



Family Fellowship

Letter to an Apostle:

A Father Considers Homosexuality, Mormon Doctrine and Christianity

H. Wayne Schow

Dedication

Dedicated with appreciation to the supportive friends we have found in Family Fellowship.

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*Letter to an Apostle:
A Father Considers Homosexuality,
Mormon Doctrine and Christianity*

Pocatello, Idaho
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Elder Marvin J. Ashton
Church Office Building
50 East North Temple Street
Salt Lake City, Utah 84150

Dear Brother Ashton:

I am writing to share with you one family's experience with a homosexual son, and to explore with you a point of view which bears on the posture of our Church toward homosexual people. Perhaps it is quixotic for me to do so, for the Church's position on the matter appears to be firmly established. Nevertheless, since my wife and I have come to view this as a moral issue of considerable importance, we hope you will take the time to read this long narrative and the comments based on it.

We are a Latter-day Saint family whose antecedents in the Church go back for generations on both sides. As a young man I served a mission to Denmark, my wife and I were married in the Logan Temple. We have raised four sons in the Church, have participated in its programs in the ways that are advocated by our leaders. As parents, we have tried diligently to foster in our sons a vision and an example of the Christian life. All of our boys were obedient to their parents and faithful to the standards of the Church as they grew up; they

were good students and good citizens. As young men three of them have carried the gospel message into the mission field—the youngest is currently serving in Uruguay. As a family we have been blessed to enjoy the good opinion of our LDS brothers and sisters in the wards and stakes in which we have resided. I mention these facts only because I think they are important to help you evaluate the perspective from which I now write.

Eight years ago, when he was twenty, our eldest son, Brad, came to his mother and me and told us he was homosexual. We were caught by surprise, for virtually nothing in his appearance or behavior would have suggested this; he was a muscular, sturdy youth, not at all effeminate in manner, and his friendships with both boys and girls had seemed well within the bounds of normality. The only difference we had observed was his being somewhat more intellectual and more highly interested in serious music, art and literature than the majority of his high school friends. Perhaps there was one sign that something was wrong, easier to recognize after the fact; he had been subject to periods of depression, which concerned us somewhat at the time but which we attributed to the general difficulties of getting through the teen period.

Our response to his declaration was predictable. We were dismayed (I had always

had visceral negative feelings about homosexual people); we were incredulous. We suggested to him that he probably was mistaken, that since he had no intimate sexual experience, he couldn't be sure at that point. We counseled him to be in no hurry to act on his "supposed" feelings, to date young women seriously in the meantime. Possibly, we conceded, he might be bisexual and was thus in a position to opt for wife, family and a life acceptable to church and society, a less problematic and more fulfilling life. Homosexuality, we contended, is sterile; it does not contribute

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to perpetuating life. "Choose otherwise," we urged him.

But he was convinced that the orientation of his sexual feelings was not a matter of choice, and he produced a folder full of articles whose authors, some of them homosexual themselves, some of them Latter-day Saints, concurred with him. (Clearly he had been doing a lot of reading. We devoured the articles, the first of many books and articles we would sift through in the years to follow, trying to make some sense of the chaos of theories relating to this subject.) Brad told us he had known of these feelings—unequivocal sexual feelings focused toward males rather

than females—since his early years in grade school, that these feelings had become even clearer during his high school years. Incidentally, he had in school an equal number of male and female friends, spent many of his recreational hours in mixed company, and dated girls after he reached sixteen, though not with great frequency.

In retrospect, we realize that the periods of depression that plagued him during these years were substantially a result of the traumatic identity crisis he was experiencing. He told us that he prayed fervently over a long period that God would help him to reorient his feelings toward heterosexuality, and he promised God that he would repay such kindness with extraordinary devotion. (His personal journals from this period confirm this; they present a picture of a religious youth, caught up in seminary instruction, concluding from that instruction as well as from all the implicit messages received from home, Church and society, that he was flawed, sinful, cursed as it seemed to him in spite of his wish to be otherwise.) If we were deeply sorrowful in those first days after his disclosure, it was not least of all because we realized how deeply he had suffered alone, while we, unaware, had done nothing to help him.

And we now understood why, after considerable vacillation, Brad had decided not to fill a Church mission. Though he had not, at nineteen, engaged in homosexual relations and thus was presumably worthy in this and other respects, he could not square his troubled self-image with his understanding of what a missionary should be; he knew that the only way he could

represent the Church was to deny the legitimacy of who and what he felt deeply he was, and that seemed to him unfair both to the Church, because it was hypocritical, and to himself, because it was a violation of himself. I did not understand at the time, though now I do, how much personal integrity was evidenced in that decision. For I know now what tremendous pressure he had to withstand, and what extreme pain he felt in that situation.

After finishing his sophomore year at college, he returned from Salt Lake City and discussed his situation with us. He had during that semester made contact with the gay underground, and he was planning to go with a close friend to Los Angeles. Moreover, he had virtually dropped out of the Church. These decisions were deeply upsetting to his mother and me. We knew the dangers that awaited him in that city; we knew that the ballast he needed to stabilize him was now lessened considerably. But from my present vantage point, I see (I saw it reluctantly even then) that it was a risk he had to take; for the sake of his own self-esteem he had to discover and test the truth of his unique identity. He had emerged from his teen years with his sense of self-worth shattered. It is not too much to say that our culture had encouraged him to hate himself, and the Church unwittingly, unintentionally—had contributed substantially to that despairing self-estimate. In its general attitude toward homosexuality, it deprecated who he was. Since gay people could not live openly in Idaho and Utah, he had to go where there were enough others of his kind that he could feel his essential identity was accept-

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able. I think he did not leave the Church so much as it left him by ignoring, denying his personal reality.

Meanwhile, his parents wrestled with demons of their own. What had we done wrong? Was I a wimpy father? No. Was his mother domineering, over protective? No, no. Had I overpowered him, had I been distant, had he and I failed to relate well to each other? No, no, no. Had he been oedipally attracted to his mother? No. None of the facile theories about parental influence on the development of homosexual behavior made much sense in our case. Did real love exist in our family? Yes. Had we shared much quality time together? Yes. Had his parent's marriage been a good one? Better than average. Ultimately, we came to the conclusion that Brad's homosexuality was not a matter of failed parenting or inadequate family relationships. Nor, we believe, would either professional counselors or those who know us well think so.

When he left for California, we were extraordinarily concerned about what we could do to help him. Clearly he was at the juncture in his life where he had to

establish his independence and we had to recognize his God-given right to determine his own course. So we tried not to be intrusive, while at the same time keeping our lines of communication open. We did not want to jeopardize the good relationship we had always had with him.

In Los Angeles, Brad was thrown on his own resources, earning his own living, making all his own decisions, learning to be street-smart, learning to negotiate traffic in the fast lane. Inevitably there was a clash between the values of his Idaho upbringing and the esthetic hedonism of West Hollywood. He tried to have the best of both lives, but they were incompatible. To us he praised his brave new world; it was, however, as if he protested too much. His relationship with a lover came to an end. After two years, he began to sense the desperation that lay beneath the surface of the frenzied life he was participating in. After the third year he saw clearly that the behavior of many of his gay friends was self-destructive, nihilistic. It was the behavior of people who do not accept themselves because society does not, the behavior of people who have no joy and hope in contemplating the future.

It is never easy to leave a supportive community, but Brad felt he must get out of that environment if he was to put his life back on a solid basis—with education for a meaningful career, with positive attitudes about life. Most importantly, he knew he had to overcome the isolation of the ghetto and renew contact with the mainstream. But where to go? To come back to Idaho and Utah was to plunge again into an

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earlier experience of cultural alienation, to renew the conscious tension between himself and the Latter-day Saints. On the other hand, he felt his love for the region of his roots, and nearness to his family might steady him. His decision to attend a university in Utah for the sake of one of its nationally reputed professional programs was a calculated risk; would he be saved by closeness to the moral influence of those cultural roots or would he be suffocated in a closed environment? By now we had accepted his homosexuality, he felt our support, and we hoped we could be a buffer for him.

He did return, and for two years pursued this experiment in personal growth and professional education. On the positive side, he left behind the promiscuity that had become part of his life in Los Angeles, and he was advancing toward a career. On the other hand he was terribly isolated in that Utah community, angry at the smugness of the comfortably religious around him, concerned lest his homosexual identity be discovered by his acquaintances, fearful of what harm he could sustain if it were.

At this stage Brad contemplated the future with great ambivalence. There were so many things in life that he loved—the beauty of the natural world; the monu-

ments of man's achievements in art and culture. Yet those deep pleasures were undermined by the ever-present awareness of being an outsider and thereby permanently cut off from so much that his religion had taught him to desire. Not least of these inaccessible opportunities was the family, with children, he had always wanted, for in good conscience he now felt he would never be able to ask a woman to marry him. With reduced possibilities before him, he sometimes wondered if life was really worth clinging to. Nevertheless, he was coping; he had separated himself from the extremes of nihilism and self-destructive behavior.

In view of this, what happened to him next seems a cruel irony. When he came home in the summer of 1985 to help us with the construction of our new family home, he was clearly not well. Apparently incubating in his blood since the period in Los Angeles, the AIDS virus had reared its head and begun its deadly work. As it turned out his homecoming was to last for the remainder of his life. His condition grew steadily worse over the summer and fall; in November he nearly died from pneumocystis pneumonia. A period of brief remission, during which he gamely attempted to continue his studies at our local university on a part-time basis, was followed by inexorable decline. He died December 5, 1986.

Aids is a devastating antagonist. It dismantles a person ounce by ounce, nerve by nerve. Brad fought this horrible disease courageously, with the independent, self-reliant spirit he had always had; and he

did not attempt to evade responsibility for what had happened to him. At the same time he tried so hard to find some deeper religious significance in his physical and spiritual suffering (and so did we). To the very end of his life he was struggling to find faith that could comfort him. Indeed, he had been engaged in a spiritual odyssey for years. After he concluded that he was unacceptable to the LDS Church—and therefore rejected fellowship in it—he looked at oriental religions, born-again Christianity, and pantheism. But his personal integrity was such that he could not accept easy explanations that did not seem compatible with reality as he perceived it. We will never forget the conversations we shared with him, day by day, by night, during that last year, conversations in which we shared our convictions and our uncertainties.

The final year of Brad's life was the most difficult one our family has known, a year of perplexity, a year of grieving. Paradoxically,

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it was also the most profoundly meaningful year of our lives. Sharing his ordeal exposed us to dimensions of experiences that enlarged our awareness of the human condition. We learned so much from him in the way he faced the difficult circumstances of his illness and his life. We are grateful to him; we are proud of him. He

was such a fine young man. At this point, we can say that we feel blessed to have had a son who was homosexual.

I have lingered over these narrative details partly because they are engraved so indelibly in my mind, but also partly to make a point, namely that assessing the meaning and morality of homosexuality cannot be done in the abstract. For it involves not theological premises finally, but real people, decent people and those close to them. It requires that we take into account the uniqueness of individuals, their fundamental integrity, their hopes and dreams; it requires that in the process we do not distort their special reality. For those of us grown used to viewing life from a fixed philosophical framework, the encounter with homosexuality jars us out of our comfortable complacency because we find to our consternation that the conventional explanations, the conventional rules don't account adequately for what is really happening to people.

I am sure that many of our LDS friends, in extending their sympathies to us, have grieved for us because they think we have lost a son for the eternity; they see Brad as having been disobedient to the law and thereby cut off from the possibility of celestial reward. But to us, who knew Brad well, who knew the challenge he faced, the intensity of his quest, the honesty of his response, such a conclusion is unthinkable. In the context of all that we hold to be just and reasonable, Brad does not seem disqualified from any potential growth and development. Because we find his life to have been lived well, because it was a

life of great value for us and others, we conclude that, as it was, it must have value also in God's eyes, and that the possibility for a renewal of progress now lies open before him.

The unavoidable challenge that we faced during the past eight years has been to try to understand our son (and ultimately others like him), to evaluate him and his life experience fairly, and to do this in the context of our religious philosophy. This has been difficult indeed, for our acceptance of LDS moral authority and our loyalty to our son and respect for his integrity seemed irreconcilable. As we understand it, the position of the Church in regard to homosexuality was (and is) as follows: 1) The practice of homosexuality is held to be unnatural because it is biologically unfruitful; 2) only within heterosexual marriage may sexual desires be expressed with full intimacy; 3) homosexual inclination, therefore, must be suppressed, either through celibacy or through reorientation of sexual feelings within heterosexual marriage; 4) this suppression or reorientation

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is possible because homosexual inclination and practice are learned behaviors and lie within the control of righteous choice; 5) indulgence in homosexual acts is a grave

In the face of this teaching, how were we to account for what had happened to Brad—and to us—when, it seemed to us he had pursued his life with honesty and courage?

sin, appropriately punished by excommunication; 6) this position is supported by scriptural authority and reiterated by modern prophets. In the face of this teaching, how were we to account for what had happened to Brad—and to us—when, it seemed to us, he had pursued his life with honesty and courage? In confronting this conflict, we gradually realized we would have to be open to the lessons of experience, and we would have to sort out a great many intricacies in the light of the central tenets of Christianity as we understood them.

Ultimately, the crux of the matter seems to be the question of whether homosexual preference is learned behavior, and therefore alterable, or—on the other hand—deeply, indelibly imprinted in the biological inheritance of the individual. We began with the assumption that it lies within the realm of free choice, that to choose it is at best unwise pragmatically, at worst sinful. But gradually our view has changed. For eight years we studied the scholarly literature on the subject; we learned to know more homosexual people than previously we knew existed, and we listened carefully to their personal accounts, trying to evaluate the complexities of their experience as objectively as

possible. Above all, we watched our son and learned what we could of the sources of his feelings. From these observations we are persuaded that for many, probably the majority of gay people, it is not a choice. An increasing body of scientific evidence points to the likelihood that homosexual inclination is a matter of genetic makeup, of biochemistry, and therefore originates outside the arena of moral choice.

And there are further, pragmatic arguments that homosexuality is not freely determined. To be homosexual in this culture is so socially painful that only the most addle-headed would voluntarily choose to be such pariahs. Moreover, for persons like our son and many others of LDS upbringing, the desire to be comfortably affiliated with the church, to be approved according to its teachings, is so strong that it would prevail over homosexual identity if choice of orientation were really possible. Not least, for gay people like our son, who so much desire the experience of rearing a family, choosing to forego such experience is highly unlikely were choice possible. We have seen homosexual people in agony, wishing to be otherwise from what they are. We can no longer believe that for them it is simply a matter of misdirected agency.

Once you acknowledge the possibility (indeed, the likelihood) that homosexuality is an involuntary, biologically imprinted dimension of personal identity, suddenly the ontological implications of the condition shift dramatically, and it must be seen in different moral perspective. Suddenly, we must acknowledge that to be homo-

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sexual is not ipso facto to be unnatural but rather part of a natural minority—with some distinctly separate possibilities and challenges. Not to allow that difference may be to violate unrighteously the given framework within which members of this natural minority must, for the time being, work out their salvation and progression. If homosexuality is not learned behavior, we must abandon our practice of attempting to “cure” the “illness” and rather concentrate on helping the gay person to express his natural sexuality in positive ways.

Nevertheless, say those who consider the matter abstractly, whether chosen or suffered inadvertently, this condition--most certainly its expression--is necessarily condemned by most religions. After all, the Biblical denunciations of it in both the Old and New Testaments are undeniable and they continue, it must therefore be sinful. There are two issues to be dealt with here: 1) what kind of moral authority is represented by those scriptural passages and pronouncements based on them? And 2) what precisely in the essence of homosexuality would make it sinful?

Let us begin with the former question. The scriptures are records of the spiritual history of an important portion of the human family. They demonstrate clearly a gradual growth in spiritual stature among the “chosen peoples” as higher principles have been revealed and understood. In the Bible this growth is clearly seen in the fact that numerous attitudes represented there (and commandments associated with them) have been altered as humankind has progressed in its quest for higher spiritual truth. The Mosaic law became outmoded in many respects; cruel punishments and retributions deemed appropriate in Old Testament times are no longer seen as compatible with Christian love. The gospel, once held to be the province of the chosen few, came to be regarded as essential for all of God’s children, and it became clear that Jehovah was more than a tribal god. Paul’s disparaging attitude toward marriage has been revised; women are moving to a position of equality unthought of even by Paul; Blacks now enjoy equal status in the church. Etcetera.

Now, is it not possible that homosexuality is an analogous case, but one which because

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of its complexity is even yet not adequately understood? This father of a fine son who was homosexual wants to look more carefully at the contextual implications of those Biblical passages related to homosexuality to see if they are, in fact, rooted in cultural biases rather than eternal truth. History repeatedly illustrates that men tend to fear what is different from themselves; this has led over the centuries to much intolerance and great injustice. Sexual homophobia is one example of this, which probably has much to do with the summary treatment it receives in the Biblical passages.

The Bible surely is a record of God’s revelation to the human family, but it seems apparent also that the continual perfection of God’s revelation is limited by the ability of cultures and individuals to receive it. It would be naive, I think, to argue that even the noblest of the prophets, ancient and modern, are not to some degree linked with the values of their contemporary cultures; we do not, I think, claim our prophets are infallible and omniscient in grasping and communicating the total will of God. Men and women generally, and even prophets, learn line upon line, precept upon precept. The Church does not lose stature or credibility if it acknowledges that we are even now in the process of seeking to acquire a more nearly perfect perception of the meanings and applications of Divine love.

I think it is apparent, then, that condemning homosexuality as sinful simply on the basis of an appeal to Biblical authority is not sufficient. We must undertake a more painstaking moral assessment based on its

effects. On what specific grounds might we regard it as sinful? Well, the highest criteria against which Latter-Day Saint Christians should measure behavior (including homosexual behavior) were given us by Christ. He taught the Jews--and all of us--that we need to look at human behavior not in terms of conformity to the letter of a generalized law, but rather to evaluate it in the light of its compatibility with the spirit of love and the degree to which it promotes growth of the individual. In this light, sin can be regarded as behavior that weakens our capacity for love, impedes our growth toward divine characteristics, and in general undermines the worth and dignity of the individual as an offspring of God. I believe it is in the spirit of Christ’s teaching to evaluate homosexual expression by this definition. I believe he would not condemn gay people on the basis of an abstract doctrine (indeed, during His earthly ministry He showed unusual tolerance for those outside the behavioral

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standards of the establishment), but would rather ask of the individual homosexual person: “Are the feelings in your heart, and the actions based on those feelings, compatible with love for yourself and your fellow man? Do you practice homosexual love in such a way as to raise others and

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yourself toward perfection in Christian virtues? Is the physical expression of love linked in your behavior with commitment, mutual concern, and long term sharing?"

In other words, if Christ were considering this subject today, I do not think He would blame gays for a condition that, probably through no fault of their own, places them outside the majority and its establishment standards; rather I think He would judge the expression of their sexuality by standards similar to those we apply to heterosexuals; is it committed and loving in a larger context, or is it promiscuous and selfish and merely sensual? He would ask of homosexuals, "To what degree are your lives in conformity with the spirit of God's love?" By their fruits ye shall know them, he taught, and the fruits of the homosexual life vary considerably, even as do the fruits of heterosexuality. Perhaps the appropriate question is then, not whether but how one is homosexual.

Would Christ find homosexuality sinful on grounds that it is biologically infertile? I think not. Conceiving, bearing and rearing children in this life may be a blessing, but it is not a sine qua non for salvation

and continuing growth. A great many people, some for reasons beyond their control, do not produce offspring, and we do not regard this as evidence of moral failure. If homosexuals are genetically unsuited for the psychological demands of heterosexual cohabitation, that is sufficient justification for not marrying.

But would Christ find homosexual expression sinful on the premise that sexual intimacy outside marriage is forbidden? I doubt he would look at the matter that simplistically. The God-man who said that "the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath" would probably say something similar about marriage. He would recognize that for most of us, whatever our sexual orientation, a happy, productive, fulfilled life is more likely to be achieved if the individual is sustained by another loved one within the bonds of total, caring, committed intimacy—including certainly physical intimacy. He would recognize that marriage is justified (aside from its function for procreation and childrearing) because through sharing and commitment, it provides stability and mutual support conducive to maximum growth of the partners. For what sanctifies marriage is not its legal formality but rather the holy enterprise of bonding and complementing which is intrinsic to it. Christ would rec-

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ognize, I think, that homosexuals, deprived of a socially approved state of cohabitation in our culture, have nevertheless the same righteous needs for loving commitment to realize this kind of human progress. I think He would not be interested in denying to gays opportunities for growth that are compatible with their nature and with righteous love. That means, of course, that gays would have to enter into monogamous faithful relationships analogous to our ideal of heterosexual marriage. Ultimately, Christ would, I believe, judge each human relationship by its fruits.

If this is true, then it is a sad irony that Christ's Church, which ought to assist all individuals in realizing the maximum development of which each is capable, is not doing this for most gays. It ought to create environments in which growth can occur. But for homosexual people, the Church has become--through its repressive, blanket condemnation---a practical stumbling block on the path leading to self-acceptance. Without self-acceptance there can be no self-love, and without a true love of self as God's creature, there can be no true love of God and thus no fruitful progression toward divine perfection.

It is unfortunate that the Church, which should be a physician to those troubled in spirit, should itself be a powerful contributing cause of the condition that requires a physician. Do you doubt this? Consider the psychological burden born by Mormon homosexuals in particular. From their youth the seeds of low self-esteem are planted. From both adults and peers they hear the deprecating epithets, the scorn-

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ful aspersions, the biased misinformation about gays, which cause them to feel contemptible. They struggle to understand their differences in an environment which demands conformity. They hide their feelings from the world, even from loved ones, and hate themselves for this deception. They discover that there are laws against homosexual intimacy. They read books written by people who encourage their assumption that they are flawed, mentally ill. And along the way, when they desperately need to turn to the Church for comfort and assurance, it proclaims its "love for the sinners," its "condemnation of the sin." Ironically, the more religious the individual, the more he believes that he is wicked, the more he suffers from this institutional repudiation of his identity. His "tainted" sexuality seems to him the central fact of his existence and colors all facets of his life. How compatible is that mental state with the self-love necessary for spiritual progress?

I have heard Mormon gays, in despair of ever reconciling the reality of their lives with the Church they love, say that they prefer not to go on living, but that since suicide is wholly unacceptable in the light of Church teachings, they will take their chances of acquiring AIDS, a horrible but

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technically involuntary form of suicide. These people desperately need help.

I am saying that I think the Church, in spite of its good intentions, is failing to bring the highest level of Christian evaluation to the conduct of individual gay people. For if homosexuality is a given and not freely chosen, and if it is expressed in positive, committed, and loving contexts that bring confidence and growth and a feeling of self worth to the homosexual couples, where is the sin?

If this critical assessment is correct, it follows that the Church is not only failing to comfort many of its own members who need a radically different kind of assistance from what it generally offers them, it is also failing to help bring about an improved level of tolerant understanding in the greater society.

Think how many are adversely affected in that greater society--perhaps as many as ten percent of the human family, certainly not less than five percent by the very most conservative estimates. Within the Church alone, there could be as many as a half million people struggling in varying degrees to overcome self-hatred, to accept themselves against the grain of the Church's moral

authority. I do not think I can overstate my perception that the Church, which ought to be primarily involved with helping people, is in this matter doing violence to a great many human souls.

A word about some in the Church who advise that homosexuals should either re-channel their sexual feelings within the context of a heterosexual marriage or remain celibate: Some whose sexual feelings lie in the bisexual range may be able to adjust to a monogamous heterosexual marriage, but to urge confirmed, homosexuals to marry is itself potentially a sin, essentially unfair and detrimental to the spiritual well being and happiness of both parties. This, I think, is so obvious as not to require further comment. As for celibacy, while it may be an acceptable state to some temperaments, for many others a life so lived is an impoverishment, a missed

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opportunity; for celibacy is in one sense a denial of our sexual natures, a denial of a creative dimension of our humanness; it is an avoidance of the challenges of intimate personal relationship and a loss of the attendant potential for psychological and spiritual growth.

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Finally, if a celibate person counsels another to be celibate, the former at least has taken a position compatible with his own practice. But I question any who, themselves having enjoyed sexual intimacy within marriage, would require permanent celibacy of homosexual people, notwithstanding that between a homosexual couple there may exist a high level of mutual commitment. Such generalized demands are at best unperceptive of individual needs, at worst hypocritical.

As I contemplate Brad's short life, I am haunted by awareness of lost opportunities, and by a vision of what might have been. How much happier his teen years could have been, how much more productive the years of his young manhood had he not been burdened with an enervating ambivalence about the value of his life. I think of how much more his parents and teachers could have supported and assisted him if only their vision of homosexual potential had been freer, more adequate, and less fearful. I wonder, had he experienced in Idaho and Utah a community that accepted and encouraged a Christian expression of homosexual love, would he have found a loving companion with a shared cultural background and thereby have avoided the extremes of gay ghetto

life that finally destroyed his health and took his earthly life. I think of how the Church itself might better have helped us all to cope with the challenge of difference if it had emphasized more the positive, liberating side of its doctrines instead of the negative, constricting side.

Indeed, Latter-day Saint theology can accommodate the phenomenon of homosexuality in a positive, harmonious fashion. For example, I see the possibility of compatibility under the doctrine of eternal progression. We Latter-day Saints believe not only that our individual development is ongoing, but that it will continue over a very long temporal period, much longer certainly than can be contained within a brief mortal lifetime. Is it not possible, perhaps probable, that we are not all learning in a lockstep sequence, that God's children may vary in their personal approaches to eternal progression, some learning one discipline now, others acquiring it later, while the latter gain some experiences here which others defer? And perhaps not all of us experience this mortal life at exactly the same stage of eternal development. From this perspective, isn't it possible that some may have chosen to encounter the challenges of homosexuality in this

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Certainly, it seems to me, if we err as a Church on this particular issue, it would be better err on the side of love, acceptance, and positive encouragement to those of our brothers and sisters whose possibilities fall outside the typical pattern.

mortal life, perhaps because its demands are great but its potential rewards valuable or even, at some point, indispensable. From a pre-mortal perspective, at least, homosexuality might then really be based on agency and not a mistaken choice at all. There is so much possible under our general philosophy, and yet so much we don't understand, that I think we have to remain open-minded.

One could say that Brad grew from his suffering, that we and others have similarly benefited from the challenging circumstances that surrounded his life. Yes, that is doubtless true. Which only goes to show that all can profit from adversity if determined to do so. But that fact should not be interpreted as a justification for any of us causing pain to others, failing to ease their burdens when we can, failing to lift up and encourage and speed them along the path of their learning. It is perverse to cause suffering needlessly.

When I multiply Brad's experiences, and ours, many times and think of all those who need consolation, love, a chance to overcome alienation, a chance to talk

openly without being condemned (it is easy for me to do this, because since the circumstances of Brad's death have become known in our community, a surprising number of gay persons and parents of gay children have sought us out privately to see what help we may be able to give them)—in short, then I think of the great need that exists in so many among us, I sincerely hope the future will not continue to find Latter-day Saints and their church deficient in openness and charity toward this significant minority. Certainly, it seems to me, if we err as a Church on this particular issue, it would be better err on the side of love, acceptance, and positive encouragement to those of our brothers and sisters whose possibilities fall outside the typical pattern.

No one understands better than I how difficult this issue is and how complex its practical ramifications are, both for the individual and for the society. I can well imagine just how problematic a qualified acceptance of homosexuality by the Church would prove (though I think we must eventually accept and wrestle with that challenge). Certainly, homosexuality and its related circumstances demand the most careful moral scrutiny. But I fear that we may have placed so much emphasis on the moral aspects of the behavior of homosexual persons that we have all but forgotten to address the equally important moral obligation incumbent on the rest of us in responding to them.

Not least of all, we must learn to overcome our stereotyping of gay people. It is simply

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true, but not widely understood, that the majority of them are not offensive in dress, manner, or behavior (and in the case of those who are, their outward excesses are often provoked by society's lack of acceptance); few of the gay men we know are limp-wristed, few of the lesbian women are offensively masculine. On the contrary, if you could hazard a generalization about them, it would be that their numbers include a great many sensitive, caring, decent, creative human beings. Not only do you find them prominently engaged in artistic fields but frequently in the helping professions—as teachers, counselors, ministers, health care specialists. We must find ways to enable them to make their valuable contributions to society without creating, unnecessarily and unrighteously, obstacles in their paths.

If our moral response to our homosexual brothers and sisters is not adequate, if we do not discriminate sensitively and fairly, if we yield to the ease of simple blanket condemnation, we undermine their chance to respond morally in their circumstances. (I am convinced, for example, that promiscu-

ity among gays is fostered by the powerful disapproval in conservative communities of gay couples living openly together; they are thus driven into furtive, uncommitted encounters, partially by despair.) If we fail to assist them to grow according to their own potential, our own spiritual growth is similarly, if less obviously, undermined.

If you have been willing to read this letter to its conclusion, I thank you. I hope I have not come across as a man who is irrationally angry but rather as one whose criticism is fair and constructive. If the words I have chosen should seem impolitic, I can only say that they are not meant to be abrasive, that they grow out of honest feelings, and that they have been thoughtfully considered. My passion is occasioned not only by love for my son but by a lifelong commitment to the Church as an instrument for helping to make the gospel prevail in the earth. With all humility, I do feel bold to claim that the experience reported and weighed here is relevant to the Church and that mission. I earnestly hope, therefore, that this testimony will not be lightly dismissed by any who have not experienced what our family has.

I have sent this letter initially to you Elder Ashton, because over the years I

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have appreciated your tolerant and kindly approach to gospel living and judgment of others, and also because I felt your considerable experience with the Church Social Services might give you a broader frame of reference in assessing the letter's content. I would be grateful, naturally if the testimony it contains could in some form or other find a wider audience among the general authorities of the Church. Perhaps you will be willing to tell me whether you think what I have written here has sufficient merit to make it of interest to others of your peers and, if so what an appropriate means might be.

Sincerely,
H. Wayne Schow

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The substance of this letter was subsequently revised into essay form and published under the title "Homosexuality, Mormon Doctrine, and Christianity: A Father's Perspective." Sunstone 14 (February 1990) 9-12. Reprinted in Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-sex Identity. Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes, eds. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991.