Psychology Today*, noted in his book *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*: “‘Normal’ American men are homophobic, afraid of close friendships with other men. The moment we begin to feel warmly toward another man, the ‘homosexual’ panic button gets pressed. It makes us nervous to see French or Italian men strolling down the street arm in arm. . . . From a cross-cultural perspective, it is we who are odd; close male friendship is the norm in most societies and is usually considered a more important source of intimacy than romantic relationships.”⁶ Some men have questioned their sexuality simply because they developed a deep emotional love for another man. It seems our culture often has difficulty distinguishing deep love and intimacy from sexual or romantic desire.

We don’t fully understand the complexity of what shapes sexual desire and how the nature and objects of sexual desire change over a life span—or even over the course of single relationships. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, noted that the stage of relationship development that researchers call “passionate love,” a state of intense longing, desire, and attraction, typically has a “short shelf life.” It’s a stage of love that research shows lasts an average of two years, after which it generally morphs into “companionate love,” a less impassioned blend of deep affection and connection.⁷

No single theory accounts for the complexity of how sexuality develops and is expressed across a wide range of human experiences. Where we often get into difficulty in our efforts to identify or understand the what, why, and how of sexual desire is when we try to attribute the root of that desire to a single factor. The popular cultural myths that either people are “born gay” or they chose to be homosexual are both oversimplifications and cannot explain much, if anything, about the development of sexuality and sexual desire.

It’s interesting that popular culture seems to be so sure about something that science and experienced researchers are not. The American Psychological Association’s official pamphlet addressing sexual orientation concedes this point, noting that ultimately, “There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles.”⁸

Lisa Diamond, a University of Utah researcher, noted that because sexual fluidity is a general feature of human sexuality, we have to acknowledge that sexual categories or identity constructs are mental shortcuts that may be helpful in making quick judgments, but which can be problematic in that they also reflect or lead to biases. She noted, “We’re not in fact cutting

nature at its joints; we're . . . imposing some joints on a very messy phenomenon. . . . We have to be careful about presuming that [these sexual categories] are natural phenomenon."⁹

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: PERSISTENT PATTERNS OF ATTRACTION

Given that we feel different kinds of attraction toward different people for different reasons, and given that various attractions or even patterns of attraction may either change over time or remain more stable, the idea of "sexual orientation" refers to those patterns of attraction that tend to be persistent. Dr. Diamond proposes a model for romantic love and sexual desire that is based on an assumption that "the evolved processes underlying sexual desire and affectional bonding are functionally independent," given that the components of sexual attraction and emotional connection in a relationship "do not always agree."¹⁰ Finding someone sexually desirable does not always mean one will be romantically bonded to them or vice versa. It's also important to note that sometimes an attraction we *interpret* as sexual may, in reality, be more emotional or intellectual in nature.

Furthermore, the dominant paradigm in our culture is that the *sex* or *gender* we are attracted to is the chief organizing principle of our "sexual orientation," but it is far from the only possible one. We could just as easily label sexual orientation around shape, size, race, personal values, ethnic traits, emotional bond, religious belief, social class, or economic status. There may even be greater persistence in some of these variables than the variable of gender preference. We are the ones, as a culture, who have drawn the conceptual lines. They are not inherent. Anyone who is opposite-sex oriented knows that they are not attracted to all or even most people of the opposite sex, and those who are same-sex oriented know they are not attracted to all or even most people of the same sex. The mere fact that someone is male or female is insufficient to make them sexually or romantically desirable. Therefore, some other factor or cluster of factors is more decisive than mere gender when it comes to physical attraction. So why are we attracted to the few of either sex we *are* attracted to, and how might that inform us regarding our "orientation"?

Again, a variety of individual factors and experiences have influenced and shaped the nature of sexuality, sexual desire, and our personal sexual identity. The concept of sexual orientation, particularly as it's been narrowly and exclusively defined by gender, is limited and not very explanatory. This realization can help individuals more effectively explore the congruence and resolution they seek between their sexuality and their personal value systems.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AND RELATIONSHIPS

It is vital to understand that the choices we make with regard to sexual behavior and relationships arise from personal values and beliefs. Some

would say that “homosexuality is not a lifestyle choice,” but anything that can be categorized in terms of “lifestyle” involves some significant measure of personal choice. For Latter-day Saints, “lifestyle” is the factor most easily moderated by exercise of agency. Absolutely fundamental to LDS theology is the concept that we are moral agents who co-create our world as eternal intelligences *who act rather than are acted upon*. While we do not always choose our circumstances, we *do* choose our response to those circumstances. As noted by Elder Dallin H. Oaks in his 1995 *Ensign* article addressing same-sex attraction:

Some kinds of feelings seem to be inborn. Others are traceable to mortal experiences. Still other feelings seem to be acquired from a complex interaction of “nature and nurture.” 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 entertain inappropriate thoughts or to engage in sinful behavior. . . .

Different persons have different physical characteristics and different susceptibilities to the various physical and emotional pressures we may encounter in our childhood and adult environments. We did not choose these personal susceptibilities either, but we do choose and will be accountable for the attitudes, priorities, behavior, and “lifestyle” we engraft upon them.¹¹

Given the diversity of experience, and the varied persistence of that experience, for whom might homosexual behavior become a sin and for whom is it simply unfair, as some would characterize, to be required to live the standards guiding sexual behavior and relationship as articulated by Church leaders?

While the laws and commandments and covenants are the same for each of us, the weight of each of those laws and covenants will press upon each of us very differently. For example, restrictions found in the Word of Wisdom may be a temptation for some but not for others. Similarly, some may find paying tithing difficult while others do not. Even with same-sex attraction, some people manage it quite well despite the possible belief they’ll never get married to someone of the opposite sex in this life, but others feel that it is simply too much of a load to bear and too unreasonable for the Church to require them to sacrifice their desires.

There also seems to be this assumed idea that because a feeling or impulse or desire is “natural,” it must also therefore be good or morally acceptable. “Natural” does not necessarily equate to good or desirable. The only thing that “natural” means is that feelings, desires, and impulses naturally manifest themselves within a given set of circumstances. Regardless of whether something shows up naturally, it may still require the exercise of

inherent agency to channel, control, manage, bridle, or *educate*. Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck stated in his book *The Road Less Traveled*: “The tendency to avoid challenge is so omnipresent in human beings that it can properly be considered a characteristic of human nature. But calling it natural does not mean it is essential or beneficial or unchangeable behavior. It is also natural to never brush our teeth. Yet we teach ourselves to do the unnatural until the unnatural becomes itself second nature. Indeed, all self-discipline might be defined as teaching ourselves to do the unnatural.”¹²

Even the natural desires and affections we have that are essentially good are still vulnerable to all of the distortions inherent to life in a fallen, mortal world and, as President John Taylor taught, “want sanctifying.” He stated, “We have a great many principles innate in our natures that are correct, but . . . like everything else, [they have] to be sanctified. An unlawful gratification of these feelings and sympathies is wrong in the sight of God, and leads down to death, while a proper exercise of our functions leads to life, happiness, and exaltation in this world and the world to come. And so it is in regard to a thousand other things.”¹³

Christian biblical scholar N.T. Wright has similarly observed:

We have lived for too long in a world, and tragically even in a church . . . where the wills and affections of human beings are regarded as sacrosanct as they stand, where God is required to command what we already love and to promise what we already desire. The implicit religion of many people today is simply to discover who they really are and then try to live it out—which is, as many have discovered, a recipe for chaotic, disjointed, and dysfunctional humanness. The logic of cross and resurrection, of the new creation which gives shape to all truly Christian living, points in a different direction. And one of the central names for that direction is joy: the joy of relationships healed as well as enhanced, the joy of belonging to the new creation, of finding not what we already had but what God was longing to give us.¹⁴

Several prophets have taught that we are “gods in embryo,” and in Mormon theology the work of Godhood is a work of creation and order—of organizing intelligences¹⁵ or of bringing order to disordered or chaotic elements in the universe to form new worlds. The call of authentic, imaginative, and generative spirituality is to identify opportunities to actively engage in this creative work of godhood every day, whether through managing emotions, ordering distorted thought patterns, bridling passions, educating desires, growing souls or organizing families. Godhood isn’t about seeking to live according to what is natural but to take natural element and shape it, organize it, build it, channel it, bridle it, and nurture it toward something

transcendent—whether that be the element of our bodies or the element of the cosmos.

IDENTITY

“Being gay” is not a scientific idea, but rather a cultural and philosophical one, addressing the subjective concept of *identity*. Our sense of identity is something we negotiate with our environment, which can include our biological environment. From an LDS perspective, the essential spiritual person within us exists independent of our mortal biology, so even our biology, or our body, is part of our “environment” and something that we relate to and negotiate our identity with, rather than something that inherently or essentially defines us. Also, while there have likely always been homoerotic attraction, desire, behavior, and even relationships among humans, the narratives through which sexuality is understood and incorporated into one’s sense of self and identity is subjective and culturally influenced. The “gay” person or personality as we might conceptualize it today didn’t exist prior to the mid-twentieth century.

In an LDS context, people often express concern about words that are used—whether they be “same-sex attraction,” which some feel denies the realities of the “gay” experience, or “gay,” “lesbian,” or “LGBT,” which some feel speaks more to specific belief systems and lifestyle choices contrary to the gospel. What’s important to understand, however, is that identity isn’t just about the words we use but the paradigms and worldviews and perceptions of or beliefs about the self and selfhood through which we interpret and integrate our various experiences into a sense of personal identity, sexual or otherwise. And identity is highly fluid and subject to modification with change in personal values or sociocultural contexts.

The terms “gay,” “lesbian,” and “bisexual” aren’t uniformly understood or experienced in the same way by everyone who may use or adopt those terms, so it’s the way those terms or labels are incorporated into selfhood that accounts for identity. One person might describe himself or herself as “gay” simply as convenient shorthand for the mouthful of “son or daughter of God who happens to experience romantic, sexual, or other attractions toward persons of the same sex for causes unknown and perhaps for only the short duration of mortality,” while another person describes himself or herself as “gay” as a sort of eternal identity and state of being, believing they were gay or same-sex oriented in the premortal world and that they will again be so in the eternal world.

An important philosophical thread in the overall experience of identity is the experience of “selfhood”—what it means to have a self, and what it means to “be true to” that self. The question of what it means to be true to ourselves is a philosophical rather than a scientific one. In her book *Multiplicity: The New Science of Personality, Identity, and the Self*, award-winning

science and medical writer Rita Carter explores the plurality of “selves” who live in each one of us and how each of those varied and sometimes conflicting senses of self inform various aspects of our identity(ies). This sense seems to be universal. In the movie *The Incredibles*, there’s a scene in which IncrediBoy says to Mr. Incredible, “You always, always say, ‘Be true to yourself,’ but you never say which part of yourself to be true to!”¹⁶

However one chooses to self-identify here in a fallen, temporal world limited by human culture and human language, I firmly believe that, like Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in which all social and political systems were swallowed up in the gospel stone that rolled forth to consume the nations, so will the spiritual ideals and identities of the kingdom of God and the celestial nature swallow up all of our social identity constructs that blur eternal identity.¹⁷ The more deeply we understand and feel spiritually connected to eternal realities and our eternal identity, the less meaningful any proximate, mortal identities or labels will feel to us.

CHASTITY, CONSECRATION, AND SPIRITUALITY

With a more nuanced understanding of sexuality as background, how should we best understand and approach sexuality through the lens of Latter-day Saint theology? LDS scholar Hugh Nibley stated:

[The] words of the prophets cannot be held to the tentative and defective tests that men have devised for them. Science, philosophy, and common sense all have a right to their day in court. But the last word does not lie with them. Every time men in their wisdom have come forth with the last word, other words have promptly followed. The last word is a testimony of the gospel that comes only by direct revelation. Our Father in heaven speaks it, and if it were in perfect agreement with the science of today, it would surely be out of line with the science of tomorrow. Let us not, therefore, seek to hold God to the learned opinions of the moment when he speaks the language of eternity.¹⁸

While science, philosophy, and common sense can enhance our understanding of sexuality and gender as part of the broad spectrum of our human experience, the last word does not lie with them. Regardless of what scientific inquiry will reveal over time about the origin and developmental nuances of sexuality—and it’s still far from conclusive—it will never be sufficient to frame the eternal lenses through which we harness and channel our human passions and guide our life choices. Our choices as Latter-day Saints are guided by the values and beliefs informed by the “language of eternity,” and we learn through the Spirit and through the inspired teachings of divinely commissioned prophets and apostles.

One of those values and beliefs is the law of chastity. Many Latter-day Saints are prone to think of chastity as an individual virtue—and even at times, perhaps, as one that is only applicable while single—the law of chastity being a list of do’s and don’ts one adheres to until married. But I would like to propose here a more expansive view of what we have traditionally called the law of chastity because I believe we too often become legalistic and behavioristic in our thinking around chastity, which can actually serve to cripple spiritual growth.

The words “chaste” and “chastity” share their root with the terms “chasten” or “chastise.” While people are typically not prone to think fondly of the idea of being chastened or chastised, the term *chaste* simply means “to be pure,” and *chastening* or *chastisement* mean “to make pure.” Psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross stated that “the most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”¹⁹ Similarly, Elder Orson F. Whitney stated, “No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God.”²⁰ All of our life experiences have the capacity, if we consecrate them to the Lord, to make us more pure—or more chaste. The essence of chastity is something we *become*, not something we *do*.

The idea of chastening is most frequently expressed in modern-day scripture in the context of building Zion, with the Lord stating that the Saints were not ready, were not pure enough, to build Zion in Jackson County, Missouri—that they must be “chastened for a season”²¹ until they could abide “by the law of the celestial kingdom.”²² At the heart of their lack of preparation was their unwillingness to fully live the law of consecration: to give everything they had and everything they were to the building of Zion. As a people, we cannot turn our efforts toward building Zion without a deep sense of humility, seeing ourselves and our lives as an important but small part of a much larger purpose and work, and being mindful and caring of the needs of the people and world around us. The Saints were told that they needed to be chastened because they “d[id] not impart of their substance, as becometh saints, to the poor and afflicted among them.”²³

The principles of chastity and consecration are intimately interwoven in the concept of creating Zion. The willingness to surrender all that we have and all that we are to the building up of Zion, including our sexuality, is key to the process of developing purity and holiness of heart that are the

defining virtues of Zion. We cannot become truly pure in heart without recognizing that all that we are is intimately interconnected with all life.

In an essay titled “Chastity and the Environment,” Suzanne Evertson Lundquist, BYU associate professor of English, describes how through interactions with Latin and Native American cultures and myths she was able to see more clearly that chastity is not just an individual virtue—or even a virtue between consenting, loving adults—but a social virtue. “*The principles of chastity govern all relationships—relationships with self, with community, with the earth, and with deity.*”²⁴ Chastity affects entire families, communities, nations, and the world as a whole. The connection between reproduction and the cyclic nature of life, death, and creation show that the law of chastity maintains a delicate harmony. When we adopt incorrect and harmful attitudes about sex or family relationships, we disrupt the balance and cause effects that will ripple throughout time and space unless we repent and bring our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors back into harmony with divine principle. In essence, the law of chastity is not even how we express *sexuality*, but *relationality*. Sexuality is only one subset of relationality. To consecrate our sexuality is to employ it only toward the divine ends for which it—and we—were created.

To think that the process of righteousness or perfection happens solely on an individual level is erroneous. Christ told the story of the rich young ruler who came to him saying he’d kept the commandments from birth and wondered what he lacked. The Savior, wanting to teach him that holiness isn’t about behavioral or ritual conformity but rather about caring for and becoming ministers of grace and healing to others, commanded him to sell all and give to the poor.²⁵ But consecration isn’t just about giving up temporal possessions. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “We must be willing to place all that we have—not just our possessions (they may be the easiest things of all to give up), but also our ambition and pride and stubbornness and vanity—we must place it all on the altar of God, kneel there in silent submission, and willingly walk away.”²⁶

In his talk “Spiritual Ecology,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell stated, “We worry about pollution and rightfully so, but a home in which there is not adequate love pollutes society just as surely as we pollute the air and streams around us, and people further ‘down stream’ pay a price.”²⁷ Immorality is social pollution—but morality doesn’t just govern personal behavior. The principles of morality and chastity govern how we treat and express love towards one another, including those whose current lifestyle choices are not in harmony with gospel law—for a family to disown or reject a child because of behavior they don’t approve of would also be considered immoral and unchaste. These principles also call us to social advocacy for harmony and order regarding sex and family relationships. It is principles of chastity that petition us in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” to “promote those

measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.”²⁸ It can be difficult to sensitively navigate the tensions between expressing unconditional love toward others whose life choices are out of harmony with gospel law and advocating for the social harmony and order that the spirit of Zion invites us into. In a conference address, Elder Holland said, “So if love is to be our watchword, as it must be, then by the word of Him who is love personified, we must forsake transgression and any hint of advocacy for it in others. Jesus clearly understood what many in our modern culture seem to forget: that there is a crucial difference between the commandment to forgive sin (which He had an infinite capacity to do) and the warning against condoning it (which He never ever did even once).”²⁹

In sum, the law of chastity is intimately interwoven with the law of consecration and a broader view of human society, and we can employ our sexuality or promote sexuality for either the good or ill of the world at large. Sexuality and chastity are *social* virtues that we consecrate toward ends of divine sociality, not merely premarital or marital behavioral codes.

THE CHANGING CONVERSATION

Over the course of the last few years, there has been a remarkable shift in the conversation about homosexuality in LDS culture, and I believe we’ll continue to see some additional shifts. While core doctrines of the Church with regard to the appropriate bounds of sexual expression have not and will not change, there has been a clarifying and nuancing of Church teaching. For example, prophets and apostles are clear to teach that sexual attraction or temptation is not a sin, only inappropriate indulgence in thought or behavior is sinful. There has also been a notable shift in our cultural and relational attitudes. We’re becoming much more open and compassionate and loving in our relationships with others wherever they may be in their journey of faith, even as we continue to embrace our own faith in the Savior and the doctrines of the restored gospel.

Around this topic, where there is still so much we do not understand, many look at how past practices of the Church have changed over time, such as cessation of polygamy and the ordination of all worthy males to the priesthood, as hopeful signs that additional understanding of this issue and changed practices will be forthcoming. But both of these analogies are misguided. Perhaps a more useful parallel to review is a comparison to the Church’s changing attitude towards Darwinian evolution. Instead of denouncing evolution as counter to a belief that God is the Creator, leaders have taken the position that the purpose of scripture and of the revelation of God through prophets is to tell us *why* man was created, not to tell us *how* man was created.

People can believe what they want about *how* sexuality develops and in what ways it may or may not change over the lifespan, but when it comes

to the role sexuality plays in the eternal plan and how we fulfill the measure of our creation here, our choices must be guided by the *why* of our doctrine and our covenants, not by any particular biological, psychological, or social theory currently in vogue. Elder Holland wrote: “As for why you feel as you do, I can’t answer that question. A number of factors may be involved, and they can be as different as people are different. Some things, including the cause of your feelings, we may never know in this life.”³⁰

So what does that mean, exactly, in terms of practical, everyday living? I believe it means we *pray* and we *practice*. It means we have to pray both to understand what true love and intimacy really is, and then we have to seek it and nurture and grow it in our lives and relationships. As Brad Wilcox has so eloquently and memorably stated, we are not here on earth to *earn* heaven—we’re here to *learn* heaven.³¹ As noted earlier, while there may be feelings of sexual or other attraction that we’re called to *channel* and *transcend* if we’re to become divine, there are other qualities of attraction that are good and godly and that we should *embrace* and *cultivate* in our lives.

While we will continue to learn much about the human dynamics associated with homosexual attraction and the myriad potential factors influencing its development through the scientific disciplines, God’s living prophets have spoken clearly and with divine authority regarding the order and appropriate bounds of sexual expression. Proverbs reads, “When there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but the one who keeps the law, blessed is he!”³² The gift and blessing of the gospel, both for us and for those we have the opportunity to share it with, is that it invites us into an expansive and transcendent way of being and an expression of our sexuality that not only invites us into deeper love and intimacy and connectedness with *everyone* around us but also reassures us that any potential conflicts in our feelings will be resolved into their proper place in the world to come if, while on our mortal journey here on earth, we pursue that higher, celestial love in chastity and self-restraint.

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who desire to live within the framework of the doctrines and teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

NOTES

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15. Abraham 3:21–22.
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17. See Daniel 2:31–45.

18. Hugh Nibley, "The Prophets and the Open Mind," in *The World and the Prophets* (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 134.
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21. D&C 103:4.
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23. D&C 105:3.
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