

Additional Resource

See also *Same-Sex Attraction* topic page.

The continuing public debate over same-gender marriage has prompted many questions from the news media, the general public and Church members in relation to the position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the marriage issue specifically and on homosexuality in general.

The following interview was conducted in 2006 with Elder Dallin H. Oaks, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church, and Elder Lance B. Wickman, a member of the Seventy. These senior Church leaders responded to questions from two members of the Church’s Public Affairs staff. The transcript of the interview appears below in order to help clarify the Church’s stand on these important, complex and sensitive issues.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: At the outset, can you explain why this whole issue of homosexuality and same-gender marriage is important to the Church?

ELDER OAKS: This is much bigger than just a question of whether or not society should be more tolerant of the homosexual lifestyle. Over past years we have seen unrelenting pressure from advocates of that lifestyle to accept as normal what is not normal, and to characterize those who disagree as narrow-minded, bigoted and unreasonable. Such advocates are quick to demand freedom of speech and thought for themselves, but equally quick to criticize those with a different view and, if possible, to silence them by applying labels like “homophobic.” In at least one country where homosexual activists have won major concessions, we have even seen a church pastor threatened with prison for preaching from the pulpit that homosexual behavior is sinful.

Given these trends, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints must take a stand on doctrine and principle. This is more than a social issue — ultimately it may be a test of our most basic religious freedoms to teach what we know our Father in Heaven wants us to teach.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Let’s say my 17-year-old son comes to talk to me and, after a great deal of difficulty trying to get it out, tells me that he believes that he’s attracted to men — that he has no interest and never has had any interest in girls. He believes he’s probably gay. He says that he’s tried to suppress these feelings. He’s remained celibate, but he realizes that his feelings are going to be devastating to the family because we’ve always talked about his Church mission, about his temple marriage and all those kinds of things. He just feels he can’t live what he thinks is a lie any longer, and so he comes in this very upset and depressed manner. What do I tell him as a parent?

ELDER OAKS: You’re my son. You will always be my son, and I’ll always be there to help you.

The distinction between feelings or inclinations on the one hand, and behavior on the other hand, is very clear. It’s no sin to have inclinations that if yielded to would produce behavior that would be a transgression. The sin is in yielding to temptation. Temptation is not unique. Even the Savior was tempted.

The New Testament affirms that God has given us commandments that are difficult to keep. It is in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 13: “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

I think it’s important for you to understand that homosexuality, which you’ve spoken of, is not a noun that describes a condition. It’s an

adjective that describes feelings or behavior. I encourage you, as you struggle with these challenges, not to think of yourself as a 'something' or 'another,' except that you're a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and you're my son, and that you're struggling with challenges.

Everyone has some challenges they have to struggle with. You've described a particular kind of challenge that is very vexing. It is common in our society and it has also become politicized. But it's only one of a host of challenges men and women have to struggle with, and I just encourage you to seek the help of the Savior to resist temptation and to refrain from behavior that would cause you to have to repent or to have your Church membership called into question.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: If somebody has a very powerful heterosexual drive, there is the opportunity for marriage. If a young man thinks he's gay, what we're really saying to him is that there is simply no other way to go but to be celibate for the rest of his life if he doesn't feel any attraction to women?

ELDER OAKS: That is exactly the same thing we say to the many members who don't have the opportunity to marry. We expect celibacy of any person that is not married.

ELDER WICKMAN: We live in a society which is so saturated with sexuality that it perhaps is more troublesome now, because of that fact, for a person to look beyond their gender orientation to other aspects of who they are. I think I would say to your son or anyone that was so afflicted to strive to expand your horizons beyond simply gender orientation. Find fulfillment in the many other facets of your character and your personality and your nature that extend beyond that. There's no denial that one's gender orientation is certainly a core characteristic of any person, but it's not the only one.

What's more, merely having inclinations does not disqualify one for

any aspect of Church participation or membership, except possibly marriage as has already been talked about. But even that, in the fullness of life as we understand it through the doctrines of the restored gospel, eventually can become possible.

In this life, such things as service in the Church, including missionary service, all of this is available to anyone who is true to covenants and commandments.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: So you are saying that homosexual feelings are controllable?

ELDER OAKS: Yes, homosexual feelings are controllable. Perhaps there is an inclination or susceptibility to such feelings that is a reality for some and not a reality for others. But out of such susceptibilities come feelings, and feelings are controllable. If we cater to the feelings, they increase the power of the temptation. If we yield to the temptation, we have committed sinful behavior. That pattern is the same for a person that covets someone else's property and has a strong temptation to steal. It's the same for a person that develops a taste for alcohol. It's the same for a person that is born with a 'short fuse,' as we would say of a susceptibility to anger. If they let that susceptibility remain uncontrolled, it becomes a feeling of anger, and a feeling of anger can yield to behavior that is sinful and illegal.

We're not talking about a unique challenge here. We're talking about a common condition of mortality. We don't understand exactly the 'why,' or the extent to which there are inclinations or susceptibilities and so on. But what we do know is that feelings can be controlled and behavior can be controlled. The line of sin is between the feelings and the behavior. The line of prudence is between the susceptibility and the feelings. We need to lay hold on the feelings and try to control them to keep us from getting into a circumstance that leads to sinful behavior.

ELDER WICKMAN: One of the great sophistries of our age, I think, is that merely because one has an inclination to do something, that therefore acting in accordance with that inclination is inevitable. That’s contrary to our very nature as the Lord has revealed to us. We do have the power to control our behavior.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **If we were to look back at someone who had a ‘short fuse,’ and we were to look at their parents who might have had a short fuse, some might identify a genetic influence in that.**

ELDER OAKS: No, we do not accept the fact that conditions that prevent people from attaining their eternal destiny were born into them without any ability to control. That is contrary to the Plan of Salvation, and it is contrary to the justice and mercy of God. It’s contrary to the whole teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which expresses the truth that by or through the power and mercy of Jesus Christ we will have the strength to do all things. That includes resisting temptation. That includes dealing with things that we’re born with, including disfigurements, or mental or physical incapacities. None of these stand in the way of our attaining our eternal destiny. The same may be said of a susceptibility or inclination to one behavior or another which if yielded to would prevent us from achieving our eternal destiny.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **You’re saying the Church doesn’t necessarily have a position on ‘nurture or nature’**

ELDER OAKS: That’s where our doctrine comes into play. The Church does not have a position on the causes of any of these susceptibilities or inclinations, including those related to same-gender attraction. Those are scientific questions — whether nature or nurture — those are things the Church doesn’t have a position on.

ELDER WICKMAN: Whether it is nature or nurture really begs the

important question, and a preoccupation with nature or nurture can, it seems to me, lead someone astray from the principles that Elder Oaks has been describing here. Why somebody has a same-gender attraction... who can say? But what matters is the fact that we know we can control how we behave, and it is behavior which is important.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Is therapy of any kind a legitimate course of action if we're talking about controlling behavior? If a young man says, "Look, I really want these feelings to go away... I would do anything for these feelings to go away," is it legitimate to look at clinical therapy of some sort that would address those issues?

ELDER WICKMAN: Well, it may be appropriate for that person to seek therapy. Certainly the Church doesn't counsel against that kind of therapy. But from the standpoint of a parent counseling a person, or a Church leader counseling a person, or a person looking at his or her same-gender attraction from the standpoint of 'What can I do about it here that's in keeping with gospel teachings?' the clinical side of it is not what matters most. What matters most is recognition that 'I have my own will. I have my own agency. I have the power within myself to control what I do.'

Now, that's not to say it's not appropriate for somebody with that affliction to seek appropriate clinical help to examine whether in his or her case there's something that can be done about it. This is an issue that those in psychiatry, in the psychology professions have debated. Case studies I believe have shown that in some cases there has been progress made in helping someone to change that orientation; in other cases not. From the Church's standpoint, from our standpoint of concern for people, that's not where we place our principal focus. It's on these other matters.

ELDER OAKS: Amen to that. Let me just add one more thought. The

Church rarely takes a position on which treatment techniques are appropriate, for medical doctors or for psychiatrists or psychologists and so on.

The second point is that there are abusive practices that have been used in connection with various mental attitudes or feelings. Over-medication in respect to depression is an example that comes to mind. The aversive therapies that have been used in connection with same-sex attraction have contained some serious abuses that have been recognized over time within the professions. While we have no position about what the medical doctors do (except in very, very rare cases — abortion would be such an example), we are conscious that there are abuses and we don't accept responsibility for those abuses. Even though they are addressed at helping people we would like to see helped, we can't endorse every kind of technique that's been used.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Is heterosexual marriage ever an option for those with homosexual feelings?

ELDER OAKS: We are sometimes asked about whether marriage is a remedy for these feelings that we have been talking about. President Hinckley, faced with the fact that apparently some had believed it to be a remedy, and perhaps that some Church leaders had even counseled marriage as the remedy for these feelings, made this statement:

“Marriage should not be viewed as a therapeutic step to solve problems such as homosexual inclinations or practices.” To me that means that we are not going to stand still to put at risk daughters of God who would enter into such marriages under false pretenses or under a cloud unknown to them. Persons who have this kind of challenge that they cannot control could not enter marriage in good faith.

On the other hand, persons who have cleansed themselves of any transgression and who have shown their ability to deal with these

feelings or inclinations and put them in the background, and feel a great attraction for a daughter of God and therefore desire to enter marriage and have children and enjoy the blessings of eternity — that’s a situation when marriage would be appropriate.

President Hinckley said that marriage is not a therapeutic step to solve problems.

ELDER WICKMAN: One question that might be asked by somebody who is struggling with same-gender attraction is, “Is this something I’m stuck with forever? What bearing does this have on eternal life? If I can somehow make it through this life, when I appear on the other side, what will I be like?”

Gratefully, the answer is that same-gender attraction did not exist in the pre-earth life and neither will it exist in the next life. It is a circumstance that for whatever reason or reasons seems to apply right now in mortality, in this nano-second of our eternal existence.

The good news for somebody who is struggling with same-gender attraction is this: 1) It is that ‘I’m not stuck with it forever.’ It’s just now. Admittedly, for each one of us, it’s hard to look beyond the ‘now’ sometimes. But nonetheless, if you see mortality as now, it’s only during this season. 2) If I can keep myself worthy here, if I can be true to gospel commandments, if I can keep covenants that I have made, the blessings of exaltation and eternal life that Heavenly Father holds out to all of His children apply to me. Every blessing — including eternal marriage — is and will be mine in due course.

ELDER OAKS: Let me just add a thought to that. There is no fullness of joy in the next life without a family unit, including a husband, a wife, and posterity. Further, men are that they might have joy. In the eternal perspective, same-gender activity will only bring sorrow and grief and the loss of eternal opportunities.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: A little earlier, Elder Oaks, you talked about the same standard of morality for heterosexuals and homosexuals. How would you address someone who said to you, 'I understand it's the same standard, but aren't we asking a little more of someone who has same-gender attraction?' Obviously there are heterosexual people who won't get married, but would you accept that they at least have hope that 'tomorrow I could meet the person of my dreams.' There's always the hope that that could happen at any point in their life. Someone with same-gender attraction wouldn't necessarily have that same hope.

ELDER OAKS: There are differences, of course, but the contrast is not unique. There are people with physical disabilities that prevent them from having any hope — in some cases any actual hope and in other cases any practical hope — of marriage. The circumstance of being currently unable to marry, while tragic, is not unique.

It is sometimes said that God could not discriminate against individuals in this circumstance. But life is full of physical infirmities that some might see as discriminations — total paralysis or serious mental impairment being two that are relevant to marriage. If we believe in God and believe in His mercy and His justice, it won't do to say that these are discriminations because God wouldn't discriminate. We are in no condition to judge what discrimination is. We rest on our faith in God and our utmost assurance of His mercy and His love for all of His children.

ELDER WICKMAN: There's really no question that there is an anguish associated with the inability to marry in this life. We feel for someone that has that anguish. I feel for somebody that has that anguish. But it's not limited to someone who has same-gender attraction.

We live in a very self-absorbed age. I guess it's naturally human to

think about my own problems as somehow greater than someone else's. I think when any one of us begins to think that way, it might be well to look beyond ourselves. Who am I to say that I am more handicapped, or suffering more, than someone else?

I happen to have a handicapped daughter. She's a beautiful girl. She'll be 27 next week. Her name is Courtney. Courtney will never marry in this life, yet she looks wistfully upon those who do. She will stand at the window of my office which overlooks the Salt Lake Temple and look at the brides and their new husbands as they're having their pictures taken. She's at once captivated by it and saddened because Courtney understands that will not be her experience here. Courtney didn't ask for the circumstances into which she was born in this life, any more than somebody with same-gender attraction did. So there are lots of kinds of anguish people can have, even associated with just this matter of marriage. What we look forward to, and the great promise of the gospel, is that whatever our inclinations are here, whatever our shortcomings are here, whatever the hindrances to our enjoying a fullness of joy here, we have the Lord's assurance for every one of us that those in due course will be removed. We just need to remain faithful.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Elder Wickman, when you referred earlier to missionary service, you held that out as a possibility for someone who felt same-gender attraction but didn't act on it. President Hinckley has said that if people are faithful, they can essentially go forward as anyone else in the Church and have full fellowship. What does that really mean? Does it mean missionary service? Does it mean that someone can go to the temple, at least for those sacraments that don't involve marriage? Does it really mean that someone with same-gender attraction so long as they're faithful, has every opportunity to participate, to be called to service, to do all those kinds of things that anyone else can?

ELDER WICKMAN: I think the short answer to that is yes! I'd look to Elder Oaks to elaborate on that.

ELDER OAKS: President Hinckley has helped us on that subject with a clear statement that answers all questions of that nature. He said, "We love them (referring to people who have same-sex attractions) as sons and daughters of God. They may have certain inclinations which are powerful and which may be difficult to control. If they do not act upon these inclinations, then they can go forward as do all other members of the Church."

To me that means that a person with these inclinations, where they're kept under control, or, if yielded to are appropriately repented of, is eligible to do anything in the Church that can be done by any member of the Church who is single. Occasionally, there's an office, like the office of bishop, where a person must be married. But that's rather the exception in the Church. Every teaching position, every missionary position can be held by single people. We welcome to that kind of service people who are struggling with any kind of temptation when the struggle is a good struggle and they are living so as to be appropriate teachers, or missionaries, or whatever the calling may be.

ELDER WICKMAN: Isn't it really the significance of the Atonement in a person's life? Doesn't the Atonement really begin to mean something to a person when he or she is trying to face down the challenges of living, whether they be temptations or limitations? The willingness to turn to the Savior, the opportunity of going to sacrament service on a Sunday, and really participating in the ordinance of the sacrament... listening to the prayers, partaking of those sacred emblems. Those are opportunities that really help us to come within the ambit of the Savior's Atonement. Viewed that way, then any opportunity to serve in the Church is a blessing. As has been mentioned, there is a relatively tiny handful of callings within the

Church that require marriage.

ELDER OAKS: There is another point to add here, and this comes from a recent statement of the First Presidency, which is a wonderful description of our attitude in this matter: “We of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reach out with understanding and respect for individuals who are attracted to those of the same gender. We realize there may be great loneliness in their lives, but there must also be recognition of what is right before the Lord.”

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **What would you say to those members in society, members of the Church, who may look at same-gender attraction as different than other temptations, than any other struggle that people face? First of all, do you think it’s a fair assessment that some people have that feeling? What would you say to them?**

ELDER OAKS: I think it is an accurate statement to say that some people consider feelings of same-gender attraction to be the defining fact of their existence. There are also people who consider the defining fact of their existence that they are from Texas or that they were in the United States Marines. Or they are red-headed, or they are the best basketball player that ever played for such-and-such a high school. People can adopt a characteristic as the defining example of their existence and often those characteristics are physical.

We have the agency to choose which characteristics will define us; those choices are not thrust upon us.

The ultimate defining fact for all of us is that we are children of Heavenly Parents, born on this earth for a purpose, and born with a divine destiny. Whenever any of those other notions, whatever they may be, gets in the way of that ultimate defining fact, then it is destructive and it leads us down the wrong path.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Both of you have mentioned the issue of compassion and this feeling about needing to be compassionate. Let’s fast-forward the scenario that we used earlier, and assume it’s a couple of years later. My conversations with my son, all our efforts to love our son and keep him in the Church have failed to address what he sees as the central issue — that he can’t help his feelings. He’s now told us that he’s moving out of the home. He plans to live with a gay friend. He’s adamant about it. What should be the proper response of a Latter-day Saint parent in that situation?

ELDER OAKS: It seems to me that a Latter-day Saint parent has a responsibility in love and gentleness to affirm the teaching of the Lord through His prophets that the course of action he is about to embark upon is sinful. While affirming our continued love for him, and affirming that the family continues to have its arms open to him, I think it would be well to review with him something like the following, which is a statement of the First Presidency in 1991: “The Lord’s law of moral conduct is abstinence outside of lawful marriage and fidelity within marriage. Sexual relations are proper only between husband and wife, appropriately expressed within the bonds of marriage. Any other sexual conduct, including fornication, adultery, and homosexual and lesbian behavior is sinful. Those who persist in such practices or influence others to do so are subject to Church discipline.”

My first responsibility as a father is to make sure that he understands that, and then to say to him, “My son, if you choose to deliberately engage in this kind of behavior, you’re still my son. The Atonement of Jesus Christ is powerful enough to reach out and cleanse you if you are repentant and give up your sinful behavior, but I urge you not to embark on that path because repentance is not easy. You’re embarking on a course of action that will weaken you in your ability to repent. It will cloud your perceptions of what is important in life. Finally, it may

drag you down so far that you can't come back. Don't go that way. But if you choose to go that way, we will always try to help you and get you back on the path of growth.

ELDER WICKMAN: One way to read the Book of Mormon is as a book of encounters between fathers and sons. Some of those encounters were very positive and reinforcing on the part of the father of a son. Some were occasions where a father had to tell his son or his sons that the path that they were following was incorrect before the Lord. With all, it needs to be done in the spirit of love and welcoming that, as Elder Oaks mentioned, 'You're always my son.' There's an old maxim which is really true for every parent and that is, 'You haven't failed until you quit trying.' I think that means both in terms of taking appropriate opportunities to teach one's children the right way, but at all times making sure they know that over all things you'll love them.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **At what point does showing that love cross the line into inadvertently endorsing behavior? If the son says, 'Well, if you love me, can I bring my partner to our home to visit? Can we come for holidays?' How do you balance that against, for example, concern for other children in the home?'**

ELDER OAKS: That's a decision that needs to be made individually by the person responsible, calling upon the Lord for inspiration. I can imagine that in most circumstances the parents would say, 'Please don't do that. Don't put us into that position.' Surely if there are children in the home who would be influenced by this example, the answer would likely be that. There would also be other factors that would make that the likely answer.

I can also imagine some circumstances in which it might be possible to say, 'Yes, come, but don't expect to stay overnight. Don't expect to be a lengthy house guest. Don't expect us to take you out and introduce you to our friends, or to deal with you in a public situation that would

imply our approval of your “partnership.”

There are so many different circumstances, it’s impossible to give one answer that fits all.

ELDER WICKMAN: It’s hard to imagine a more difficult circumstance for a parent to face than that one. It is a case by case determination. The only thing that I would add to what Elder Oaks has just said is that I think it’s important as a parent to avoid a potential trap arising out of one’s anguish over this situation.

I refer to a shift from defending the Lord’s way to defending the errant child’s lifestyle, both with him and with others. It really is true the Lord’s way is to love the sinner while condemning the sin. That is to say we continue to open our homes and our hearts and our arms to our children, but that need not be with approval of their lifestyle. Neither does it mean we need to be constantly telling them that their lifestyle is inappropriate. An even bigger error is now to become defensive of the child, because that neither helps the child nor helps the parent. That course of action, which experience teaches, is almost certainly to lead both away from the Lord’s way.

ELDER OAKS: The First Presidency made a wonderful statement on this subject in a letter in 1991. Speaking of individuals and families that were struggling with this kind of problem, they said, “We encourage Church leaders and members to reach out with love and understanding to those struggling with these issues.” Surely if we are counseled as a body of Church membership to reach out with love and understanding to those ‘struggling with these issues,’ that obligation rests with particular intensity on parents who have children struggling with these issues... even children who are engaged in sinful behavior associated with these issues.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Is rejection of a child to some degree the natural reaction of some parents whenever their children fall

short of expectations? Is it sometimes easier to ‘close the window’ on an issue than deal with it?

ELDER OAKS: We surely encourage parents not to blame themselves and we encourage Church members not to blame parents in this circumstance. We should remember that none of us is perfect and none of us has children whose behavior is entirely in accord with exactly what we would have them do in all circumstances.

We feel great compassion for parents whose love and protective instincts for their challenged children have moved them to some positions that are adversary to the Church. I hope the Lord will be merciful to parents whose love for their children has caused them to get into such traps.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Let’s fast-forward again. My son has now stopped coming to church altogether. There seems no prospect of him returning. Now he tells me he’s planning on going to Canada where same-gender marriage is allowed. He insists that he agrees that loving marriage relationships are important. He’s not promiscuous; he has one relationship. He and his partner intend to have that relationship for the rest of their lives. He cannot understand that a lifetime commitment can’t be accepted by the Church when society seems to be moving in that way. Again, if I am a Latter-day Saint father, what would I be expected to tell him?

ELDER WICKMAN: For openers, marriage is neither a matter of politics, nor is it a matter of social policy. Marriage is defined by the Lord Himself. It’s the one institution that is ceremoniously performed by priesthood authority in the temple [and] transcends this world. It is of such profound importance... such a core doctrine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, of the very purpose of the creation of this earth. One hardly can get past the first page of Genesis without seeing that very

clearly. It is not an institution to be tampered with by mankind, and certainly not to be tampered with by those who are doing so simply for their own purposes. There is no such thing in the Lord’s eyes as something called same-gender marriage. Homosexual behavior is and will always remain before the Lord an abominable sin. Calling it something else by virtue of some political definition does not change that reality.

ELDER OAKS: Another way to say that same thing is that the Parliament in Canada and the Congress in Washington do not have the authority to revoke the commandments of God, or to modify or amend them in any way.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **On some gay web sites there are those who argue that homosexual behavior is not specifically prohibited in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament. Some argue that Jesus Christ’s compassion and love for humanity embraces this kind of relationship. What is the Church’s teaching about that?**

ELDER WICKMAN: For one thing, those who assert that need to read their Bible more carefully. But beyond that, it is comparing apples and oranges to refer to the love that the Savior expressed for all mankind, for every person, for every man and woman and child, with the doctrine related to marriage.

In fact, the Savior did make a declaration about marriage, albeit in a somewhat different context. Jesus said that “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife and they twain shall be one flesh. What God has joined together let no man put asunder.”

We usually think of that expression in the context of two people, a man and a woman, being married and the inappropriateness of someone trying to separate them. I think it may have a broader meaning in a doctrinal sense. Marriage of a man and a woman is clear

in Biblical teaching in the Old Testament as well as in the New [Testament] teaching. Anyone who seeks to put that notion asunder is likewise running counter to what Jesus Himself said. It's important to keep in mind the difference between Jesus' love and His definition of doctrine, and the definition of doctrine that has come from apostles and prophets of the Lord Jesus Christ, both anciently and in modern times.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: What of those who might say, "Okay. Latter-day Saints are entitled to believe whatever they like. If you don't believe in same-gender marriages, then it's fine for you. But why try to regulate the behavior of other people who have nothing to do with your faith, especially when some nations in Europe have legally sanctioned that kind of marriage? Why not just say, 'We don't agree with it doctrinally for our own people' and leave it at that. Why fight to get a Constitutional amendment [in the United States], for example?"

ELDER WICKMAN: We're not trying to regulate people, but this notion that 'what happens in your house doesn't affect what happens in my house' on the subject of the institution of marriage may be the ultimate sophistry of those advocating same-gender marriage.

Some people promote the idea that there can be two marriages, co-existing side by side, one heterosexual and one homosexual, without any adverse consequences. The hard reality is that, as an institution, marriage like all other institutions can only have one definition without changing the very character of the institution. Hence there can be no coexistence of two marriages. Either there is marriage as it is now defined and as defined by the Lord, or there is what could thus be described as genderless marriage. The latter is abhorrent to God, who, as we've been discussing, Himself described what marriage is — between a man and a woman.

A redefinition of that institution, therefore, redefines it for everyone — not just those who are seeking to have a so-called same gender marriage. It also ignores the definition that the Lord Himself has given.

ELDER OAKS: There's another point that can be made on this. Let's not forget that for thousands of years the institution of marriage has been between a man and a woman. Until quite recently, in a limited number of countries, there has been no such thing as a marriage between persons of the same gender. Suddenly we are faced with the claim that thousands of years of human experience should be set aside because we should not discriminate in relation to the institution of marriage. When that claim is made, the burden of proving that this step will not undo the wisdom and stability of millennia of experience lies on those who would make the change. Yet the question is asked and the matter is put forward as if those who believe in marriage between a man and a woman have the burden of proving that it should not be extended to some other set of conditions.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **There are those who would say that that might have applied better in the 1950s or earlier than in the 21st century. If you look at several nations in Europe, for example, traditional marriage is so rapidly on the decline that it is no longer the norm. If marriage is evolving, ought we to resist those kind of social changes?**

ELDER OAKS: That argument impresses me as something akin to the fact that if we agree that the patient is sick and getting sicker, we should therefore approve a coup de grace. The coup de grace which ends the patient's life altogether is quite equivalent to the drastic modification in the institution of marriage that would be brought on by same-gender marriage.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **You talked about the harm that could come**

on society by redefining marriage. What would you say to those people who declare: "I know gay people who are in long-term committed relationships. They're great people. They love each other. What harm is it going to do my marriage as a heterosexual to allow them that same 'rite?'"

ELDER WICKMAN: Let me say again what I said a moment ago. I believe that that argument is true sophistry, because marriage is a unified institution. Marriage means a committed, legally sanctioned relationship between a man and a woman. That's what it means. That's what it means in the revelations. That's what it means in the secular law. You cannot have that marriage coexisting institutionally with something else called same-gender marriage. It simply is a definitional impossibility. At such point as you now, as an institution, begin to recognize a legally-sanctioned relationship, a committed relationship between two people of the same gender, you have now redefined the institution to being one of genderless marriage.

As we've mentioned in answer to other questions, [genderless marriage] is contrary to God's law, to revealed Word. Scripture, ancient and modern, could not be clearer on the definition that the Lord and His agents have given to marriage down through the dispensations.

But it has a profound effect in a very secular way on everybody else. What happens in somebody's house down the street does in very deed have an effect on what happens in my house and how it's treated. To suggest that in the face of these millennia of history and the revelations of God and the whole human pattern they have the right to redefine the whole institution for everyone is presumptuous in the extreme and terribly wrong-headed.

ELDER OAKS: Another point to be made about this is made in a question. If a couple who are cohabiting, happy, and committed to one

another want to have their relationship called a marriage, why do they want that? Considering what they say they have, why do they want to add to it the legal status of marriage that has been honored and experienced for thousands of years? What is it that is desired by those who advocate same-gender marriage? If that could be articulated on some basis other than discrimination, which is not a very good argument, it would be easier to answer the question that you have asked, and I think it would reveal the soundness of what we've already heard.

There are certain indicia of marriage — certain legal and social consequences and certain legitimacy — which if given to some relationship other than marriage between a man and a woman tend to degrade if not destroy the institution that's been honored over so many thousands of years.

In addition, if people want to legalize a particular relationship, we need to be careful if that kind of relationship has been disapproved for millennia. Suddenly there's a call to legalize it so they can feel better about themselves. That argument proves a little too much. Suppose a person is making a living in some illegal behavior, but feels uneasy about it. (He may be a professional thief or he may be selling a service that is illegal, or whatever it may be.) Do we go out and legalize his behavior because he's being discriminated against in his occupational choices or because he doesn't feel well about what he's doing and he wants a 'feel good' example, or he wants his behavior legitimized in the eyes of society or his family? I think the answer is that we do not legalize behavior for those reasons unless they are very persuasive reasons brought forward to make a change in the current situation.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Would you extend the same argument against same-gender marriage to civil unions or some kind of benefits short of marriage?

ELDER WICKMAN: One way to think of marriage is as a bundle of rights associated with what it means for two people to be married. What the First Presidency has done is express its support of marriage and for that bundle of rights belonging to a man and a woman. The First Presidency hasn't expressed itself concerning any specific right. It really doesn't matter what you call it. If you have some legally sanctioned relationship with the bundle of legal rights traditionally belonging to marriage and governing authority has slapped a label on it, whether it is civil union or domestic partnership or whatever label it's given, it is nonetheless tantamount to marriage. That is something to which our doctrine simply requires us to speak out and say, "That is not right. That's not appropriate."

As far as something less than that — as far as relationships that give to some pairs in our society some right but not all of those associated with marriage — as to that, as far as I know, the First Presidency hasn't expressed itself. There are numbers of different types of partnerships or pairings that may exist in society that aren't same-gender sexual relationships that provide for some right that we have no objection to. All that said... there may be on occasion some specific rights that we would be concerned about being granted to those in a same-gender relationship. Adoption is one that comes to mind, simply because that is a right which has been historically, doctrinally associated so closely with marriage and family. I cite the example of adoption simply because it has to do with the bearing and the rearing of children. Our teachings, even as expressed most recently in a very complete doctrinal sense in the Family Proclamation by living apostles and prophets, is that children deserve to be reared in a home with a father and a mother.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **On the issue of a Constitutional amendment prohibiting same-gender marriage, there are some Latter-day Saints who are opposed to same-gender marriage, but who are**

not in favor of addressing this through a Constitutional amendment. Why did the Church feel that it had to step in that direction?

ELDER OAKS: Law has at least two roles: one is to define and regulate the limits of acceptable behavior. The other is to teach principles for individuals to make individual choices. The law declares unacceptable some things that are simply not enforceable, and there’s no prosecutor who tries to enforce them. We refer to that as the teaching function of the law. The time has come in our society when I see great wisdom and purpose in a United States Constitutional amendment declaring that marriage is between a man and a woman. There is nothing in that proposed amendment that requires a criminal prosecution or that directs the attorneys general to go out and round people up, but it declares a principle and it also creates a defensive barrier against those who would alter that traditional definition of marriage.

There are people who oppose a federal Constitutional amendment because they think that the law of family should be made by the states. I can see a legitimate argument there. I think it’s mistaken, however, because the federal government, through the decisions of life-tenured federal judges, has already taken over that area. This Constitutional amendment is a defensive measure against those who would ignore the will of the states appropriately expressed and require, as a matter of federal law, the recognition of same-gender marriages — or the invalidation of state laws that require that marriage be between a man and a woman. In summary, the First Presidency has come out for an amendment (which may or may not be adopted) in support of the teaching function of the law. Such an amendment would be a very important expression of public policy, which would feed into or should feed into the decisions of judges across the length and breadth of the land.

ELDER WICKMAN: Let me just add to that, if I may. It’s not the Church that has made the issue of marriage a matter of federal law. Those who are vigorously advocating for something called same-gender marriage have essentially put that potato on the fork. They’re the ones who have created a situation whereby the law of the land, one way or the other, is going to address this issue of marriage. This is not a situation where the Church has elected to take the matter into the legal arena or into the political arena. It’s already there.

The fact of the matter is that the best way to assure that a definition of marriage as it now stands continues is to put it into the foundational legal document of the United States. That is in the Constitution. That’s where the battle has taken it. Ultimately that’s where the battle is going to be decided. It’s going to be decided as a matter of federal law one way or the other. Consequently it is not a battleground on such an issue that we Latter-day Saints have chosen, but it has been established and we have little choice but to express our views concerning it, which is really all that the Church has done.

Decisions even for members of the Church as to what they do with respect to this issue must of course rest with each one in their capacity as citizens.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **The emphasis that has been placed in this conversation on traditional marriage between a man and a woman has been consistent throughout. Do you see any irony in the fact that the Church is so publicly outspoken on this issue, when in the minds of so many people in the United States and around the world the Church is known for once supporting a very untraditional marriage arrangement — that is, polygamy?**

ELDER OAKS: I see irony in that if one views it without the belief that we affirm in **divine revelation**. The 19th century Mormons, including some of my ancestors, were not eager to practice plural marriage. They

followed the example of Brigham Young, who expressed his profound negative feelings when he first had this principle revealed to him. The Mormons of the 19th century who practiced plural marriage, male and female, did so because they felt it was a duty put upon them by God.

When that duty was lifted, they were directed to conform to the law of the land, which forbade polygamy and which had been held constitutional. When they were told to refrain from plural marriage, there were probably some who were unhappy, but I think the majority were greatly relieved and glad to get back into the mainstream of western civilization, which had been marriage between a man and a woman. In short, if you start with the assumption of continuing revelation, on which this Church is founded, then you can understand that there is no irony in this. But if you don't start with that assumption, you see a profound irony.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: What about various types of support groups for those with same-gender affliction?

ELDER WICKMAN: I think we neither encourage nor discourage them, but much would depend on the nature of those groups. We certainly discourage people getting involved with any group or organization that foster living a homosexual lifestyle.

Ultimately, the wisest course for anybody who's afflicted with same-gender attraction is to strive to extend one's horizon beyond just one's sexual orientation, one's gender orientation, and to try to see the whole person. If I'm one that's afflicted with same-gender attraction, I should strive to see myself in a much broader context... seeing myself as a child of God with whatever my talents may be, whether intellect, or music, or athletics, or somebody that has a compassion to help people, to see myself in a larger setting and thus to see my life in that setting.

The more a person can look beyond gender orientation, the happier

and more fulfilling life is likely to be. The worst possible thing for any of us — no matter what our temptations, no matter what our mortal inclinations may be — is to become fixated with them, to dwell on them. When we do that, not only do we deny the other things that comprise us, but experience teaches that there will be an increased likelihood that eventually we will simply succumb to the inclination.

ELDER OAKS: The principle that Elder Wickman has talked about, in a nutshell, is that if you are trying to live with and maintain ascendancy over same-gender attractions, the best way to do that is to have groups that define their members in terms other than same-gender attractions.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: **If you had to describe this enormously complex question in a couple of basic principles, what would that be?**

ELDER OAKS: God loves all of His children. He has provided a plan for His children to enjoy the choicest blessings that He has to offer in eternity. Those choicest blessings are associated with marriage between a man and a woman by appropriate priesthood authority to bring together a family unit for creation and happiness in this life and in the life to come.

We urge persons with same-gender attractions to control those and to refrain from acting upon them, which is a sin, just as we urge persons with heterosexual attractions to refrain from acting upon them until they have the opportunity for a marriage recognized by God as well as by the law of the land. That is the way to happiness and eternal life. God has given us no commandment that He will not give us the strength and power to observe. That is the Plan of Salvation for His children, and it is our duty to proclaim that plan, to teach its truth, and to praise God for the mission of His Son Jesus Christ. It is Christ’s atonement that makes it possible for us to be forgiven of our sins and

His resurrection that gives us the assurance of immortality and the life to come. It is that life to come that orients our views in mortality and reinforces our determination to live the laws of God so that we can qualify for His blessings in immortality.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Thank you.

Additional Resources

STYLE GUIDE NOTE: When reporting about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, please use the complete name of the Church in the first reference. For more information on the use of the name of the Church, go to our online [Style Guide](#).