

“LETTER TO A COUSIN”

By Stuart Matis

NOTE: On Feb. 25, 2000, just days before the election, Stuart Matis took his life in front of the Mormon church in Santa Clara, California. Weeks earlier he wrote the following essay, in the form of a letter to a cousin, to express his feelings about the church and its involvement in supporting Proposition 22. The essay was sent to Jeanie Mortensen-Besamo to be posted on the Free Our Families Foundation website. It was Stuart's desire that his words be heard far and wide in the hope that no other young gay Mormon would have to experience the anguish, suffering, and anger that he had known most of his life.

Ryan,

It was great to hear from you. I had been wondering whether you were planning soon to put in your papers. The whole concept of Ryan going on mission disturbs me – I suddenly feel *real* old. Actually I'm excited for you. It's a tremendously scary time in your life right now because you are facing into a void of so many unknowns. The second you step foot in the MTC, however, it will all seem so natural.

So, you want to have my opinions regarding the Knight Initiative? At the outset, I'll tell you that the events surrounding this initiative have been painfully difficult for me to endure. Last July, I read online that the Church had instructed the Bishops to read a letter imploring the members to give of their time and money to support this initiative. I almost went into a panic attack. I cried for hours in my room, and I could do very little to console the grief of hearing this news.

Furthermore, I read that the Church had supported similar measures in Hawaii and in Alaska. In Alaska, the supporters of the measure had raised \$600,000. Of this, \$500,000 came from the Church. Ads were aired on television describing the downfall of the Roman Empire and placing blame on Rome's tolerance of homosexuality. Its message was that a similar fate would occur to those who supported equality for gay Americans. Not only was this historical analysis completely fallacious¹, but this was a prejudicial ad designed to invoke a visceral reaction of fear and hate among the Alaskan citizens.

Apparently, the Church has raised \$1 million in support of this initiative. This is so disheartening because I feel that my own peers are attacking me. Caesar's Brutes comes to mind. In July, I realized that I was going to have to endure viewing millions of dollars of television ads designed with one intention in mind: raise fear against gay and lesbian Californians. What's worse is that this fear campaign has been orchestrated by my own friends.

My mom is completely distraught over the issue. She told me that she is scared to read the papers or watch TV. When her bishop read another pro-Knight letter last Sunday, she wanted to cry. My gay friend, Clay (I met him on my mission), has implored me to never mention anything regarding Knight in his presence. It causes him too much pain. He almost asked that his name be taken off the Church records (indeed many have done just that). I was at a party several months ago with about fifteen gay men, and I mentioned to one that I was Mormon. Immediately, the room became deafeningly quiet. One guy looked at me and said, "Do you realize how hateful and destructive your Church is?" The expression "By your fruits ye shall know them" is common in the Church. Among gay men and women, the Church's fruit is perceived as being hate. This is so unfortunate because many gay men and women become atheist as they are only presented with a God of hate.

¹ It was true that Ancient Rome tolerated homosexual behavior. This has been well documented in the history books, and thus this information has been used by many within Christian churches to foretell of similar consequences that await America. What is commonly ignored is that Rome actually began to persecute homosexuals. Shortly thereafter, Rome began its slow decline. Thus, Rome flourished under tolerance and declined under prejudice. I am not making any inferences other than to identify the fallacious nature of so many anti-gay arguments. Truth is rarely a component of such arguments.

Naturally, I have become very well versed in the Knight Initiative and the Church's involvement. This is my world after all. I have met with my bishop to discuss the matter. He too disagrees with the Church's involvement in anti-gay politics. It's very disheartening for him as well, but his concurrence still does nothing to ease my pain.

Be forewarned; I'm going to deluge you with all my thoughts and feelings on the issue. Within the Church, there is such a knee-jerk reaction on this issue that many never engage in a healthy dialectic debate. They also never realize the consequences of their actions. With not even a cursory analysis of the logic behind the Church's argument, most believe that their response is proper, and thus they don't give it much thought. My hope is that I could enlighten you on how we gay members feel about it.

Before I begin, I want you to know that my arguments are *not* an attack on the Church. Rather they are a logical analysis of the arguments the Church and others give to support the Knight Initiative. My feelings will come across as extremely strong, because I believe the Church's arguments are extremely weak. Furthermore, as I will explain, the Church's actions are actually harmful to families and gay members and directly contrary to the central message of Christ's gospel. Therefore, I feel compelled to strongly speak my mind on this issue. In the end, if you believe that I have vindictively attacked the Church, then I have failed in the intent of this letter, and I apologize beforehand.

THE AUTHOR

I'll begin with the author of this initiative, William "Pete" Knight. To say that he is homophobic doesn't even begin to underscore his hatred of homosexuals. His own brother is gay as well as his son. His son was his pride when he returned home with honors from the Gulf War. That soon fell apart when his son came out, and his son quickly fell out of favor with his dad. So much for family values. In a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed piece, the younger Knight said his father's measure is "a blind, uncaring, uninformed, knee-jerk reaction to a subject about which he knows nothing." Knight consistently produces legislation to strip away any gay rights including basic necessities such as employment non-discrimination. He is also notoriously racist. He's written racist poetry that he has passed out to his conservative peers in Sacramento. His world is white, male, straight, Christian and conservative. All others be damned!

Frustrated with his inability to pass any of his legislation within the deliberative body of the state legislature, he has decided to focus on the more prejudicially swayed California electorate. You see, Ryan, bumper sticker politics works best with the voters rather than in a state legislature.

Certainly, the lack of integrity of the messenger does not automatically mean the message is flawed. However, I just wanted you to understand the force behind this legislation and with whom the Church is now sleeping. It's greatly disturbing to me.

"TRADITIONAL" MARRIAGE

Next, it's important to discuss what this issue is supposed to be about: marriage. Anti-gay advocates love to use the word "tradition" because it is emotionally prejudicial as it plays into people's inherent fear of change. However, this is not a legal argument nor is it a valid argument for denying rights to a group of individuals. Neither is it a tenable argument, for it relies on the faulty premise that history has provided us with a consistency in the foundation of marriage. Marriage as is commonly known today is actually a relatively novel concept in the history of mankind. Depending upon the culture, religion, politics, and period of history, one may find a myriad of formations. Even among Christian people, marriage has undergone a metamorphosis contingent upon the needs of the people.

When anti-gay advocates use the term "traditional", I always wonder what tradition and what time. Do we support early 19th century traditional marriages when married women had no legal standing, could not own property, sign contracts, or legally control any earned wages? When the minimum age of consent for sexual intercourse in most states was 10 years old and in Delaware seven? When some states allowed boys as young as 14 and girls as young as 12 to marry with parental consent? Or do we support mid-1900 traditional marriages when in 12 states a woman could still not make legal contracts? When it was illegal to sell contraceptives? When in 13 states interracial marriage was forbidden and punishable by prison? Or do we support 1977 marriages when no states outlawed rape in marriage? Or in 1990, when only 10 states outlawed rape in marriages? I also find it somewhat hypocritical for

the Church to appeal to people's emotions and use the "tradition" argument when it was on the receiving end of such abuse during its polygamy era. The Church more than anyone in this country should know how persecution feels².

There are actually two kinds of marriages that people in America maintain: a *legal* marriage and a *ceremonial* marriage. Legal marriage is a relationship between three parties — the two individuals *plus* the state. *Ceremonial* marriage, often called a "wedding," is quite distinct from legal marriage and is a relationship, not with the state, but between the couple, their religion and usually their familial and social circle. While many opposite-sex couples engage in both legal and ceremonial marriage, these two forms of marriage are entirely distinct — legally and functionally — under the United States' Constitutional separation of church and state.

The word "marriage" is so emotionally charged that people fail to recognize the difference between legal and ceremonial marriage. To them it's one and the same. The Knight Initiative, however, actually only precludes same-sex legal marriages not ceremonial marriages. Currently, many same-sex couples receive ceremonial marriages (weddings) each year by gay-friendly churches. If Knight passes, gay couples will continue to manifest their love in front of their friends and family by getting married in these churches. However, their marriage will not be legally recognized by the state of California (incidentally, they are *already* not recognized in California or in any state — the Knight Initiative merely codifies into law the status quo). They will be denied legal protection and benefits that are accrued to all opposite-sex marriages. In sum, they will be treated as unequal members of our society.

On the other hand, if same-sex marriages were legally recognized, the state could never force any church or institution to offer same-sex ceremonial marriages. The separation of church and state completely allows this. Mormons, Catholics and Southern Baptists could continue to deny ceremonial marriages to same-sex couples.

The state-enforced prohibition on same-sex marriages is nothing but the result of mob rule. There is no valid moral argument to deny equal rights to people simply because you dislike or fear them. As Oscar Wilde wrote, "Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike." The same can be said of the Knight Initiative.

Many claim that the state should forbid same-sex marriages on moral principles (read: Biblically interpreted laws). These arguments are worn and tired. Biblical laws were used to validate slave ownership in America. They were used to deny women's rights. They were used to forbid interracial marriages. The arguments are always the same; it's the persecuted group that changes. Hate, fear and prejudice have always been traditional human values but why should we uphold them? It's time we change this tradition!

MARRIAGE, FAMILY, HOMOSEXUALITY AND REALITY

The Church has a right to be concerned about families. The divorce rate is rising³. Spousal and child abuse continues unabated. Adultery remains a persistent part of the marriage landscape. These are all afflictions that have weakened families. The problem is that the Church has picked the wrong culprit. I understand that it is far easier to point the finger outward than inward, but it requires a great leap of faith to conclude that somehow homosexuals and their desire to marry is somehow responsible for these calamities or will make these calamities worse.

If there is anything consistent in any anti-gay debate, it is the superfluous use of platitudes and bumper sticker slogans. The debate in support of the Knight Initiative is no different. The slogan that is repeatedly used is that the Knight Initiative is needed to protect families (the Church uses "defend the institution of the family").

² "No legislation can be supposed more wholesome and necessary in the founding of a free, self-governing commonwealth, fit to take rank as one of the co-ordinate states of the Union, than that which seeks to establish it on the basis of the idea of the family, as consisting in and springing from the union for life of one man and one woman in the holy estate of matrimony; the sure foundation of all that is stable and noble in our civilization; the best guaranty of that reverent morality which is the source of all beneficent progress in social and political improvement." This was the ruling by Justice Mathews in the 1885 case of *Murphy v. Ramsey* (the court case to stop polygamy in the Utah Territory). The argument was used against the Church; the same argument is now being used against same-sex marriages.

³ Somehow it seems that homosexuals are the only people that *want* to get married anymore.

I'm curious how exactly families will be defended. I will probably never know because the Church and other supporters never substantiate their argument. They leave the slogan to speak for itself. The problem is that it says nothing. Instead it relies on people's fears to fill in the blanks. In order for their arguments to work, anti-gay advocates must convince people that homosexuals are in some way anti-family. As this is so completely fallacious, the arguments that rely on this premise crumble.

This is precisely why you will never read a full-blown argument in defense of the anti-family argument. In the end, a casual observer will quickly ascertain that anti-gay arguments are nothing but a patchwork of indefensible slogans and prejudicial sound bites. It makes for extremely effective politics, but lousy logic.

Let's analyze the anti-family argument. How exactly are homosexuals anti-family? Homosexuality is not a choice; instead it is an indelible part of a person's identity. The choice debate may still rage in the far right fringe of our society, but among those medical professionals who work daily with homosexuals, the overwhelming consensus is that homosexuality is a permanent identity. The American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, and American Association of Social Workers have all declared that homosexuality is not a choice. Even the Church (very reluctantly) is beginning to admit this.

Since the Church now recognizes the indelible aspects of one's sexuality, it actually dissuades homosexuals from getting married; they realize that marriage is *not* a cure for one's sexuality. A same-sex marriage can only be "anti-family" if a person chooses a same-sex marriage over an opposite-sex marriage. As this simply is NOT the case, the entire issue of a homosexual being anti-family is moot.

A homosexual can only choose one of two avenues: being celibate or being sexually active. Neither of these choices will allow a homosexual to participate in the traditional family of a husband, wife and kids. Thus regardless of whether a homosexual gets married or not, the net effect on the family or on marriage is zero. The Church desires that homosexuals remain celibate, but how will this choice affect families any differently than if a homosexual nurtures a relationship? Once again, it's a moot issue.

The problem is that this issue has been framed as a false dilemma and too many members and supporters of Knight have been snookered into believing it. The false dilemma is that either one is either pro-homosexuality or pro-family. This, of course, is false. I am gay. I hate to sound redundant, but whether I remain celibate or find a partner, the net effect on families is zero. The Church can certainly make whatever subjective moral argument for or against homosexuality. However, if it desires to make an objective argument, it must be logical, and in the case of the homosexuality/anti-family connection, the argument is illogical and fallacious.

Ironically, the Church's positions on homosexuality have actually been anti-family. Several decades ago it was church policy to advocate marriage as a cure for one's homosexuality. This inevitably resulted in many broken marriages and families. The Church also postulated that men became gay because of a doting mother and an absent father. This inevitably cast blame on the grieving parents. The Church's positions and outspoken frankness on this issue has nurtured a climate that is hostile for young gay Mormons. Kids have been thrown out of homes under the guise of Christian love. Brothers and sisters have broken off contact from their gay brother and sisters. I recently read the letter of a brother in Salt Lake City who had to send his son far away from home to a private high school because he was constantly tormented in his Salt Lake high schools and by his neighbors. Unfortunately, the promotion of the Knight Initiative will only worsen an already polluted environment. Homophobia is a disease that destroys families. Unfortunately, the Church's rhetoric and actions will only continue to nurture this disease.

Straight members have absolutely no idea what it is like to grow up gay in this Church. It is a life of constant torment, self-hatred and internalized homophobia. Imagine the young gay boy frightened to death to divulge his secret pain to his dad because he witnesses his dad tromping around the neighbor placing up Knight signs. Imagine the young gay girl who listens to her mother profess her love for her as she writes a check to oppose "those filthy homosexuals". Imagine any young gay kid who is desperate to scrape together a sliver of self-esteem as he or she daily hears the pejorative "faggot" and the word "gay" used as a negative adjective (as in "that was such a gay movie").

The Church has no idea that as I type this letter, there are surely boys and girls on their calloused knees imploring God to free them from this pain. They hate themselves. They retire to bed with their finger pointed to their head in

the form of a gun. Every waking moment of every day they must be on constant alert to not divulge any clues that will identify themselves to their peers. "Was my glance at that boy too long? Does he think I'm gay? Will he now publicize my secret and beat me up?" They are afraid of their parents. They are afraid of their bishop. They are afraid of their friends. They have nowhere to go but to lay on their floors curled in a ball and weep themselves to sleep.

The Church's involvement in the Knight Initiative will only add to the great pain suffered by these young gay Mormons. This is a fear-based, divisive, galvanizing movement. Members who don't even vote in presidential elections now put signs on their laws and march around the neighborhood like precinct workers. On the night of March 7th, many California couples will retire to their beds thrilled that they helped pass the Knight Initiative. What they don't realize is that in the next room, their son or daughter is lying in bed crying and could very well one day be a victim of society's homophobia. The Knight Initiative will certainly save no family. It is codified hatred. It is anti-family, anti-love and it is wrong.

Another argument that is quite prevalent is that marriages are weakening and must be defended. I always get a kick out of hearing this argument particularly from politicians. Marriage certainly does need defending and we as a society are doing our best to defend it. Indeed, Newt Gingrich will soon be defending his third marriage. Bob Dole is defending his second. Notoriously anti-gay Rep. Bob Barr is defending his third marriage. And Bill Clinton is *still* defending his first marriage.

Seriously, once again I'm confused at how exactly the Knight Initiative will defend marriages. What does it mean to defend marriages? I know of no gay activist who is calling for the dissolution of straight marriages, so who exactly is trying to destroy it? Do young couples make a decision to get married based on the actions of their gay neighbors? Will some couple decide that they'll get a divorce because same-sex marriages are legally recognized? I never knew that we gay people had so much power over the decision making process in straight relationships. As is always the case with the issue of homosexuality, truthful information is rare and misplaced fear is high.

The issues that face marriages and families are real: divorce, spousal abuse, child abuse, adultery, wages that are below the living requirements, lack of health care for children. I could give a laundry list of proposals and solutions to help families, but most of these are opposed by the very same organizations and politicians that claim to be pro-family. Same-sex marriage and homosexuals just make easier targets...a red herring.

Same-sex marriages already are not legal in the state of California. The Knight Initiative just codifies the status quo into law. It is a worthless endeavor. I would rather see the church ask its members to raise a million dollars for battered women's shelters or for free marital counseling. Instead of asking its members to engage in neighborhood campaigning, the Church could ask all of its members to spend several Saturdays working with Habitat for Humanity building homes for low-income families. If the intent is to help families, why doesn't the Church engage in a campaign to actually *do* something worthwhile for families? The Knight Initiative campaign is just a frivolous use of time and money. The proponents are wasting their resources on an empty suit. The opponents have to spend money to defend love and stability. The Knight Initiative is maddening in its petty benightedness.

It's maddening also because even if the hyperventilated fears of anti-gay advocates come to fruition, the social impact will be negligible. For the sake of argument, I'll assume that homosexuals constitute 5% of the population. If the rate of marriage among gay men and women is commensurate to the rate among heterosexuals, about 1-2 of every 100 marriages will be same-sex marriages. The end of marriage? Hardly. I once read that on the politics of homosexuality, the ratio of advance hysteria to actual social change is as out of whack as most NASDAQ Internet company valuations. Openly gay employees were supposed to disrupt the workplace. Gay school teachers were supposed to terrorize our kids. Tolerance of homosexuality was supposed to usher in an explosion of homosexuals (actual result: the percentages of self-professed homosexuals have remained consistent during the past several decades⁴). Like our experience with books and movies, the advance hysteria (book) is always far more interesting and eventful than the actual results (movie). The frenzy in favor of the Knight Initiative is no different.

⁴ This may seem contrary to anecdotal evidence. The reason is that while the percentages remain the same, gay men and women now are merely more *open* about their identity. The reason why I am honest to people today is because it is 2000 not 1970. Of course, many people wish that I (and everyone else) were still in the closet. This may seem convenient for them, but for me, closeted life was a living hell.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE ARGUMENT

Many claim that if same-sex marriages were legalized, what would stop the state from legalizing pedophilic marriages, bestiality marriages, or, heaven forbid, polygamous marriages⁵. I sound redundant, but this argument also is flawed and downright frivolous. Marriage is a conscious decision by two adults to affirm their love for one another. Whether a couple constitutes an opposite-sex couple or a same-sex couple, the arrangement is between two consenting adults. Both pedophilia and bestiality are relationships where only one member is conscious and mature enough to consent. They are on an entirely different plane than homosexuality.

Society and the government allow any two consenting adults to get married: black and white, Christian and atheist, tall and short, deaf and blind, rich and poor, Republican and Democrat. To deny a marriage to someone based on gender is purely discriminatory. We as a Constitution-supporting and freedom-loving people should be the first to support the equal rights of *all* American citizens.

THE GREAT FALLACY

The argument against same-sex marriage is a classic zero sum game argument: a gain for one side corresponds with a loss for another. I have seen the ads produced by the proponents of the Knight Initiative. It portrays a large family reunion as the announcer describes the beauty of families. The voice over ends with the statement, "Marriage and family. That's what proposition 22 is all about." On the surface it appears completely innocuous, but what is the implication behind the message? It is that if we allow homosexuals to get married, then straight marriages and their families will suffer. It's a zero-sum game argument, and it is deceitful and fallacious.

In order to be effective, the message MUST play on people's fears. My parents oppose the Knight Initiative because they know that whether I get married to a man or not, my family and my parent's marriage will remain sound and healthy. They have no fear, and so they oppose it. Those who support it do it solely out of fear. Why else should one support it? The arguments made by the proponents prove it's all about fear. "We need to protect the family". From WHOM? "We need to protect marriage." From WHOM? The whom is, of course, me, your gay neighbor, family member, friend and coworker. The message is that if I, Stuart, get married to a man, your family will suffer. You know that is wrong, and so is the Knight Initiative.

SECOND-CLASS REALITY FOR GAY COUPLES

I don't think that people in this country realize just how many laws are written dealing with marriages and how many benefits are accrued to married couples. These are just a few of the more than 1,000 federal and state benefits that married people automatically enjoy⁶:

⁵ Surprisingly the Church *is* making this argument. The Church has hired a lawyer, Thomas McCormick, to represent them before the Vermont State legislature. McCormick told the committee that he thinks permitting same-sex marriages will lead to other forms of marriage. "What is it going to mean if you redefine marriage today that says, yes, the very attractive couples in the Baker case can be married? What are you going to say tomorrow when three or more people want to get married?" It is startling in its hypocrisy.

⁶ It is true that some of these benefits are available to same-sex couples. For instance, insurance is available, but *only* if a gay man or woman is fortunate enough to work for a company that offers insurance benefits to domestic partners (my company does not). The vast majority of companies in gay-friendly California do not offer these benefits, and in other states the percentages are much lower. California also offers some legal protections through its new registry program (which was widely opposed by the same organization that now support Knight), however, California is one of only a handful of states that does offer a statewide registry program. The overwhelming majority of gay men and women live in states that do not offer a domestic registry. Furthermore, domestic partnerships are *not* portable – they are not recognized outside the city, state or country which offers the status (thus, if a gay couple from California were traveling through Nevada, the hospital visitation rights could be denied). Also, domestic partnerships could easily be negated by the state's attorney general (as was done recently in Hawaii and Texas). In the end, the vast majority of gay Californians are still denied most benefits and all gay Californians are treated as second-class citizens. Whether or not gay Californians were denied even one benefit, it would be unfair and discriminatory. I am particularly irked that the supporters of Knight claim (with a straight face) that Knight is

- Assumption of Spouse's Pension
- Automatic Inheritance
- Automatic Housing Lease Transfer
- Bereavement Leave
- Burial Determination
- Crime Victim's Recovery Benefits
- Divorce Protections
- Domestic Violence Protection
- Exemption from Property Tax on Partner's Death
- Immunity from Testifying Against Spouse
- Insurance Breaks
- Joint Bankruptcy
- Medical Decisions on Behalf of Partner
- Certain Property Rights
- Reduced Rate Memberships
- Sick Leave to Care for Partner
- Visitation of Partner's Children
- Visitation of Partner in Hospital
- Wrongful Death (Loss of Consort) Benefits
- Assumption of Spouse's Pension
- Social Security Survivor Benefits

Perhaps Mormons believe that it is better to deny us filthy and disgusting gay people any benefits. Perhaps they believe that it is divine that a gay man is refused entrance into his partner's hospital room while he dies because he has no legal connection to him. Perhaps they believe that it is divine that a lesbian is unable to afford insurance and cannot receive discounted insurance through her partner's company's program. Well, I believe in a loving God. I believe in a God who sacrificed His own son for us. Therefore, I simply refuse to acknowledge that God in any way desires that his gay children are marginalized, treated as second-class citizens and denied equal benefits simply because of a society-believed character flaw. I also can't imagine a Mormon who professes to love both God and his neighbor will allow himself or herself to believe that homosexuals should be treated as second-class citizens.

THE AFTERMATH

An issue I have with Christian culture is its use of military metaphors: "war in heaven", "onward Christian soldiers", "Armageddon". In order for these metaphors to be validated, churches must create enemies: communists in the fifties, hippies in the sixties, feminists in the seventies and now homosexuals. A desire to understand and to engage in an open dialogue is jettisoned in favor of sound bite rhetoric.

When the Columbine massacre occurred, people were quick to point fingers. The targets were the usual suspects: Hollywood, video games, liberal politicians, rock singer Marilyn Manson. No one stopped, however, to ask the critical questions: Why were these killers hated in school? Why were they taunted? Why did they endure daily name calling? Why were they ostracized? If these killers had been fully embraced with love and support by their fellow student, I postulate that all the video games, rock music and movies couldn't have turned them into killers. These boys had to be nourished with hate. They had to be treated as an enemy.

Ryan, there is far too much hate and division in our society. Our society is becoming Balkanized as we segregate people into groups. The parallels between our society now and that of the Nephites/Lamanites at the end of the Book of Mormon are frightening.

not intended to deny gay couples any hard-fought benefits. These same supporters constantly argue before state and local legislatures that benefits should *only* be offered to legally recognized marriages. Thus, Knight supporters want to use Knight as a leverage to overturn these benefits (as they have successfully done in cities and states across the nation). The hypocrisy is rank.

I understand that the world is seemingly chaotic. It is innate in each of us to apply order to this chaos (our inner Aristotle). We thirst after a clean delineation between good and bad, black and white. We also have an insatiable desire to divide up people into two camps: "us" friends versus "them" enemies. Perhaps when we are confused at the chaos, it is easier for us to scapegoat others to give reasons for our fears. I too suffer from these human weaknesses, and I am trying to rid myself of them. The reason is that, ultimately, I see no good in pitting one group against another. It seems so contrary to the principles laid out by Jesus in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

After the millions of dollars have been spent on television ads promoting the Knight Initiative, homophobia will be inflamed and our gay youth will intensify their self-destruction by internalizing society's homophobia. The disquieting results already⁷:

- 22% of gay and lesbian youth skip school each month because they fear for their safety.
- Gay students are seven times more likely than others to have been threatened or injured with a weapon
- 18% of Bay Area college men said they had physically assaulted or threatened someone they thought was gay or lesbian and 32% admitted to verbal harassment.
- Gay and lesbian teenagers are three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. 53% of gay youth served by the Los Angeles Youth Services Department had attempted suicide at least once, 47% more than once.
- About 25% of all homeless youth in the United States are gay or lesbian
- 90% of gay and lesbian students suffer from verbal and physical harassment in school (half indicate that they suffer from verbal harassment on a daily basis)
- More than 25% of gay and lesbian students drop out of school because of discomfort in the environment.

Do the members not even care about these statistics? Their lives are validated by their peers, society, church, and government. I, on the other hand, have to claw my way into social acceptance. I am the one who will have to live in the wake of the Knight Initiative. Most members never know what it feels to be marginalized. They are Christian and mostly white and middle class. They never know what it's like to live in fear.

Imagine for a moment that the Knight Initiative was a proposition to ban Mormon marriages. The proponents believed that Mormon marriages would destroy families and destroy marriages. Imagine seeing your neighbors place anti-Mormon marriage placards on their lawn or seeing your neighbors march around the neighbor in support of this initiative. Imagine having to watch over \$5 million in TV ads designed to raise fears about you. Then imagine the proponents of this initiative having the audacity to claim that they are not bigoted and that this initiative is not about prejudice. Rather they simply want to affirm what everyone knows: Mormon marriages are immoral and not healthy for society. The shoe doesn't feel so good, does it?

My world is so vastly different than that of my straight friends. For every person I meet, I am forced to quickly ascertain whether or not he or she is a friend or foe. I have to keep quiet at work about something that is so integral to my identity for fear of the repercussions. Most of my gay friends (and I) were suicidal at one time in their lives. I have friends who have swallowed pills, cut their wrists, burned their arms, placed bags over their heads. I have friends who have taken anti-depressant pills as if they were candy. Years of internalized homophobia have deeply scared my friends and me. It is only after we began to accept our identity that we have been able to heal our minds.

Straight people have no idea what it is like to turn on the television and watch some angry demagogue spew hateful rhetoric and cast the blame for society's problems at our feet. They have no idea what it is like to have the Bible shoved in our faces and hear the love that stirs in our souls described as "repugnant", "disgusting", "immoral", "unnatural". They have no idea what it is like to live in a society that treats you like a second-class citizen and fights to keep you from having the same rights that all other citizens enjoy. They have no idea what it is like to hear people truly believe that we desire to terrorize children and that our mere existence is evident of the eventual decline of our civilization.

Do I blame the Church for society's homophobia? I know that I am quick to cast blame at the feet of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Gary Bauer. However is the Church any different? Did you know that Russell Hendersen, one of

⁷ Source of information: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study

the two boys convicted of killing Matthew Shepard, was raised by his Mormon grandparents⁸? The Church does not operate in a vacuum, and its message does plant seeds in people's hearts.

I realize that the Church is quick to point out that we should love gay people. However, this is usually a short caveat after a lengthy condemnation of our behavior. Our "behavior" is such an integral part of our identity that it's difficult for people to separate the two. To most members, the two are not mutually exclusive; they are joined at the hip. After spending several weekends knocking on doors supporting the Knight Initiative, could anyone feel closer and more love towards gay people? Despite what the Church says, the energy level devoted in the attack is significantly greater than the few sentences thrown in a talk to appease the Church's critics.

Can any of the Brethren really say without equivocation that the hatred of the California members towards homosexuals has not increased in the past several months? What is the Church doing to diminish the animosity and fear directed at gay people? A position based on fear could never grow into an understanding based on love. Fear is never a solid foundation for love. I wish that one day the members could realize that this sort of fear has no business in a Church of Love.

NOT DIVINE REVELATION

When all is said and done (and believe me, I have talked to many members on this subject), the membership of this Church will invariably support the initiative. I have discussed this issue with my friends of over two decades, and while they agree with me in substance, they inevitably tell me that they will support the initiative anyway. Their sole reason is that the Brethren have requested it. Because President Hinckley referred to it in a Priesthood session of General Conference and because the letters read over the pulpit were on official stationery, many members feel that the Church's support of this initiative is divinely inspired, that God Himself had decreed to President Hinckley that he and the Church should pursue this course of action. This is entirely not true; God has not spoken to President Hinckley regarding this initiative. This is purely a temporal and administrative decision.

If this were indeed divinely inspired, then why does the Church repeatedly tell reporters that the church members are not compelled to support the initiative? A member can actually publicly donate money to and conduct fieldwork for the "No on Knight" campaign and still take the sacrament and go to the temple. How could this be if the Church's support for the measure was "divinely inspired"?

I know many active and devoted members of the Church who do not support the Knight Initiative and plan to vote no. Are they sinners? No, because the proposition has nothing to do with divine gospel. It is solely a triumph of the rule of law over the rule of love. Indeed, if the Church's support were divinely inspired, then one would conclude that God's law is illogical, He speaks in fallacious sound bites, and He has no concern for the fears racing in the hearts and minds of His gay children.

SPIRITUAL ANALOGY

In Luke 10:25, a lawyer asks Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies, "What is written in the law? How readest thou?" The lawyer responds, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." Jesus tells him that he had answered correctly, but the lawyer wants to know more. He asks, "Who is my neighbour?"

The answer is, of course, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a simple response to a simple question, yet the response underscores what Christ believes it means to be a Christian: no law is as important as the law of love. It transcends all other laws.

That the traveler was left "half dead" is no small significance. According to Biblical Law, the holy men among the Jews were forbidden to touch the dead. As the man was "half dead", the priest or the Levite would have had to

⁸ In no way am I inferring that the Mormon Church advocates this type of violence against anyone. Indeed, the Church considers murder the most heinous of sins. However, the murder was motivated by hate, and hate is usually motivated by fear (homophobia). My concern is that the Knight Initiative campaign will assuredly raise homophobia among Mormons and others.

touch the man to ascertain whether or not he was truly dead. Instead of unintentionally breaking the laws, the priest and the Levite decided to ignore him entirely. By this parable, Jesus underscored the Samaritan's love as superior to that of the rulebook mentality.

The Samaritans were extremely despised by the Jewish people and particularly around the time of Christ. Near Christ's birth, some Samaritans had defiled the court of the Jerusalem temple by strewing dead men's bones around the place. Therefore, the reaction by the Jews upon hearing that Jesus had suggested to a Judean lawyer that a Samaritan might attain external life, while a priest or a Levite would not, would be analogous to the reaction by a Mormon upon hearing the suggestion that a homosexual is a better Christian than a Mormon Apostle.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan has been discussed so many times that it has become trite. Lost in our familiarization with the story is the knowledge that, at the time, it was truly a revolutionary message. Jesus was definitely iconoclastic for his times, and his message required a dramatic leap of understanding. If a Christian were to utter a familiar message today using a modern-day Samaritan (say, a homosexual), it might be perceived as a quaint lesson on a Christian theme, but the modern-day Christian listener surely would still believe that the Samaritan would be condemned to hell.

Our modern day minds are not different from those of the ancient Jews. Like the Jews, we would fail to realize that the thrust of the story is that in Jesus' eyes, the Samaritan was a Christian. He wasn't baptized a Christian. He didn't go to church. He didn't profess any Christian affiliation, however, he is still is a Christian. The reason is that he loves his neighbor. In the Samaritan's eyes, his neighbors are not his friends, or church members, or those like him, or those who share his beliefs. A neighbor is simply any human being regardless of his or her backgrounds or characteristics. And what is more remarkable in this story is that the Samaritan's neighbor happened to be his detractor, his chief enemy.

Did the priest or Levite not love the fallen Jew? Perhaps they did, but they were compelled from touching him due to their law. Are the Church's actions any different? Would they actually "touch" me, a gay man – would they try to know me and understand me? Would they attempt to stop their harmful rhetoric? Would they stop supporting divisive initiatives? Would they support my equality regardless of whether I was their "enemy" or not?

Unfortunately, Jesus' message is still needed in our day. The parable is a mighty challenge to us not just to *say* that we love all but to actually *act* with love towards all. We must *do not talk*. This message is particularly relevant for us when dealing with those who belong to oppressed, despised or disenfranchised groups (the metaphoric Samaritan). In sum, love in action is the only kind of love there is, and it is at the core of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In what way is the effort by the Church to campaign for the Knight Initiative in concert with the message found in the Parable of the Good Samaritan? Are their actions based on love or on fear? Are they intended to unify us as a people or divide us? Will the campaign result in the vilification of a perceived enemy? I think that you know the answers. This is precisely why I am so deeply troubled by the Church's involvement in this wretched initiative.

CONCLUSION

The successful passage of the Knight Initiative will do absolutely nothing (repeat: absolutely NOTHING) to protect marriages. Wives will still be battered. Children will still be abused. Spouses will still commit adultery. Marriages will still break up. Meanwhile the Church will have raised and spent a million dollars and the members will have volunteered thousands of hours to support...nothing.

Unfortunately, as the members retire to their beds on the night of March 7th and fall asleep in relief that their marriages are once again safe, what could ensue the next day? A gay man will not be able to see his partner of thirty years die in a hospital bed because he had no legally recognized relation. A gay woman will have depleted all of her savings fighting breast cancer because she couldn't afford insurance and her partner's company refused to grant domestic partner benefits. A gay man will be denied permission to take sick leave from work to care for his dying partner (a benefit readily available to his straight peers). A gay kid will be beaten to a pulp in high school because he dared to tell the truth. Thousands of frightened young gay Mormons will dig deeper into the dreadful closet in panic that their parents or friends may discover the truth about them. Homophobia in California will have been

nurtured and inflamed and ready to engulf its next victim. The Church's actions are completely contrary to the message found in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The rule of law has transcended the rule of love. Fear has transcended compassion and understanding. It's a travesty, Ryan. It's a travesty. And it's one that has caused (and will continue to cause) me immeasurable pain.

In the end, remember, Ryan, that we gay people *are* your family. We are your brothers and sisters. We are your sons and daughters. In your case, I ~~am~~ your cousin. You know from your 18-year life that I adore my family. I respect my family, I look up to them, and I love them. I would lose my life in order to protect them.

The entire premise of the Church's argument, however, is that if I were to fulfill the measure of my creation, fall in love with a man, and desire to commit my love to him through marriage, then suddenly I become anti-family. My union somehow will weaken families. Which family, Ryan? My family? Your family? Whose family am I supposed to destroy? When placed in this context, it seems so absurdly silly. However, this is exactly the intent behind the Knight Initiative.

This is precisely why you will not see a church member who has a gay son or daughter placing signs on his or her lawn. These members will not be walking around their neighborhoods. These members will ache every time a gay debate ensues in the chapel halls. These members know the intent of their children's hearts. They know the goodness of their spirit. They see the goodness in their children's gay friends. They see and experience homophobia on a personal basis, and they collectively mourn the Church's involvement in the Knight Initiative. I wish that I could shout this message from the rooftops, but alas, I sit alone in my room typing wondering what will happen next.

Well, Ryan, my fingers are blistered. By asking me your question, you poured water on my electrical wounds. Thus I apologize if my words were a bit strong. I hope that these words, however, give you a substantial alternative point of view and help you in your report.

On a more upbeat note, good luck preparing for your mission. I'll see you in the spring. Take care.

Warmly,
Stuart