

ARTICLE

Openly Contradictory: Navigating the Gospel as a Gay, Latter-day Saint Scholar

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“And now, my beloved brethren, I desire that ye should remember these things, and that ye should work out your salvation with fear before God, and that ye should no more deny the coming of Christ;

That ye contend no more against the Holy Ghost, but that ye receive it, and take upon you the name of Christ; that ye humble yourselves even to the dust, and worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in, in spirit and in truth; and that ye live in thanksgiving daily, for the many mercies and blessings which he doth bestow upon you.

Yea, and I also exhort you, my brethren, that ye be watchful unto prayer continually, that ye may not be led away by the temptations of the devil, that he may not overpower you, that ye may not become his subjects at the last day; for behold, he rewardeth you no good thing.

And now my beloved brethren, I would exhort you to have patience, and that ye bear with all manner of afflictions; that ye do not revile against those who do cast you out because of your exceeding poverty, lest ye become sinners like unto them;

But that ye have patience, and bear with those afflictions, with a firm hope that ye shall one day rest from all your afflictions.” -Alma 34: 37–41

I knew that I was gay from a young age, but I also believed in God and in the restored gospel. That belief meant that I had to accept his teaching that marriage is ordained to be between a man and a woman. The people in my life seemed convinced that a person chooses to be gay, but it felt like the only choice I had was to remain a latter-day saint or not. So, if in reality God had made me this way—and it felt like he did—why did he set me up to fail? I believe that God loves all His children, so as I questioned his plan for me, I trusted I wasn’t doomed to fail. In The Book of Mormon Amulek teaches the Zoramites about faith. He states his desire for them to “work out [their] salvation” (Alma 34:37). His terminology inspired me: we must work out our salvation as if we are working out a math problem or a puzzle. The problem of my salvation felt unsolvable as a youth in the church listening to other members describe homosexuality in ways that made me want to run, hide, and never be seen again. I just didn’t belong. But I wanted to, desperately. So, I stayed, determined to work out my own salvation.

In my graduate studies, I was introduced to queer theory. I study queer theory, which seeks to unpack and dismantle society’s notions of gender, sex, sexuality, and the binary

categories to which we must somehow conform. The work of Michel Foucault specifically led me to question these categories, which he claims were invented during the Victorian era (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*). As I read his work, I wondered: is homosexuality a sin, or do we just think it is because of how we've been socialized? What I encounter in my studies resonates with my experience as a gay man and challenges the teachings I have received in the church. As I connect more with LGBTQ+ latter-day saints, I find that these frustrations come with the territory. Most of us live in the ambiguity of our place in the church and in God's kingdom. It seemed my equation became even more unsolvable. Yet it was exposure to the experiences and personal truths of others that helped me accept my own experiences and truths.

Let it be clear that I speak only for myself. My decision to stay in the church is what made the most sense for me and brought me the greatest amount of hope and joy (though the journey is far from easy). What has worked for me should not necessarily be prescribed for other LGBTQ+ latter-day saints, though I believe the principles I will discuss can help any who desire to stay in the church and work out their own salvation. As I see it, God has given us both the freedom to choose the path we desire *and* the commandment to love all of his children regardless of the paths they choose. Each of us must work out our *own* salvation, which involves humbly choosing belief over disbelief and accepting our complex identities.

Receive the Holy Ghost

What follows Amulek's invitation to work out our own salvation are instructions. In verse 38, he teaches that we should "contend no more against the Holy Ghost," and instead "receive it." We all contend against the Holy Ghost in some way, and to different extents. I see this contention every General Conference. After conference, despite the uplifting messages delivered, there are social media posts complaining about how the rhetoric in a talk harbors prejudice against one or more minorities. The arguments shared in these posts are usually valid. I can empathize with them, especially those that criticize parts that can seemingly be anti-LGBTQ+. I, too, am tempted to approach these talks as I would a literary text: deconstructing and critiquing them. When I succumb to that temptation, I lose the peace, light, and joy that the Holy Ghost brings. Instead, I remind myself that my knowledge and understanding is incomplete; I cannot let my frustrations keep me from finding the eternal truths in these messages. I must rely on the Holy Ghost to guide me to and testify of those eternal truths.

Amulek instructs us to *receive* the Holy Ghost. We are given the same instruction during the confirmation ordinance after baptism. The word *receive* implies that the Holy Ghost is being offered to us, and that we must make the conscious choice to accept it. Whether it be from local or general leaders, when we hear counsel that initially conflicts with our personal philosophies, it may cause us to doubt our faith. Yet faith is a principle of action—we *choose* to have faith. We can do this even when we have doubts. I perceive doubt to be a fork in the road where we must choose belief or disbelief. Through that choice, we are also choosing to receive the Holy Ghost or to reject it.

After coming out and finding acceptance from my family, doubts began to weigh on my mind and my heart. These were new doubts: now that I accepted this part of my identity, I began to wonder why God had made me this way if I was not to act upon my feelings. It seemed he had set me up for a joyless life. God began to feel distant and unattainable, while my attractions were real and instinctual. I began to doubt his plan because it did not correspond with what I understood this life to be about. Then, Proverbs 3:5 came to my mind: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." This verse gently reminded me that

what I know, even what feels so ingrained in my very being, pales in comparison to God's understanding. It is a daily effort in humility to put aside my attractions and to focus on the plan that God has prepared for each of us. As I humbly choose to believe in him and in his plan, I receive the Holy Ghost, who comforts me and helps ease the tension that arises naturally when I try to align my will to God's.

Patience in Affliction

Amulek's final instructions for working out our salvation come in verses 40 and 41 of Alma 34, where he states, "I would exhort you to have patience, and that ye bear with all manner of afflictions . . . with a firm hope that ye shall one day rest from all your afflictions." We learn throughout the scriptures that afflictions are rarely taken away from us (for example, see Mosiah 24:15). I never expected my sexuality to be converted away, nor do I necessarily want it to. It is part of who I am and, in many ways, it enriches my relationships with others. Tom Christofferson, a gay latter-day saint, published a book that seeks to aid parents and leaders of LGBTQ+ members of the church in understanding the ambiguity and complexity of this identity:

As [LGBTQ] or [SSA] members of the Church of Jesus Christ, we live in the reality of two independent, contradictory truths: first, that every element of who we are is known to our Father, and we are His beloved children; and second, that His prophets have said that what comes naturally to us, what feels like it is at the core of our being, must not find physical expression.¹

It is difficult to feel God's love for us when he is determinately against what is so natural to us. I do not mean that it is impossible to feel his love. I am simply stating that coming to feel his love has been the most complicated part of working out my own salvation. It is a daily battle: my mind and body working against my heart and spirit, as if I'm being torn apart. Yet I have faith that Christ can make me whole, and I have hope that someday he will.

For me, coming out was necessary in order to patiently and faithfully endure. So much of my life has been spent hating the parts of me that conflict with God's plan. I hid them as best I could. But hiding only leads to loneliness and shame, which taint every relationship. I was never comfortable because I could not fully be myself, even with my closest friends. Being gay is a part of my identity. Now, as I open up about my experience, I can see how that part of my identity is worthy of love. It is a truth for me that cannot be converted away, suppressed, or ignored. My identity as a latter-day saint is also a significant part of who I am. It has shaped how I understand the world. Additionally, my identity as a scholar has brought me to understand new perspectives and opinions that do not always coincide with my own. The ambiguity and complexity I deal with while trying to reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable identities is a challenge. I face it head on, every day, with an eye of faith.

Regardless of my intense daily efforts, doubts remain. Questions are left unanswered. I still do not fully understand God's plan for me. The puzzle pieces do not fit and the equation of my identity doesn't add up. Essayist Marilynne Robinson wrote about how we all identify with

¹ Tom Christofferson, *That We May Be One: A Gay Mormon's Perspective on Faith & Family* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2017), 27.

“overlapping communities,” which can lead to what she refers to as “turbulence.”² For her, turbulence leads us to narrow or broaden our definition of identity.³ Narrowing this definition “destroys every community.”⁴ On the contrary, she claims “wisdom, which is almost always another name for humility, lies in accepting” our complex identities.⁵ Working out my own salvation has meant allowing myself to reside in this uncertainty, to seek this wisdom from the Holy Ghost and humbly receive its promptings. Each of us has our own salvation to work out, our own puzzle to solve—despite how unsolvable it may seem as doubts arise. The solution lies in our willingness to be openly contradictory. This means accepting that our identities, needs, and desires do not always align with what we are taught in church and trusting that all will one day be made right in Christ.

² Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (Virago Press, 2013), 26.

³ Robinson, 26.

⁴ Robinson, 26.

⁵ Robinson, 27.

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