

Features

Mo's vs. 'Mos: The battle between Mormons and Gays



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Since there was such a thing as a gay and lesbian community, tension has existed between the community and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; or, perhaps more accurately, church leaders.

Many gay former Mormons have found simply leaving the church behind and working through their feelings of disgust for the religion was enough, even rolling their eyes at those gay people within the church trying to live their lives within its religious boundaries.

But then came California's Proposition 8, where the church wielded its political muscle and successfully reversed gay marriage in the state only months after it was declared legal by the state's Supreme Court.

The war was on.

Now, gay former Mormons, and a growing list of non-gay current Mormons, were up-in-arms that the church was being too heavy-handed against gays.

Jacob Whipple wrote in a letter to the editor, "I left the Mormon Church because I didn't like the way I was treated. Now, here I am still being told what I can and cannot do by the church. It is just wrong."

Exaltation

Same-sex marriage hits at the heart of Mormon theology, says Terryl Givens, a professor of literature and religion at the University of Richmond. According to the church, couples married in a Mormon temple remain wedded for eternity and can give birth to spirit children in the afterlife. Most importantly, Mormons must be married to achieve “exaltation”— the ultimate state in the afterlife. Mormons also believe they retain their gender in the afterlife.

“This all explains the Mormon difficulty with homosexuality,” said Givens. In a theology based on eternal gender, marriage and exaltation, “same-sex attraction doesn’t find a place.”

Former church president Spencer W. Kimball said, “Homosexuality is an ugly sin, repugnant to those who find no temptation in it, as well as to many past offenders who are seeking a way out of its clutches. ... All such deviations from normal, proper heterosexual relationships are not merely unnatural but wrong in the sight of God.”

This is not to say that LDS perceptions may not change. In its early years, the church clearly taught that exaltation was dependent not just on marriage but on plural marriage. Clearly, the modern church has rejected this notion with its focus on the nuclear family and active opposition to the practice of polygamy.

Same-Sex Attraction

Church leaders rarely mention the words “gay” and “lesbian,” unless preceded with the term “so-called.” Leaders believe that gays and lesbians are “afflicted” with “same-sex attraction,” even using the acronym SSA to describe homosexuality. This term tends to reduce a person’s sexuality to an illness or affliction that can be overcome.

Indeed, the church has poured a great deal of resources into therapies to rid gay people of their sexual desires.

Electro-shock Therapy

Also as late as 20 years ago, the church counseled men with homosexual tendencies to participate in shock-aversion, vomit-aversion and other heinous experimental therapies.

At church-owned Brigham Young University, Dr. D. Eugene Thorne, head of BYU's Psych Department, oversaw doctoral student Max Ford McBride in his PhD dissertation involving experiments on gay men using gay and straight pornography with electric-shock therapy. The study started out with 16 gay male BYU students and staff, but two committed suicide during the experiment, so the study ended up with 14 subjects.

In a documentary by Sean Weakland, *Legacies*, a man who was a BYU intern during the experiments described how they were conducted.

“We would tape electrodes to their groin, thigh, chest and armpits. We had another machine that would monitor their breathing and heart rate. If there was a difference in their heart rate when looking at homosexual pornography, we would turn a dial which would send a current to shock them. If they were a new patient, we would use a very low current. From the reaction that I saw there were muscle spasms which looked very painful.

“After that was over, we would switch the pornography over so that it was a man and a woman having sex, and we would play very soothing music in the background to try and get the mind to relate to that. For the people that had been doing the therapy longer we turned the voltage way up so that you could see burn marks on the skin and quite often they would also throw up during the therapy. This is speculation, but most of the students at BYU probably hadn't even seen pornography before [this experience].”

Another LDS-approved psychologist, Robert Card, used these techniques well past the time of the study, even though the results had proven a failure. In 1985, Card accepted an invitation to speak at the University of Utah's Gay Student Union, where he admitted that he practiced electro-shock therapy, but said he had abandoned it and was not using bio-

feedback therapy in an effort to reduce homosexual feelings. He was silent on whether his success of introducing heterosexual feelings afterward.

Church-Endorsed Gay Marriages

As late as 20 years ago, church leaders counseled “struggling” gay men to marry and their “problem” would be solved.

“Mormonism teaches that any sacrifice is worthwhile for service to God and the LDS Church. Spencer W. Kimball’s 1969 *Miracle of Forgiveness* instructed each homosexually-inclined male to just forget his desires and ‘force himself’ to date the opposite sex and marry a woman in one of the sacred temples ‘for time and eternity,’” said D. Michael Quinn in a presentation at this year’s Sunstone Symposium, “In 1971, the church officially published his pamphlet *New Horizons for Homosexuals* (later called *A Letter to a Friend*), which had a section titled “Multiply and Replenish” as a step in repenting from homosexual activities.

Such counsel wrought broken families and worse.

In a 1987, President Gordon B. Hinckley renounced Kimball’s teachings in *Ensign*, the church’s official magazine: “Marriage should not be viewed as a therapeutic step to solve problems such as homosexual inclinations or behavior.”

Evergreen

“If you want to diminish your same-gender attractions and avoid homosexual behavior, there is a way out,” leads the Evergreen International Web site, which was heavily revamped after church leaders softened their tone of the cause of homosexuality and the ability for a person to change.

“Same-sex attraction is one of life’s many challenges,” the site continues. “People can overcome homosexual behavior and diminish same-sex attractions. God expects us to be chaste and reserve sexual activity to the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman.”

Though the LDS Church claims that Evergreen is a completely separate, stand-alone organization, many Evergreen chapters use church facilities for meetings and local leaders of some chapters are “called” to serve by the church. Since the church does not release financial records and Evergreen is not required to list where it receives its funding, it would be nearly impossible to prove a financial link.

Many church leaders, including some at the highest levels, address Evergreen’s annual conference, held at the church-owned Joseph Smith Memorial Building.

Many other “Ex-Gay” organizations are run by those who belong to the LDS religion, including NARTH (National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality), People Can Change, the Center for Gender Wholeness

War Against Same-Sex Marriage

Proposition 8 was not the first gay marriage battle the LDS Church involved itself in. After the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that the state’s ban on same-sex marriage “denies same-sex couples access to the marital status and its concomitant rights and benefits.” The church poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into a successful campaign to change the state’s constitution, asking the Catholic Church to take the lead because of PR problems with attaching their name to it.

Then last year, the church called on its members to work for California’s Proposition 8 to ban the then-legal same-sex marriages in the state. And this year, activists believe, the church has been involved in Ohio, Maine, New Hampshire and other states.

Californians Against Hate founder Fred Karger began a one-man crusade to reveal the depth that the LDS Church is involved in organizations fighting gay marriage. After filing a complaint against the church with the California Fair Political Practices Commission, church leaders filed a

revised financial statement with the state, showing thousands of dollars in additional expenditures in Prop. 8.

Karger says the church “has been leading the national crusade against same-sex marriage since President Gordon B. Hinckley issued such a proclamation in 1988. The church showed just how effective it could be beginning in Hawaii in the mid-90s all the way through to California’s Proposition 8 in 2008. They were involved to some degree with all 30 state elections outlawing same-sex marriage.”

Karger insists that the church founded the National Organization for Marriage, which has been fighting (and losing) gay marriage battles in several states. Last month he filed a complaint in Maine that organizations fighting against gay marriage were “money laundering” and not revealing who their donors were. He believes it will be revealed that the LDS Church will be revealed as major donors in those fights as well.

Interracial Marriage

There are interesting parallels between the current fight against gay marriage and the fight against interracial marriage 50 years ago.

LDS Church leaders were long against interracial marriage as well, beginning with Joseph Smith.

“Had I anything to do with the negro, I would confine them to their own species,” Smith wrote according to *Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* author D. Michael Quinn.

“LDS doctrine and practice maintained that civil marriages specifically between blacks and whites were categorically prohibited, were unnatural and contrary to God’s law, would never be acceptable within the LDS; they were deeply offensive to social norms and if allowed to be performed, would lead to the destruction of not just society but indeed humanity,” wrote Connell O’Donovan in a paper about Mormons and black and white marriage.

William I. Appleby, president of the church's eastern states mission, in his autobiography tells of a time when he called on an LDS couple living in Boston, only to find that the husband was black and the wife white. He writes in his journal, berating the woman: Oh! Woman, thought I, where is thy shame, (for indeed I felt ashamed and not only ashamed, but disgusted, when I was informed they were both members of a Church!) [Where is] Respect for thy family, thyself, for thy offspring and above all the law of God?

In the early 1960s, as the black civil rights movement was beginning to take hold, church president and prophet Ezra Taft Benson, according to the Deseret News, said, "The whole slogan of 'civil rights' as used to make trouble in the South today, is an exact parallel to the slogan of 'agrarian reform' which they [Communists] used in China ... The pending 'civil rights legislation is, I am convinced, about 10 percent civil rights and 90 percent a further extension of socialistic federal controls ... It is part of the pattern for the communist take-over of America."

The U. S. Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967 nationally ended bans against interracial marriage.

It wasn't until 1978, when President Spencer W. Kimball lifted the ban on blacks serving in the priesthood that the church would marry mixed-race couples in their temples.

Mormon Church and Change

O'Donovan wrote in his paper that LDS doctrine and practice maintained that civil marriages specifically between blacks and whites were categorically prohibited, were unnatural and contrary to God's law, would never be acceptable within the LDS Church (or if so, only in some future eschatological period); they were deeply offensive to social norms and if allowed to be performed, would lead to the destruction of not just society but indeed humanity.

To drive his point home, he restated his paper's conclusion, but tweaked a few words:

“LDS doctrine and practice maintains that civil marriages of same-sex couples are categorically prohibited, are unnatural and contrary to God's law, will never be acceptable within the LDS Church; they are deeply offensive to social norms and if allowed to be performed, will lead to the destruction of not just society but indeed humanity.”

“In 1963 Utah finally accepted legalized black-white inter-marriage and then in 1978 the LDS Church accepted it doctrinally (although begrudgingly) and black-white sealings are now performed in temples across the world. And the prophesied divine retribution and utter destruction of society and humanity have not happened,” wrote O'Donovan.

What do the Gays Want?

At least one Web site has been developed that is offering the church a way out of this “war.” LDSApology.org is looking for a reconciliation between the gay community and the LDS Church.

“True reconciliation requires that parties on both sides of this issue be willing to honestly examine their attitudes, behaviors (including past behaviors), policies and practices—and be open to understanding, forgiveness (both asking for and accepting), and apology,” the online petition states.

The petition asks leaders to examine “the ways in which official statements, rhetoric, policy and practice have been injurious to gays and lesbians and their families and friends; have caused unnecessary pain and suffering, rejection, psychological and spiritual damage and even death.”

It also asks that the church acknowledge the harm done by “reparative, revulsion, and shock-therapies” and calling homosexuality an “evil perversion, a condition that is chosen and changeable and one that can be

overcome through fasting, prayer, sacrifice and heterosexual marriage” is hurtful.

Some are even more direct.

Activist Troy Williams, who calls himself a queer Mormon, offered up the four Rs of repentance at a rally instigated by a kiss on the church-owned Main Street Plaza that turned to a scuffle with church security.

He said that the church needs to Recognize that they have hurt people.

“The LDS leadership has consistently lied about who queers are. Spencer Kimball described homosexuality as a slippery slope toward bestiality. Boyd K. Packer advocated physical violence against gays. BYU electrocuted us. Bishops counseled gay men to marry straight women,” he said.

He also called for Remorse.

“Mormons know what it’s like to be persecuted, mobbed, killed and driven across the country. Mormons were hated just for being different. Mormons, of all people, ought to feel empathy for the plight of another stigmatized minority. Shame on you if you don’t.”

He then called for Restitution.

“We’ll start with a public apology. After which, you’ll close down Evergreen. And finally, you will use your influence to encourage the Utah Legislature to pass the Common Ground Initiative this January. That would make a good start.”

And lastly, he called for leaders to Resolve to “never sin again.”

He said that once that has happened, “we queers will forgive them and we’ll go our way in peace. We won’t ask to get married in their temples.

We won't launch any political campaigns to strip away their rights. And we won't make fun of them for eating at Chuck-A-Rama."