

# Opinion: Balancing the tensions of our Latter-day Saint and LGBTQ conversations

<https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2021/10/21/22717022/balancing-the-tensions-of-our-latter-day-saint-and-lgbtq-conversations-mormon-truth-love>

We can do better in holding to both truth and love without neglecting one or the other

By [Ty Mansfield](#) Oct 21, 2021, 3:59pm MDT

**Editor's note:** *This essay by Ty Mansfield is part of an ongoing Deseret News series exploring ideas and issues at the intersection of [faith and thought](#).*

*“Do not accept anything as truth that lacks love and do not accept anything as love that lacks truth. One without the other is a destructive lie.”*

— St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross

I sit every day in the tensions of our American and Latter-day Saint conversations about faith and sexuality, both as a sexual minority who has concerns about the pain felt by many LGBTQ clients and others I support, and as a believing and practicing Latter-day Saint who is concerned with the growing polarization in faith communities around the ethics of sexuality, marriage and family.

I was an undergraduate student at BYU when I started addressing the conflict between my own faith and my attraction to men. I know in a very real and personal way how it feels to live in a world between worlds. I know the shame and pain of wondering where you fit in a world where it's taught that God has given us “natural” attractions for divine purposes — and feeling that what was natural to me was so fundamentally at odds with what “should” be that I was convinced if anyone knew how I felt inside I would lose the acceptance and love from others that I craved.

A lot has changed for me since then. With the help of some transformative spiritual experiences and good therapy, I was able to work through the existential crisis I experienced earlier, recommitted myself to my faith (and to what I thought then would be an ever-single life in the church), and then many years later I met my now-wife with whom I have a beautiful and life-giving marriage and five more little humans who have taught me more about God's love than I ever could have imagined.

As I've observed and felt the tensions over the years in our cultural conversations around sexuality, gender and faith, there are some themes that have emerged that seem to me to be at the heart of at least some of the conflicts within our Latter-day Saint faith community — particularly the tensions between the doctrines of the church

and how those doctrines impact different people differently, and how we extend love and ministry to others in varying life circumstances.

For a number of years, Latter-day Saint leaders have been speaking to this tension that members of the church must wrestle with. In 2009, then-Elder Dallin H.

Oaks spoke in general conference of the reinforcing truths of “love and law” — which he then reemphasized and expanded on during a 2018 address to BYU-Idaho students on “The Paradox of Love and Law.” In 2019, President Russell M.

Nelson underscored this same divine duality in his message to BYU students, “The Love and Laws of God.” And then last month, Elder Jeffrey R.

Holland cautioned BYU faculty and administrators, “We have to be careful that love and empathy do not get interpreted as condoning and advocacy, or that orthodoxy and loyalty to principle not be interpreted as unkindness or disloyalty to people.”

In my opinion, one thing the aftermath of Elder Holland’s address has revealed is that most people don’t actually seem to do very well at holding this tension. To borrow a phrase from Elder Neal A. Maxwell, in the “spiritual ecology” of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it requires a high degree of emotional and spiritual maturity and a high level of commitment to both love and truth to be able to hold them in adequate tension. “The doctrines of Jesus Christ,” Elder Maxwell taught, “are so powerful that any one of these doctrines, having been broken away from the rest, goes wild and mad. . . . The principle of love without the principles of justice and discipline goes wild. Any doctrine, unless it is woven into the fabric of orthodoxy, goes wild. The doctrines of the kingdom need each other just as the people of the kingdom need each other.”

There seems to be such a strong paradoxical tension between love and ministry, truth and law, that most people seem to get pulled in one direction or the other. Those who err on the side of primarily advocating for truth and law too often have a dogmatic and dismissive approach to those who struggle with faith or other difficulties. There’s often a lack of empathy for minority experiences that fosters a feeling of alienation. As a client of mine — a strong believer and adherent to the church — recently said, “My crisis hasn’t been a crisis of faith, but rather a crisis of belonging.” Too often those who err on the side of truth and orthodoxy betray the compassionate counsel from President Thomas S. Monson to “never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved.”

On the other side, those who advocate for a stronger love and ministry often seem to have a kind of disregard for truth and law — or at least, for those who claim to believe in the gospel and the Church of Jesus Christ, the truths as they have been taught and articulated by the church. Love and ministry as it’s perceived by many self-identified

LGBTQ individuals, as well as many self-proclaimed “allies,” often seems to have an ethic and view of God and the gospel rooted more in Western cultural values of expressive individualism, Victorian romanticism, American sentimentalism, liberal-progressive sexual ethics and queer liberation ideology than anything scriptural or prophetic, ancient or modern. Love without truth tends to creep into a kind of sentimentalist moral relativism.

Certainly, I know many people who hold these tensions masterfully. But at least from my perspective, they are a minority of saints. There are too many who seem to be more concerned with truth than love, while others are more concerned with love than truth. Either one without the other is but a polarized shadow of the fullness of both love and truth that God and Christ are calling us to live.

If you’re reading this and see yourself as holding the correct balance and those you disagree with as being imbalanced or erring in an extreme, I would simply invite you to consider if there’s more you can do to love or minister better to those who hurt or feel alienated or are hungering for connection and belonging, or whether you have a tendency to be dismissive of prophetic teachings that may not fit your cultural or sociopolitical worldview. In a phrase, “Lord, is it I?”

## **Understanding and loving truth**

I believe there is something happening within the lay Latter-day Saint community that we need to be aware and conscious of. In his Truman Madsen Lecture on Joseph Smith’s “recovery” of the “eternal man,” Robert Millet, former dean of religious education at BYU, talked about the changes in the Christian concept of God that took place with early councils such as Nicaea and Constantinople, quoting evangelical scholars who remarked on the many insights that emerged from this “inevitable encounter” between the gospel and the larger culture and influence of Hellenistic philosophy, which also helped Christians evangelize Greek culture. Quoting these scholars, Millet continued, “Along with the good came a certain theological virus that infected the Christian doctrine of God, making it ill and creating the sorts of problems mentioned above. The virus so permeates Christian theology (today) that some have come to take the illness for granted, attributing it to divine mystery, while others remain unaware of the infection altogether.”

I believe something comparable is happening in the church today with regard to ideologies surrounding love, marriage, sexuality and gender. Cultural movements such as secular humanism, expressive individualism, Victorian romanticism,

American sentimentalism and gender deconstructionism — and perhaps even a few more -isms — have given rise to sexual liberation and subsequent gay/queer liberation movements. These broader cultural -isms — and many of the tribal -ites they help shape — have influenced even members of the church in ways we most often simply don't comprehend. But they are potent and we consume a steady diet of them through our popular culture and entertainment.

These cultural and sociopolitical philosophies and worldviews, just as Greek and pagan cultures of old, have in many ways infected the worldviews of many Latter-day Saints and become a kind of “theological virus” or spiritual cancer. As a colleague of mine recently remarked, it's almost as if Jesus had said, “Greater love hath no man or woman than this, that any and all consenting adults should experience passionate romance, intimate pair-bonding and maximized sexual fulfillment all the days of their life — and, be wary of children, for they may inhibit life satisfaction.”

Respected Anglican scholar N.T. Wright has written of the clash of some of these cultural philosophies with the prophetic witness in the Bible. “We have lived for too long in a world, and tragically even in a church,” he said, “where the wills and affections of human beings are regarded as sacrosanct as they stand, where God is required to command what we already love and to promise what we already desire. The implicit religion of many people today is simply to discover who they really are and then try to live it out — which is, as many have discovered, a recipe for chaotic, disjointed, and dysfunctional humanness.”

In contrast, Wright went on to say, “The logic of cross and resurrection, of the new creation which gives shape to all truly Christian living, points in a different direction. And one of the central names for that direction is joy: the joy of relationships healed as well as enhanced, the joy of belonging to the new creation, of finding not what we already had but what God was longing to give us.”

## **Understanding and loving people**

If we truly believe that love is as important as truth — if we're going to hold this spiritual tension — then we have to understand that loving is more than giving lip service to doctrinal ideals. We must seek to understand what love and compassion truly require.

As one of my favorite writers, Henri Nouwen — a celebrated Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian who was also homosexual — wrote, “Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it

requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it. ... Those who can sit in silence with their fellowman, not knowing what to say but knowing that they should be there, can bring new life in a dying heart.”

Kindness, love and compassion aren't easy; they are very real and very challenging spiritual disciplines that require us to do our own inner work, to look at our own shadows, and to get outside of ourselves. If we cannot see our shared humanity with sexual and gender minorities — if we cannot see ourselves in them in some way, truly empathizing — the capacity for real compassion will always be hindered. Latter-day Saints who believe in the church's doctrines of chastity and marriage might also consider the words of President Spencer W. Kimball, with my own emphasis added, that “Jesus saw sin as wrong but also was able to see sin *as springing from deep and unmet needs*. ... We can show forth our love for others even when we are called upon to correct them. *We need to be able to look deeply enough into the lives of others to see the basic causes for their failures and shortcomings.*”

In short, the morality of promoting the church's position on marriage and chastity is challenged to the degree that we are not *at the same time* looking deeply enough into the lives of others who feel somehow hurt or confused or alienated by those teachings in order to understand just where those “deep and unmet needs” are, and how at least *some* portion of responsibility for those deep and unmet needs falls squarely on the shoulders of *our own* failures and shortcomings as the body of Christ. I've had more than a handful of clients express some variation of the sentiment that it's easier to connect sexually and anonymously with someone from an app than it is to get a real hug or any real understanding and connection from fellow believers.

This is *at least* as much our failure as it is theirs.

In the hierarchy of human needs, beyond needs for survival, there are roughly two genres of needs that we all have that are *critical* for human flourishing: needs for a sense of connection, intimacy and belonging, and needs for a sense of meaning and positive identity. We need a life-giving narrative for our lives. These needs are so core to life that we will often go wherever we need to go and do what we need to do to meet them. And if those needs are somehow *not* being met within one's faith community, then barring a deep testimony and sustaining relationship with God — which, ultimately, is the ideal — people will likely go elsewhere in an attempt to meet those needs.

This then raises the question: What is the ministry and healing that we are offering in the church, but which too many are not feeling, that rivals what they often quickly receive in broader LGBTQ communities? This, in my own judgment, is our greatest collective challenge as believers when it comes to these questions.

It's also our opportunity.

Before we condemn or inappropriately judge someone, we must first ask ourselves: Can we Latter-day Saints who believe in the doctrines of the gospel, who find eternal truth in scripture and prophetic teachings also go deeper in our efforts to love and minister? Rather than seeing the hurt many in the LGBTQ community feel as another cause for suspicion, can we grow in both our empathy and understanding together? When those in the LGBTQ community feel hurt when the church reaffirms its doctrines on chastity, marriage and gender, can we seek to understand and empathize with why they do — and then “(show) forth afterward an increase of love” toward those who are hurting “lest (they) esteem (us) to be (their) enemy” (D&C 121:43)?

Indeed, the Lord tells us that, as his disciples, we must.

### **A caution on the harms of stirring up false hope**

That said, another very real concern and potential harm on the side of love has to do with earnest LGBTQ Latter-day Saints and “allies” who see or empathize with the tension and sometimes pain of their LGBTQ loved ones, and who want to feel or say something to give hope. Too often the outcome they rely on is a doctrinal change allowing same-sex marital temple sealings. Authors, podcasters and commentators continue to grow bolder in their arguments that this doctrinal change is inevitable and is only being hindered by ignorance, fear, hatred or bureaucratic inertia. As more people make this argument, the expectation for this outcome grows. But this idea will not be sustaining unless it's rooted in something true.

To the point of St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, love without truth is a destructive lie.

To be clear, these individuals would likely say that they *don't* disregard truth and law, but rather that truth is on their side — that it's the doctrines of the church that are in err. Some like to look to institution's past experiences with polygamy and temple and priesthood restrictions as precedent for anticipated changes in the church regarding same-sex relationships and marriage, but both of these analogies are sorely misguided, each for different reasons.

A more accurate parallel might be the church's position on Darwinian evolution. While taking an official *non*-position on *how* the mortal bodies of Adam and Eve were created, church leaders have instead taken the position that the purpose of scripture and of revelation through prophets has been to teach us *why* they, and we, were created — of our *eternal* identity and purpose. Similarly, even as church leaders take no official stance on *how* sexual and gender minority experiences may develop or evolve here in this mortal life, they continue to teach the connection between our eternal nature as sons and daughters of God, the purpose and design of our educative experiences here in a fallen world, and our eternal destiny if we embrace our *eternal* identity and potential. I firmly believe that, like Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in which all social and political systems were swallowed up in the gospel stone that rolled forth to consume the nations, so will the spiritual ideals of the kingdom of God swallow up all of our human experiences and social identity constructs that blur eternal identity.

So, while these well-meaning Latter-day Saints may be acting in good faith according to their understanding and hope, what they don't understand is that they are unwittingly *but directly* contributing to confusion, conflict, pain and betrayal that LGBTQ individuals feel when prophets remind the church that the doctrine of chastity and marriage will not change. They then in turn castigate the church for simply reaffirming what it has always taught, without taking responsibility for the false hope they may have unwittingly engendered. The betrayal is real, and it does damage. It isn't actually loving, and it's not the church doing the harm here.

## **In closing**

We used to have a generation of members who seemed to be more prone to embracing the theological truths of the gospel but rejected their LGBTQ loved ones, and now it seems that the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction where people are embracing their loved ones but rejecting the church and the truths of the gospel. These are but two shadows of the same coin. What we really need is a generation of members who hold both — hold and teach the fullness of the gospel but who also have a greater capacity to minister, heal and include of all of our Heavenly Parents' children who are seeking and feeling their way toward them, wherever they may currently be on their life journey.

It's far easier to gather in tribal fashion around truth or love, neglecting one or the other. But I believe as we let ourselves take seriously the prophetic invitation and truly sit in this tension between truth *and* love, practicing more intentionally to hold

both together, we can become better disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and create a safer and more life-giving home for all who seek him.

*Ty Mansfield is a practicing marriage and family therapist and adjunct faculty in religious education at Brigham Young University. He is a co-founder and current board member of North Star, faith-based ministry for Latter-day Saint sexual and gender minorities, and member of the Reconciliation and Growth Project, a dialogue group between LGBTQ affirmative and religious conservative mental health professionals.*