

On Living the Gospel

By Eugene England

Speech given at the 6 September 1998 at the conference of Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons, held in Portland, Oregon.

Available online at http://www.affirmation.org/resources/on_living_the_gospel.shtml.

WHEN I WAS quite young I had two spiritual experiences that set the course and tone of much of my life. The first occurred one June morning when I was about eight, while my father and I were kneeling in the knee-high green wheat on our dry farm in Idaho. He was asking protection of the developing crop from hail and drought and wind and consecrating it all to the Lord, promising to use all we earned from it in building Zion. I suddenly felt a strong, almost physical, presence which seemed to me a confirmation from Jesus Christ that he was pleased with that consecration. That feeling of approval, a burning in my bosom and fire in my bones, was as real as anything I have experienced and has never entirely left me. It has come back again and again to serve as the touchstone by which I have judged among the choices and issues and conflicts of my life: My actions, decisions, and ideas that have brought to me feelings most close to that one long ago have been the ones I have trusted most and have been the ones that I have later been convinced were the best—the ones that Jesus Christ most approves.

The second experience came four years later, just after we had moved to Salt Lake City, when Elder Harold B. Lee was speaking at the last session of a stake conference. I was not paying attention, in fact was teasing my sister, who was sitting in the row behind me, but suddenly I felt myself physically turned around and compelled to listen as Elder Lee interrupted his address to give the new stake an apostolic blessing. I felt that same spiritual confirmation from the Lord Jesus Christ again, but this time there came with it the added conviction that this man was indeed an apostle of Jesus and that the Church was Christ's church. That feeling of conviction has also never left me. It is hard to imagine living without either of those two convictions: First, that Jesus Christ approves a life of consecration, of unconditional love that overcomes selfishness and gives us the power to give all that we have to bless and help others. Second, Christ has established his church on the earth again, led by his apostles, to help us understand and have the courage to live an unconditionally loving, Christ-like, life. Those feelings seem as crucial to my identity and as unchangeable as my sexual orientation. Please remember that as you try to understand, to let into your minds and hearts, what I have to say tonight.

In the Fall of 1987 I published a letter in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, in which I responded to a fine article in the previous issue by Mormon

psychologist Jan Stout on “Psychobiology and the Development of Homosexuality.” I praised Brother Stout for his summary of the growing scientific evidence over the previous ten years that same-gender attraction and other conditions “once thought to be entirely psychological in origin” are “profoundly influenced by genes and neurochemistry.” I agreed that the evidence, though not conclusive, was quite strong and that it was “probably true that a large proportion, if not all, of those attracted to their own sex do not ‘choose’ that attraction and therefore are not morally responsible for their condition” (7). But I objected to Stout’s apparent conclusion from that evidence that homosexuals could not be held accountable for either their sexual feelings or their sexual behavior. I wrote, “Sexual feelings may not be consciously chosen, but sexual behavior can be, and when sexual behavior of any kind violates understood commandments or natural laws, then it surely is . . . inevitably destructive.”

I pointed out that far too many in our society, including many Mormons, “failed to distinguish between homosexual feelings and homosexual activity, condemning both as sinful—sometimes in ways that are ignorant, intolerant, certainly unChristian.” I insisted, however, that to react by simply calling both the feelings and the sexual activity acceptable was to compound the confusion. I expressed my conviction that “the scriptures and modern prophets are right when they make no judgment of homosexual feeling but condemn clearly any erotic activity outside of heterosexual marriage.” I argued that Mormons should “hold firmly to the laws of married fidelity” because they seem to be based in the reality that a heterosexual union of a man and a woman is what makes possible not only the creation of mortal bodies on earth but also seems to be necessary for the creation of spirit children. And if that is true, eternal, heterosexual marriage and the resulting “continuation of the seeds forever” is what makes possible the creation of new universes for the development and eternal life of those children—and thus it is “the fullest expression of self and relationship possible, indeed is what we call godhood.” I argued that though a certain percent of men and a lesser number of women seemed to be “affected by the genetic and embryonic forces that produce homosexuality, it is not an eternal condition or a viable alternative to celestial heterosexual marriage as the supreme basis for divine self-fulfillment and creativity” (6).

This is very hard doctrine, but I was trying sincerely to be compassionate—as well as true to my convictions about Christ and his Church and the prophets that I mentioned earlier. I went on to attempt an answer to the question that inevitably follows for homosexuals: “If my attraction to my own sex is not an “eternal condition or viable alternative,” then why did God make me this way in mortality? I suggested that Mormons can answer in the same way they do the many others who ask, “Why did God make me this way?”—the millions who have physical and psychological crosses to bear, especially crosses that make them unable to have any sexual expression or marriage. In response to that question, Mormon theology holds out what I find to be two enormously liberating and optimistic doctrines: First, the finite, limited nature of God, who cannot violate the natural laws or interfere with the mortal use of agency—which are the two main causes of our various physical and psychological differences. And, second, the doctrine of the unlimited love and

grace of God, who provides continuing opportunities for development after the mortal life, when those differences may no longer exist. In that letter I wrote, “We will all be provided, in that long period of continued probation after death when we are no longer limited by the genetic, developmental, and psychological burdens of mortality, a time and way to work out a one-to-one heterosexual relationship that is the basis for godhood and to be judged only according to our response to opportunities there that are the same for all of us” (7).

I ended the letter by praising Jan Stout for helping straights improve in Christian empathy and gays increase in self-acceptance. But I still insisted that “to encourage homosexuals in any way to think that the range of expression of feelings acceptable to the Lord includes extra-martial erotic activity or homosexual marriage is to do them a disservice and to undermine the courage that they, like all of us, must have” to make the best they can of mortality, “within the moral laws clearly set forth by God and his prophets” (8). After reading that letter, a few gay Mormons came by my office to thank me for helping them have the courage to accept celibacy as the best alternative for people who had testimonies or wanted to be part of the Church. But in the next issue of *Dialogue*, Jan Stout responded to my letter in a way that made me begin to rethink my position. First he pointed out that I had overreacted to and thus misunderstood his essay, which was intended mainly to “inform the reader about new advances in psychobiology and the complexity that this presents in understanding the development of human sexuality”—not to state an argument that condones all expression of sexual feeling. In fact, I had somehow ignored his clear statement that “the moral choice that a Mormon homosexual must face—to remain active, loyal and guilt-free and accepted—is to ‘remain celibate and abstain from engaging in eroticism with a member of one’s own sex’” (5). He was certainly right that my own anxieties had led me to overreact and misread him in my rush to make my own argument and state my own position. But his most telling comment was this: “My entire professional life is focused on dealing with psychic and emotional pain. I do agree that we all have ‘crosses to bear,’ but I would be very reluctant to compare or quantify mine or anyone’s with another human being. Asserting that ‘I hurt as much or more than you do’ seems to me the very antithesis of empathy” (6).

This struck home, and I began to wonder if I had in fact been quite arrogant, certainly not very empathetic, in assuming I could understand and comment on the particular “cross” that homosexuals bear—or even if it could appropriately be called a cross. I read carefully the personal statements by Mormon homosexuals that were published from time to time in *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* and went back to read those published in the past. By the time I rewrote my response to Jan Stout into an essay for the groundbreaking volume, *Peculiar People: Mormons and Same Sex Orientation*, an essay which I gave the title, “A Case for Celibacy,” I had somewhat modified my thinking, but not very much. I tried to be less certain about comparing the crosses all humans bear and I focused less on “a hope for rewards and compensations in the life to come” and more specifically on the attractions of celibacy in this life. I suggested that there is much to be learned from the “great tradition of celibacy in Catholicism and some other religions,” where “the vow of lifelong celibacy has been, for many, a form of personal discipline and a source of spiritual power that

has energized lives of remarkable service.” I argued, sincerely, that Mormon homosexuals, by such a vow, could “be freed from the distractions and difficulties of sexual relationship during this life” and devote themselves “to a focused kind of development and service that many of us who are married will have to achieve in the next life” (281). I repeated my conviction that it is centrally important to our eternal salvation eventually to learn how to succeed in the complex and very difficult love that is uniquely possible in a bipolar union of the male and female opposites, that is, in heterosexual monogamy. However, I also recognized that “there are many other dimensions to saving love which all of us must learn—and which all will have opportunity eventually to learn. Some of us, heterosexuals, may learn one kind of love in mortality through marriage and have to neglect other kinds that involve undistracted service; those with same sex orientation may have to neglect one form of love but can cultivate those other kinds of saving love.” That recognition that we may have, in mortality, not only different burdens, but very different opportunities to learn crucial things for our development, even in quite different religious and moral and perhaps different marital or sexual circumstances, was a very significant development in my thinking, and I continue to believe it with all my heart. In my essay in the June-July issue of *Sunstone* this year, called “On Becoming a World Church, I present the scriptural evidence that God has been revealing himself to every nation and people and that our task is to seek out and learn from those other revelations, both now and in the life to come. That idea began to take shape as I considered what celibate servants of God like Mother Teresa may have to teach us and has continued to develop today as I have heard some of you suggest that straights may have some things to learn from the struggles to live a moral life in a hostile society that many gay persons are engaged in.

As my journey has continued after writing that essay, I have read more widely, both in the other essays in *Peculiar People* and also in national publications concerning research into the causes of same-sex attraction and arguments for legalizing same-sex partnerships. Richard C. Lewontin, who teaches genetics at Harvard, in the August, 1995, issue of the *New York Review of Books*, reviewed some recent books on the question of genetic and developmental causes of sexual identity and preference, a question which was at the forefront of much popular thinking and discussion, including that among Mormons. The basis for condemning gay people as sinful, their feelings as well as behavior, as some Church publications and most Mormons had done, was of course the conviction that homosexuality was a conscious and free choice against the accepted laws of God—which is exactly what sin means. Lewontin, after calmly summarizing what science to that point had and had not learned about the matter, gave me a new perspective by reminding me that sexual identity is very complex and never likely to be reduced to a specific gene or even set of genes and hormonal influences—and suggesting that it shouldn’t matter anyway! Lewontin, along with Ruth Hubbard, author of many books on the sexual politics of modern biology, has worked for many years to show how biased male science, even of prestigious professors at Harvard and Stanford, has served in the past to justify the inferior status of blacks, people from the Mediterranean countries, and the working class in general by showing them to be biologically different. Such

biased science, Lewontin feels, is now engaged, unintentionally, of course, in doing the same for women and homosexuals (see Lewontin's review of Hubbard's work in the April 7, 1994 *New York Review of Books*).

In Lewontin's view, all of that bad but currently popular and influential science distracts us from the central matter, which is that the foundation principle of America, the ideal of equality, is in constant danger. That principle has of course been an agonizing problem from the first, when Jefferson's "All men are created equal" did not include women or Blacks, and our continuing failure to achieve that equality remains the chief blot on our claim to be a legitimate democratic society, indeed the model for the world. The crucial questions about the rights that should be available to those who, for whatever reasons, identify themselves as gays or lesbians, should not depend on what those reasons are; the crucial fact is that the overwhelming majority of them insist that the identity was formed by the time they were quite young and, despite enormous religious and psychological effort to change and enormous consequent pain, cannot be changed—except of course for a certain minority who are near the middle of the six-point Kinsey scale of sexuality. I began to wonder if, by the same token, the treatment we in the Church afforded those who found themselves in that condition should also have nothing to do with what the complex structure of "reasons" were, since it seemed quite clear the reason for most was not merely sinful choice.

In the August 1996 issue of the *New York Review* legal scholar Ronald Dworkin analyzed three momentous Supreme Court decisions, announced the previous spring, which he believed had registered a substantial gain in making our system one that is fair to minorities. The Court had reversed its earlier position, in a case in 1985, which allowed states to make homosexual acts illegal, and had now turned toward a more principle-based set of arguments that essentially concluded in the position that a "moral majority" cannot limit the liberty of other citizens simply on the ground that it disapproves of the personal choices they make. In two decisions involving physician-assisted suicide, and the one from Colorado concerning homosexuality, the Court held essentially that in a political system such as ours that claims to protect minority rights, the majority cannot use law to "condemn some people morally, [rather than] to protect anyone else's direct interest" (11). The key issue is not whether laws ought to be, or can be, based in moral perspectives, but whether the majority can enforce its moral view in matters that are not crimes, that is do not harm other people or their direct interests, but simply offend their sense of morality.

On the basis of these three Supreme Court decisions of 1996, Dworkin came to the remarkably optimistic conclusion that "many of [the Justices] have come to sense the importance of America's great experiment in government under principles as well as law, and to recognize their responsibilities in that experiment. They realize that the Constitution is made of political morality, not historical accident, and that it is unfair to tell any group of Americans—dying patients or homosexuals or any other group—that because their convictions about how to live and die contradict the religious or moral convictions of others, or because others despise their 'culture,' they must wait another generation to claim the rights that a principled reading of the Constitution would guarantee them now" (14).

If Dworkin is right and we are moving toward such an optimally free society that has always been our American ideal, we Mormons face a difficult dilemma, much like the one that faced the Founding Fathers, who like us believed that a society to be free must also be moral—and were tempted to enforce morality through the majority will but had the political and moral insight to resist the temptation. Freedom is always fearful and often exacts the short-term costs of diversity, apparent moral chaos, people making mistakes, including offensive ones—all of which can produce fear and pressure to reassert comforting control. But the long term benefits are enormous—which was, of course the reason freedom won out in the war in heaven. I believe that war included all of us being shown in very clear terms what chaos and pain and diversity and failure freedom would bring in this life—and that’s why a third of us bailed out and perhaps why many of us, having forgotten our firm decision for freedom there, try to reassert the devil’s plan in this life, the plan of forcing people to be moral—according to our lights. Mormons are perhaps the only group that believes the Constitution was literally inspired by God (in fact, we believe that the Gospel was restored in this nation precisely because of the safeguards to unpopular minority groups provided in the Constitution that would allow the Church to survive, even if barely). In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord explains that the crucial, inspired part of the Constitution was precisely that it protected citizens from enforced morality: “[It] should be maintained for the rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles; That every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment” (D&C 101: 77–78). The very plan of salvation is defeated if a moral majority dictates private morality so that we are not accountable for our own sins.

During the mid 1990s, as I became more and more aware that Mormon culture was, however inadvertently, quite homophobic and seemed to be becoming more so, I reviewed Church statements, especially the First Presidency letter of 14 November 1991, and indulged in some optimism of my own. That statement clearly distinguishes between homosexual thoughts or feelings and homosexual behavior that is immoral because it is outside the bonds of marriage and thus against God’s clear commands. I began thinking that we could work in the Church to overcome our mainly American cultural homophobia and greatly reduce the pain and alienation we were creating if we simply stayed true to that distinction, applying exactly the same standards we did for heterosexual desires as opposed to behavior. We could reasonably preach celibacy as the ideal for both gays and straights until they could make a lifelong pledge of fidelity to one partner, and wait patiently for the Lord to approve such same-sex partnerships as the best alternative for gays in this life, while holding to the ideal of heterosexual eternal marriage for all at some far future point in the next life. I really believed that if we could avoid backing ourselves into a corner, as our culture gradually became more accepting of gays, whether motivated by scientific evidence concerning the causes of homosexuality or by the kind of Supreme Court activism that Dworkin was encouraged by in 1996, we might find our way through this difficult period. We could both keep gay Mormons in the Church and also reduce our homophobia as we learned to see how gays could live

moral lives of fidelity in legal partnerships—and leave to the next life the question of why God made some this way and what his eternal plans are for them.

This dream was shattered, of course, when the Church entered the political arena in Hawaii to oppose legalizing same-sex marriage and then began to speak, both semi-officially and officially, against it. Since then I have been doing much rethinking, and preparing this talk has accelerated the process. I trust the process will continue as I receive your feedback and further help in the future.

SO WHERE ARE we now—where am I now? The feeling I had a few years ago, that staying quiet on the issue of legal same-sex partnerships and waiting patiently on the Lord and society to move us to the point we could live the higher law of unconditional love—that feeling was confirmed by the spirit of Christ I felt as a boy in that wheat field. But because of the similar feeling I had as a teenager in that stake conference, while receiving an apostolic blessing, and subsequent experiences and feelings that have confirmed that one, I also believe that the article on “Same-Gender Attraction” by Elder Dallin H. Oaks in the October 1995 *Ensign* speaks to us with his special apostolic authority and that the letter of the First Presidency and Twelve condemning same-sex marriage is both binding on me and an expression of the will of the Lord at this time. That phrase “at this time” is of course crucial to any resolution of the dilemma I have just stated: that my two core convictions about Christ and the Church give somewhat opposed results, that stable same-sex partnerships would be better than the choice of celibacy or excommunication but that the official Church position must be supported. Let me try to explain with a somewhat parallel case: During the 1960s and 70s I lived, in great pain and sometimes humiliation, as a graduate student and professor trying to contribute to the civil rights movement while at the same time having to defend the Church’s denial of priesthood and temple blessings to Blacks. I was convinced, confirmed by that early spiritual experience with what I believe was the spirit of Christ, that “all are alike unto God” and that it was wrong to discriminate in any way on the basis of race, and yet I also believed by that same spirit that the Church leaders were directed by God. I came to the conclusion that God was not happy with the policy but, as he has often done with his chosen people, was allowing us to live a lower law for a time. I believed this accommodation by the Lord was because of our racism, not something wrong with blacks, and would continue only until we could try to live the higher law of full equality in a way that would be a genuine blessing to blacks themselves—and not merely a source of further prejudice and division in the Church as trying to live it then would surely be, given our racism.

Just twenty years ago this year, my faith, and that of many others, was finally vindicated by a glorious revelation to President Spencer W. Kimball. In the revelation itself President Kimball spoke of the right time having finally come and of the many hours he spent praying in the temple in preparation. In the press conference following the announcement, where he was asked why the revelation had come at that time, he frankly admitted that it came because conditions and people have changed: “It’s a different world than it was 20 or 25 years ago. The world is ready for it.”

How will the world become ready for gays and lesbians to be accepted fully as a valued, contributing, fully enfranchised and protected, minority in our great pluralistic democracy and also in our true Church, which I believe holds special keys of salvation for all of us? Some encouraging development in that direction is certainly taking place. If Ronald Dworkin is right, we can expect a gradual acceptance in our country of the principle that all should have the same rights, whatever their beliefs and choices as well as whatever their genetic inheritance or fetal and early childhood development—as long as they don't harm others or inhibit those same rights for them. The positive experience of other countries with legalized same-sex partnerships (Holland's experiment is now over ten years duration and has won over the approval even of former opponents), as well as some positive experience by a few states in this country, may gradually help convince a majority in this country that such a provision is not a threat to traditional heterosexual identity and marriage and will actually increase family values—if we mean by that stability, fidelity, and the wholesome care and security of children. A remarkable sign of that kind of progress is the report of the *Governor's Commission on the Rights and Responsibilities of Same-sex Relationships*, delivered in July this year to Governor Romer of, believe it or not, Colorado. After a year of hearings and study, the Commission has recommended that both our democratic and our basic religious ideals would be well served by providing the same legal rights and responsibilities for what they call “committed relationships” as they do for traditional heterosexual marriage.

In my recent thinking I have been much influenced by the work of Gary Watts, current co-chair of Family Fellowship and an active participant in P-Flag. He was, as he put it in a *Sunstone* article, “mugged by reality” when his son Craig announced to Gary and his wife in 1989 that he was gay, and Gary has acted and written with great energy and intelligence since then in support of families dealing with the same kind of experience. Increasingly in the past few years, he has tried to help resolve the terrible dilemma Craig and thousands of others have found themselves in, that of having two core identities that they were asked to choose between: a “belief in the authenticity of the gospel of Jesus Christ as embodied in the LDS Church” and an inner core of same-sex attraction that to a greater or lesser degree they felt they could not change without harming themselves and could not pretend to change (by marrying and having a family) without harming others. In an article that will appear this month in *Dialogue*, “The Logical Next Step: Sanctioning and Affirming Same-Sex Relationships,” Gary holds out a remarkably daring and optimistic hope:

A policy of inclusion of gay members who are in committed relationships would not undermine the family but would allow for the formation and recognition of some non-traditional families, but families nevertheless. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, our gay members are not anti-family but they fail to see “family values” as universal when their own relationships receive no value whatsoever. Gay and lesbian members would, for perhaps the first time, feel welcome and like they have a place in the church. . . . The exodus of so many gay members and their families and friends from the church would cease,

and the acrimonious feelings and expressions would certainly diminish. Many individuals, unable to give unqualified support to the church because of this issue would return to the fold and, once again, become its advocates.

This vision of Gary Watts seems to be a reasonable compromise of the ideal eternal requirement or heterosexual marriage in order to meet, as best we poor mortals can, the difficult conditions of mortality. I believe polygamy, which also involved a very unusual and morally challenging kind of marital relationship for this life only, was such a compromise, inspired by the Lord to meet the special needs of the Church in its early years in 19th century America.

But of course I have been wrong before. Though I hope Gary is right, it may certainly be true that the proscription of same-sex marriage by the Church is not merely a temporary, lower law God is having us live until we and our society get over our homophobia, but is an expression of God's highest and permanent will. Any of us at all serious about the Mormon religion, which derives much of its energy and appeal from the principle of continuous revelation, must recognize that possibility—as well as the possibility of future change. I believe the Gospel and the Church are true, not only because of my spiritual experiences but because I have studied the Gospel principles (such as that of continuous revelation and the wonderfully optimistic concepts of eternal progression in imitation of our Heavenly Parents) and found them the most logical and energizing available on earth. And I have learned about Christ's challenging and healing, unconditional love best through the struggles and small victories of Church service. So I hope you will find a way to live in the Church, submissive to the will of God as you come to understand it for yourselves.

How, then, can we all, both heterosexual and homosexual Mormons, live with both possibilities I have mentioned—a hope for change and faithful obedience now? We can focus on fundamentals, on living the Gospel—I'm finally coming to the subject of this talk!

One of the most fundamental principles of the Gospel is prayer. The First Presidency statement of 1969, after reaffirming the policy of denying Blacks the priesthood, continued, "We join with those throughout the world who pray that all of the blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ may in due time of the Lord become available to men of faith everywhere. Until that time comes we must trust in God, in His wisdom and in His tender mercy." Not many of us took those words seriously enough to actually pray that the priesthood would in due time be given to Blacks. However, it seems to me consistent with that statement by President Brown to pray now that all the blessings of the gospel can become available to gays and lesbians of sincere faith, including those in faithful partnerships that can be religiously sanctioned as well as legal—if we can pray humbly that it will be in God's due time and when it is God's will according to his wisdom and mercy.

Another fundamental principle is that we make a promise, as a condition of our baptism according to Alma, to "bear one another's burdens than they may be light" and to "mourn with those that mourn" and "comfort those that stand in need of comfort"—as well as to "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things,

and in all places that ye may be in, even until death” (Mosiah 18:9–10). Certainly there is much opportunity and need, among Mormon gays and their families and friends—and those of us who need to reach out and become friends—to bear burdens and comfort and even mourn, and to stand as a witnesses of God and his mercy.

It is crucial, if we are to stand as witnesses of the God, that we witness to the true God, the one revealed to us in ancient and modern revelation as a personal God of unconditional love, one who is absolutely “no respecter of persons,” one to whom “all are alike.” The idea that God does not have favorites, that all are alike unto him, equally loved and equally blessed and of equal potential in their spiritual journey toward Godhood, seems to me perhaps the most fundamental idea about God that we must have. It is the principle that throughout history has been the one when violated or misunderstood has led to the most terrible human atrocities, from slavery and religious racial wars and the millenia of subjugation of women to the holocaust. And it is the principle that, in my view, is the one most crucial to understand and live if we are to experience the atonement and have faith unto salvation. Joseph Smith put the case this way, in the third of his “Lectures on Faith”: It is necessary [for all to see] that God is no respecter of persons, for [otherwise] men could not exercise in him; because if he were a respecter of persons, they could not tell what their privileges were, nor how far they were authorized to exercise faith in him, or whether they were authorized to do it at all, but all must be confusion.” This seems to me to describe the impossible situation a gay or lesbian Mormon with a testimony is in when he feels at the core, especially after painful trying, that he cannot change his feelings but is taught that God disapproves of what he is, that he has no moral or spiritual standing or identity or hope for salvation until he changes what he is. Joseph Smith continues, “But no sooner are the minds of men made acquainted with the truth on this point, that he is no respecter of persons, than they see they have authority by faith to lay hold on eternal life, the richest boon of heaven, because God is no respecter of persons, and every man in every nation has a equal privilege.”

Yet, crucial as this principle is, for evil and for good, it seems to be one of the hardest for us to learn, even when we are God’s chosen people—perhaps *especially* when we feel we are chosen, and thus better than others or objects of God’s special favor. In the Old Testament dispensations it was taught regularly, as scripture, that God punished children for their parents’ sins—until the prophet Ezekiel received the word of the Lord declaring flatly they should no longer teach such doctrine in Israel: “Behold, *all* souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine; the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:3–4; my emphasis). In the New Testament, even Peter, the head of the Church, had to be convinced by a dramatic vision from God, that he should teach the Gospel to a Gentile, Cornelius, because “God is no respecter of persons”—and even after that, along with other church leaders, he had continuing differences with the young apostle Paul because they wanted to impose Jewish cultural requirements on the new Greek Christian converts. In the Book of Mormon, everyone believed that God cursed innocent children with dark skins, except that God was able to get the remarkable message through to the prophet Nephi that all were alike unto him, black and white, and to

the prophet Alma that “every man that is cursed bring[s] upon himself his own condemnation” (Alma 3:14).

A crucial question, of course, is whether that list Nephi gives of those who are alike to God—“black and white, bond and free, male and female, . . . Jew and Gentile,”—though it seems quite universal, can be expanded to include “gay and straight.” But one answer to the question, Why did God create us with different kinds of sexual attraction (as well as different colors and genders and religions and conditions of servitude), is precisely to challenge us to stop asking who is to be included in the assertion that “all are alike unto God.” Certainly sinners are in one sense not alike unto God; they are loved the same and offered the same healing power but cannot enjoy the gifts and blessings and progressions that are only available, by natural law, as we give up sin. I therefore believe that homosexual attraction as well as behavior that is put on or persisted in for “style” or to be “cool” or indulged in as a form of narcissism or mere recreation can be sinful—just as heterosexual feelings and activities, if they are pretended or are abusive of power or exploitive of others, even within legal marriage, can be sinful. But that is not for me to judge from the outside, so I think God expects me to see all alike unto him, gay and straight—that, in fact, my ability to do so may be a supreme test of the ability, which is crucial to my salvation, to love unconditionally.

In our own dispensation, despite receiving that remarkable statement that all alike unto God at the very beginning, we did not understand it well, and, with a few remarkable exceptions, we have been about as racist and sexist as the rest of Americans. Obviously, God is patient with us, lets us live lower laws and go on in lack of understanding until social conditions change and new experiences open us up to new revelation. What do we do in the meantime? I believe we can try to live the Gospel, if possible within the Church. Please try to be patient with me as I explain why and how. These last remarks I dedicate especially to Joseph Riddle and Dwight Ostergaard, two of the remarkable people I have met at this conference. Joseph represents to me the many gays who could bless the Church with their presence. He is, as he put it, a happy person, one who makes others happy, who lights up a room. His character and skills, I believe, could be a great blessing to others through the many ways the Church effectively puts people in the way of serving others and with each other and learning through those intimate associations to understand and experience the unconditional love central to the experience of the Atonement. I am selfish, perhaps, but I want him in the Church with me—to teach and help me. This is to encourage him. Dwight represents to me the many I have met, among the quieter ones here, who are struggling to be what Del Thornton at the devotional recognized as only an apparent contradiction, both spiritual and gay Mormons. He is a remarkable pianist and composer who could give much to society and the Church and who, after a long period of terrible suffering and self-abuse after coming out, has had spiritual experiences that have pointed him back to the Church. This is to encourage him in his struggle.

First, it seems crucial to me to accept that if I am right that all are alike unto God, gay and straight, that not only means we all have the same rights and needs before God; it also means we all have the same responsibilities: we must all live the

same Gospel, must do about the same things to be saved, to find happiness, to fulfill the purpose of life, without regard to sexual orientation. What then should we all focus on in living the Gospel? If God doesn't care about our race or gender or sexual orientation or apparently even our religious identity—what *does* he care about? Let me suggest one key answer from each Standard Work. In answer to the question “What does the Lord require of thee?” God told the prophet Micah, “But to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” No mention of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation. Instead, justice and mercy were the constant message of the so-called literary prophets, Micah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah; they insisted we cannot have a spiritual relation with God unless we also have a moral relation with his other children, whom he loves as much as he does us; therefore, unless we seek justice in society for the widow and orphan and offer, even at great cost to ourselves, merciful help to the poor, our sacrifices and other temple ordinances, solemn assemblies, tithing, much of what occupies our preoccupations with religious living are useless (God even says he despises them; see Alma 5:21–24).

Christ, just before his ascension, told his disciples that when he came again he would divide the sheep from the goats, the saved from the damned, by one criterion only—again no mention of religion or sexual orientation: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” What then is it that we must do to Christ by doing it to the most despised and rejected in our society, whoever they are: “I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me” (Matt. 25:35–36).

In the Book of Mormon, the resurrected Christ, speaking to his “other sheep” on this continent, answered the basic question we are asking here about what is central by holding out what Elder Oaks has called “[Christ’s] incredible invitation”: “What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am.” As Elder Marion D. Hanks has written, one thing we know for certain about Christ is that his specialty is mercy—and to be like him we must develop the same specialty. And finally, in the Doctrine and Covenants, we are told that when Zion arrives, we will know we are part of it because we will be the only people on the earth “that shall not be at war one with another” (D&C 45:69).

Much I have said tonight was my sincere effort to describe my own journey. Now, for this not to have been a waste of time, you must apply what I have said to your own very different journeys. What do these scriptures suggest about your responsibilities? It is one thing for me to say that the principle of equal rights for all means that I, as a straight white male, must open myself to the rights of people very different from me, such as legalizing gay and lesbian partnerships. But what challenge does that pose to you who are gay or lesbian? Have you considered how to be open to the rights and opinions of others whose ideas you abhor, even those who vilify you, try to abridge your rights, try to harm you? Those you fear, and who obviously fear you?

My spiritual experiences have formed a core of my being that has required, for me to have integrity, that I recommend celibacy to gay Mormons as long as that is

the Church's position, and that is not easy, certainly not popular among many of you whose good will I value. What do your spiritual experiences require of you in order that you be true to yourself and the spiritual witnesses you have had, even if it is very difficult, not popular among your friends and support group?

I have discussed same-sex partnerships as perhaps a solution, as they become legal and perhaps even sanctioned by God, to the core conflicts you experience, but you should know that that is not an easy solution and will require enormous moral and spiritual resources to achieve. I know because I know that heterosexual marriage is the most difficult task I am engaged in. That is partly the reason I believe it is the ultimate condition of Godhood, because it embodies all of the most difficult yet rewarding oppositions of the universe, the ones that Lehi teaches us are "in all things" and necessary for existence itself and certainly for progress to Godhood. But, as Michael Novak reminded us in an essay long ago in *Harper's*, "The Family Out of Favor," "Marriage is an assault upon the lone, atomic ego. Marriage is a threat to the solitary individual. Marriage does impose grueling, humbling, baffling, and frustrating responsibilities. Yet if one supposes that precisely such things are the preconditions for all true liberation, marriage is not the enemy of moral development in adults. Quite the opposite. . ." If you choose to pursue the option of same-sex partnership, I will not and I hope others will not withdraw from you, but will only support you in the difficult task ahead, where you will learn the difficulties of constant fidelity, which will bless your lives now and in the future life—whatever turns out to be true there about eternal marriage. And you will have many times the kind of difficult experience I often have in my own marriage: As Michael Novak put it, "Seeing myself through the unblinking eyes of an intimate, intelligent other, an honest spouse, is humiliating beyond anticipation" (41).

God's demand that we learn to be like him, unconditionally loving of all—even of those we see as dramatically different from us and therefore fear, is certainly a challenge to heterosexuals in our Mormon culture. How does it challenge you as a gay or lesbian Mormon? Can you love General Authorities, bishops, even bigots in your local congregation, unconditionally? Can you serve them with mercy and justice, visit them in their prisons of misunderstanding and fear as you hope they will in yours of isolation and yearning? Can you treat them as Christ would?

Finally, can you be a Zion person as defined in the Doctrine and Covenants, one of the few in the world that is not at war with others, one who makes peace? Do you have the courage to be one of those who helps rather than hinders the ideal process Gary Watts has envisioned and I could feel many of you at the devotional yearning for—a process that includes spiritual gays as active Mormons? Helvecio Martins is a black Brazilian who joined the Church in 1972 and became a faithful member who, because of his core convictions, endured the humiliation of racism within the Church and a policy which specifically excluded him from temple blessings he yearned for. Because of his humble devotion in the face of these difficulties he became a prominent Church spokesman and a friend of President Kimball—and then, because President Kimball could see clearly his devotion and the dilemma of core feelings he endured, Helvecio Martins became perhaps the one human being most directly responsible for the yearning prayers of President Kimball

that led to the priesthood revelation in 1978. But Helvecio Martins is only one example of how black Mormons made possible the progress of the past thirty years in overcoming our racism and finding reconciliation. Many others were able to oppose racism but also to be faithful to their convictions about the saving value of the Gospel and Church, and they afflicted the conscience not only of President Kimball but of many of the rest of us who had to be prepared for God's revelation of his full will that we be equal. I believe you can make that kind of difference for the Church if you have the will, the intelligent love, the peacemaking ability to welcome straight Mormons into face to face relationships with you of the kind I have been blessed by at this conference. I pray that all of us can learn to be such faithful and effective peacemakers and help bring about changes in Mormon culture and perhaps even in God's word to us, but certainly will bring about changes in our souls that can save us.

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How to cite this essay: Eugene England, "On Living the Gospel," unpublished speech given 6 September 1998 at the annual conference of Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons, Portland, Oregon. The text of the speech is available online at: http://www.affirmation.org/resources/on_living_the_gospel.shtml.

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