

# INTERPRETER

— ∞ —  
A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT  
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 54 · 2022 · Pages 206 - 222

## **“We Don’t Know, So We Might as Well”: A Flimsy Philosophy for Same-Sex Sealings**

Matthew Watkins

Offprint Series

© 2022 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at [InterpreterFoundation.org](http://InterpreterFoundation.org). You can find other articles published in our journal at [Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org](http://Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org). You may subscribe to this journal at [InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription](http://InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription).

# “WE DON’T KNOW, SO WE MIGHT AS WELL”: A FLIMSY PHILOSOPHY FOR SAME-SEX SEALINGS

---

Matthew Watkins

Review of Nate Oman, “A Welding Link of Some Kind,” *Thoughts from a Tamed Cynic* (Substack, September 27, 2022).

**Abstract:** *Nate Oman claims to demonstrate a theological path that allows for same-sex sealings within existing Latter-day Saint doctrine. In fact, he claims that such an adjustment would be not only compatible with most Church doctrine but more scripturally sound than current teachings and policies regarding same-sex relationships. However, he falls short of his declared objective. His essay sets up an exaggerated pattern of dramatic theological overhauls in Latter-day Saint theology, downplays existing revelation on the subject of sealings and exaltation, and proposes a new theology to justify his policy conclusions. In the end, his essay completely ignores the root cause of the contention surrounding the issue: the nature of doctrine and the truth claims of the restored Church.*

In the summer of 2021, the *Washington Post* published an article highlighting (and celebrating) the increasing acceptance of and advocacy for social progressivism within the membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The article briefly nods at various issues from vaccinations to Heavenly Mother to Donald Trump, but the bulk of the article centers on the growing desire among some members for the Church to reverse its teachings on same-sex marriage. The author concludes her article by quoting Patrick Mason, a prominent progressive advocate within the Church:

I can see multiple futures for Mormonism ... People have already started to do the work to sketch out a theological rationale that would allow for the kind of revelation that

allows for women's ordination, for same-sex marriage, all kinds of things ... What was once possible then becomes probable.<sup>1</sup>

Few members have accepted Mason's invitation to pave a theological path to Church-sanctioned same-sex marriage, but Nate Oman, a previous contributor to the Interpreter Foundation's journal, has taken up this charge. Exactly one year after the *Washington Post* article, Oman published an essay<sup>2</sup> describing a "theological possibility of same-sex marriage sealings in a way that requires minimal theological change and maintains maximum continuity with Church practices" (p. 1).

This audacious claim quickly gained attention among Church critics and adherents alike. Within the first few days of its release, the essay was featured prominently in publications ranging from *By Common Consent*<sup>3</sup> to *Public Square Magazine*<sup>4</sup> to the *Salt Lake Tribune*.<sup>5</sup>

However, Oman's essay claiming that adopting same-sex sealings "could be easily and simply explained" (p. 13) ultimately fails because:

1. He exaggerates the historical shifts in the Church's understanding of sealings.
2. He ignores what *has* been revealed regarding sealings and marriage.
3. His proposed replacement theology inherently contradicts the founding doctrines of the Restoration itself, yet he doesn't acknowledge these implications.

---

1. Emily Kaplan "The rise of the liberal Latter-day Saints," *Washington Post* (27 September 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/09/27/rise-liberal-latter-day-saints/>.

2. Nate Oman, "A Welding Link of Some Kind," *Thoughts from a Tamed Cynic* (Substack, September 27, 2022), <https://nateoman.substack.com/p/a-welding-link-of-some-kind/>. A PDF version of Oman's essay can be found at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-9FcMPVVsCdpa4hcFsHaW\\_gUYbj76lEg/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-9FcMPVVsCdpa4hcFsHaW_gUYbj76lEg/view). The page numbers cited in this review are from the PDF version.

3. "Oman, A Possible Theology of Same-Sex Marriage Sealings," *By Common Consent* (27 September 2022), <https://bycommonconsent.com/2022/09/27/oman-a-possible-theology-of-same-sex-marriage-sealings/>.

4. "It's Not Loving to Mislead People About Reality," *Public Square Magazine* (14 October 2022), <https://publicsquaremag.org/sexuality-family/its-not-loving-to-mislead-people-about-reality/>.

5. "Theological breakthrough? LDS scholar sees a path for same-sex temple sealings that honors church teachings," *Salt Lake Tribune* (4 October 2022), <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2022/10/04/theological-breakthrough-lds/>.

## Historical Policy Changes, Exaggerated Conclusions

Oman asserts that the core doctrines of the Church regarding sealings were heavily rewritten multiple times throughout the history of the Restoration. He specifically breaks up the history of sealing practices into three “eras,” with the transition between these eras representing not minor changes in policy, but dramatic shifts into entirely new theologies.

The first “era” begins with Joseph Smith and ends with the nineteenth century. During this time, “sealings were less a matter of forming nuclear families than of becoming part of a royal priesthood network” (p. 6), or “a series of nested kingdoms created by networks of sealing ordinances” (p. 5). Oman calls this time the era of “kingdom theology.” This first era wound down in the 1890s under the administration of President Woodruff (p. 6), ushering in Oman’s second era, that of “lineage theology.” What was different in this new era? The only change Oman references is the replacement of outstanding cross-family adoptive sealings with sealings to earthly parents.

To say these two eras represent two acutely different theologies, however, is a stretch. While no one argues that adoptive sealings were commonplace prior to 1894, to say it was the primary focus of the Church in that era is not accurate. Parley Pratt, for example, was sealed to Joseph Smith in one of these “kingdom” sealings, yet it is not this sealing that Parley describes most fondly:

It was Joseph Smith who taught me how to prize the endearing relationships of father and mother, husband and wife; of brother and sister, son and daughter.

It was from him that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity; and that the refined sympathies and affections which endeared us to each other emanated from the fountain of divine eternal love.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout Joseph Smith’s sermons, it is this sealing of families, not of “kingdoms,” that shines most clearly.<sup>7</sup> The 1890s policy update discontinuing the practice of cross-family sealings did not rewrite the

---

6. “He Taught Me the Heavenly Order of Eternity,” *Ensign* 45, no. 8 (August 2015): 80, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2015/08/he-taught-me-the-heavenly-order-of-eternity/>.

7. Joseph Smith, “Family: The Sweetest Union for Time and for Eternity,” in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 479, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-42>.

fundamental understanding of sealings any more than discontinuing polygamy rewrote the fundamental understanding of husband and wife. Yes, this policy change modified the perspective of the Church, but it is a stretch to classify it as an entirely new “theology,” as Oman claims.

In discussing the second era, that of “lineage” sealings (p. 7), Oman seems to anticipate that his readers may see similarities to the practices of the Church today. So, he is quick to note that even though so-called “lineage” sealings were now limited exclusively to families, they are not an analog for today’s familial sealings. Why? Because policies regarding remarriage applied equally to *both* genders at this time. The policies allowing only men to be sealed multiple times were not introduced until the 1950s and have not substantially changed to this day. Oman labels this period from the mid-twentieth century to the present time the era of “family” theology (p. 8).

Here again, his division between the “lineage” and “family” eras is a stretch, even more so than the division between his “kingdom” and “lineage” eras. Requiring women to annul previous sealings before entering into a new sealing represents a policy change, not a dramatic shift into a new theological “era” of sealing focus.

These disagreements about how to classify eras of sealing practice across history may seem a minor quibble, but they are important distinctions in the context of this discussion. By exaggerating policy adjustments into dramatic theological shifts, Oman constructs a narrative wherein Church leaders rewrite the entire theology of sealings every generation or so. Here we are, seventy years into the latest era. This exaggerated pattern implies — and not subtly — that perhaps it’s time to rewrite the theology again.

Even if this pattern were a true representation of theological trends, it should be noted that Oman’s pattern actually cuts *against* his ultimate thesis. For nearly 200 years, sealing requirements have been repeatedly *narrowed*, making it difficult to justify the radical expansion he proposes later in his essay.

### **We Don’t Know Everything, but We Know Enough**

Why does Oman spend significant effort to relate the history of sealing practices? To prove that when it comes to the eternities, our understanding has always lacked, and still lacks today. How will cross-family sealings be worked out? We don’t know. How will polygamous sealings work out? We don’t know. How will remarriage work out? We don’t know. Indeed, “we don’t know” becomes the dominant theme of

his essay; Oman reminds us that “we don’t know” no less than 11 times in 13 pages.

It is true that we do not know how the Lord will resolve today’s complex cases such as divorce, remarriage, or children from different sealings, let alone the inter-familial sealings of the nineteenth century. There is value in admitting what we do not know. When speaking about the post-mortal spirit world, President Oaks highlighted our lack of understanding:

What do we really know about conditions in the spirit world? I believe a BYU religion professor’s article on this subject had it right: “When we ask ourselves what we know about the spirit world from the standard works, the answer is ‘not as much as we often think.’”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Elder Renlund taught about the gaps in our knowledge of our Heavenly Mother:

Very little has been revealed about Mother in Heaven, but what we do know is summarized in a gospel topic found in our Gospel Library application. Once you have read what is there, you will know everything that I know about the subject. I wish I knew more.<sup>9</sup>

To Oman’s credit, it is vital to acknowledge what we do not know. Indeed, understanding what we know and where we are mistaken is necessary for our salvation, for “it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance” (D&C 131:6).

However, acknowledging existing holes in our understanding does not require us to artificially excavate new ones, which Oman’s essay unfortunately does. He downplays and at times even contradicts what *has* been revealed regarding marriage, sealing, and exaltation. For example, he asserts that:

The theology of heterosexual exaltation rests on [a] thin foundation in the canon. The idea of heavenly parents is not contained in the scriptures. The sexualized, procreative vision

---

8. Dallin H. Oaks, “Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 26, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/17oaks/>.

9. Dale G. Renlund, “Your Divine Nature and Eternal Destiny,” *Liahona* 46, no. 5 (May 2022): 70, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2022/04/36renlund/>.

of divine spiritual parenthood is nowhere explicitly set forth.  
(p. 4)

In fact, Oman views the teachings of heavenly parenthood as not just doctrinally unfounded but an actual “threat to the continued vitality of the Lord’s work, and a wrenching internal contradiction in our theology” (p. 2). While he acknowledges that “references to God as father are ubiquitous,” he finds no support for the notion that any of us — including the Savior Himself (p. 4n6) — are literal spiritual offspring of God. When we ask, “In the heav’ns are parents single?”<sup>10</sup> Oman answers, “we don’t know.”

But, in fact, we *do* know. Many passages in both biblical and restoration scripture attest that we are the literal, spiritual offspring of a Heavenly Father.<sup>11</sup> As the interpretation of these passages is sometimes contested, I refer to the First Presidency’s authoritative teaching on the matter issued in the early twentieth century:

Jesus... is the firstborn among all the sons of God-- the first begotten in the spirit, and the only begotten in the flesh. He is our elder brother, and we, like Him, are in the image of God. All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity...

[M]an, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality....

Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God.<sup>12</sup>

Children who grow to be like their Heavenly Father also attain His divine ability to bear and rear another generation of spiritual children.

---

10. Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1985), 292.

11. See the numerous scriptures listed in the Topical Guide under “Man, a Spirit Child of Heavenly Father.”

12. First Presidency of the Church, “The Origin of Man” (November 1909), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/02/the-origin-of-man>.



This doctrine (which Oman terms “heterosexual exaltation”) was clearly revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith:

If a man marry a wife by my word, which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant... [their marriage] shall be of full force when they are out of the world; and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. (D&C 132:19)

Since that revelation, this doctrine of exaltation has been repeatedly affirmed by subsequent prophets and apostles. Teachings in this dispensation regarding exaltation and spiritual parenthood are, as the First Presidency stated in an official letter regarding the subject, “too numerous and specific to require citation,”<sup>13</sup> but I shall include a few.

President Young elaborated on the promises revealed to his predecessor as follows:

[T]he Lord has bestowed on us the privilege of becoming fathers of lives. What is a father of lives as mentioned in the Scriptures? A man who has a posterity to an eternal continuance. That is the blessing Abraham received, and it perfectly satisfied his soul. He obtained the promise that he should be the father of lives.<sup>14</sup>

Elder Melvin J. Ballard also:

What do we mean by endless or eternal increase? We mean that through the righteousness and faithfulness of men and women who keep the commandments of God they will come forth with celestial bodies, fitted and prepared to enter into their great, high and eternal glory in the celestial kingdom of God; and unto them through their preparation, there will come spirit children.<sup>15</sup>

---

13. “The Father and the Son,” *Improvement Era* (August 1916), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/04/the-father-and-the-son/>.

14. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 8 (Liverpool: George Q. Cannon, 1861), 63, quoted in “Preparing for Eternal Progression,” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-brigham-young/chapter-13/>.

15. Melvin J. Ballard, *Crusader for Righteousness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 211, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/>

The aforementioned First Presidency letter states that “resurrected and glorified beings can become parents of spirit offspring... spirits born to them in the eternal worlds.” Elder Bruce R McConkie added:

Mortal persons who overcome all things and gain an ultimate exaltation will live eternally in the family unit and have spirit children, thus becoming Eternal Fathers and Eternal Mothers.<sup>16</sup>

Exaltation grows out of the eternal union of a man and his wife<sup>17</sup>... if after their marriage they keep all the terms and conditions of this order of the priesthood, they continue on as husband and wife in the celestial kingdom of God.

If the family unit continues, then by virtue of that fact the members of the family have gained eternal life (exaltation), the greatest of all the gifts of God, for by definition exaltation consists in the continuation of the family unit in eternity.<sup>18</sup>

These are only some of the most direct statements. For further sources, I direct the reader to the Family Proclamation, the Gospel Topics essays, Sunday School manuals past and current, and General Conference addresses given on the subject.

In light of the many modern witnesses in agreement on the matter, it is factually false to affirm, as Oman does, that the doctrine of exaltation based on eternal marriage is purely unfounded and “we don’t know.” When it comes to these questions, “[we] do not know everything, but [we] know enough.”<sup>19</sup>

### Oman’s Proposed Theology

Once the reader accepts Oman’s philosophy, that “we don’t know” practically anything about the eternities, then no ideas are off-bounds. This creates space for the new theology Oman offers to the reader — a theology that provides an answer for cross-family sealings, plural sealings, re-marriage sealings, and yes, same-sex sealings. In this new model, “we don’t know” isn’t a limitation of Oman’s theology — it’s the

---

eternal-marriage-student-manual/marriage-for-eternity/.

16. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 517

17. *Ibid.*, 613.

18. *Ibid.*, 117.

19. Neil L. Andersen, “You Know Enough,” *Ensign* 38, no. 11 (November 2008): 13, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2008/10/you-know-enough/>.

very foundation of the theology itself. I think it appropriate to say he considers this the hopeful next era in his pattern of sealing theologies. Kingdom theology, lineage theology, family theology, and finally, "we don't know" theology.

Oman quotes D&C 132:7, which states that:

All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise ... are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead; for all contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead.

Oman interprets this passage to imply that *all* interpersonal relationships — not just marriages — must eventually be sealed. He suggests that when the Lord finishes His work, all of humanity may be assimilated into one mass, communal sealing, forming a "great link that will weld all of the children of God together and save them from the curse of their alienation and mutual forgetfulness" (p. 12).

This theory easily answers cross-family sealings, adoptions, re-marriage sealings, divorce, children of the same household sealed to different parents, and all other complex questions regarding historical and contemporary sealings. Which sealings are valid? They are *all* valid, and will all be honored, each forming a small link in the sealing web that ties every member of humanity together.

Oman is careful not to state that this theory of a universal, communal sealing is true, just that "we don't know." And if we don't know, his proposed theology is just as valid as the one currently practiced, so we may apparently proceed under the assumption that it is true.

How does this justify same-sex marriage? In effect: "we don't know, so we might as well." It is here that Oman takes his most interesting logical leap, suggesting that we can bless same-sex unions in the temple "without endorsing the theology of eternal homosexuality" (p. 13). How?

[Same-sex] unions could fit under the [D&C 132] categories of "covenants," "bonds," "vows," and "connections." As to the precise theological status of sexual identity in the eternities, the Church could say, "We don't know." (p. 12)

As I understand it, Oman here suggests the Church seal same-sex couples but not call that sealing a "marriage." He doesn't go into the specifics of what this would entail. Presumably, this would require all promissory language to be stricken from the sealing ordinance itself,

effectively reducing it to a vague sense of covenantal “togetherness” within the communal web. Still, Oman is “confident that ‘the power of godliness’ (D&C 84:20) manifested in the ordinance will bless the [same-sex] couple,” notwithstanding the ambiguity about what the sealing accomplishes. We don’t know, so we might as well.

For readers concerned about how the existing doctrine of the family fits into this free-for-all model of “we don’t know” sealings, Oman assures us that his theology “need not imply the abandonment of eternal families and the hope that doctrine holds out.” However, he simultaneously admits that his model does, in fact, “[leave] the precise mechanics of salvation less clear than in the theology of heterosexual exaltation.” This sacrifice is ultimately deemed acceptable because his theory doesn’t rely on the “elaborate extra-scriptural ideas” of spiritual parenthood he previously dismissed (p. 12).

Oman tells us he “take[s] very seriously the need for continuity and loyalty to the Restoration” (p.13). Jettisoning the marriage sealing ordinance in favor of an ambiguous “we don’t know” sealing ordinance is the engine of that claim. This would presumably allow a believer to acknowledge dispensations worth of teachings while also justifying the practice of same-sex sealings in the temple moving forward, because same-sex sealings are not technically classified as a “marriage,” *per se*.

Oman claims such a change “could be easily and simply explained.” To that end, he helpfully drafted a First Presidency press release announcing the policy change permitting same-sex sealings under the theology of “we don’t know” (p. 13). Following his proposed press release, Oman notes that he does not claim to speak for the Lord on the issue, but reiterates that some change is necessary because the doctrine taught today “creates corrosive contradictions that pose an existential threat to the continued vitality of the Lord’s work.” He prays that the Lord will intervene against the current practice forbidding same-sex relations which “threaten[s] the future of the Lord’s Kingdom” (p. 13).

### Unacknowledged Implications of Oman’s Theology

Oman overpromises when he claims his model “requires minimal theological change and maintains maximum continuity” (p. 1). Spending minimal time addressing theological change does not make theological change minimal. He focuses his essay exclusively on the important but *peripheral* topics of sealing and exaltation yet ignores the core issue: that his theology invalidates the very foundation of the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What makes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints unique among Christendom? It is our claim of modern revelation, restored priesthood authority, and exclusive acceptance by God as “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30). We claim that Jesus Christ stands as the Head of the Church, guiding its members through an unbroken line of true prophets who trace their priesthood keys back to the Savior. Such an audacious claim leaves little room for gray area. Many prophets and apostles have spoken on this subject; I will quote only President Hinckley:

It’s either true or false. If it’s false, we’re engaged in a great fraud. If it’s true, it’s the most important thing in the world. Now, that’s the whole picture. It is either right or wrong, true or false, fraudulent or true... That’s our claim. That’s where we stand, and that’s where we fall, if we fall.<sup>20</sup>

In light of this binary choice, how are we to reconcile the fact that prophets and apostles have made incorrect statements, even from the pulpit during General Conference? This is where honest seekers discover the nuance that accompanies the truth claims of the Gospel. We learn that “a prophet is only a prophet when he is acting as such.”<sup>21</sup> We learn that the Lord allows us to pursue the course that seems most reasonable to us in the absence of specific revelation.<sup>22</sup> We learn that statements by individual Church leaders represent a well-considered opinion and not necessarily the mind and will of the Lord, binding for the whole Church.<sup>23</sup> We learn that policies are subject to change as circumstances change, and leaders receive new guidance “line upon line, precept upon precept.”<sup>24</sup>

---

20. Gordon B. Hinckley, interview, *American Experience*, PBS, January 2007, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/mormons-hinckley>. See also Jeffrey R. Holland, “True or False,” *Liahona* 20, no. 6 (June 1996), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/1996/06/true-or-false>.

21. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 5:265.

22. Dallin H. Oaks, “In His Own Time, in His Own Way,” *Ensign* 43, no. 8 (August 2013): 22–27, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2013/08/in-his-own-time-in-his-own-way/>.

23. Dallin H. Oaks, “Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 26–29, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/11/17oaks>.

24. Russell M. Nelson, “The Love and Laws of God” (address, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, September 17, 2019), <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-nelson-byu-transcript-september-2019/>.

With this nuanced understanding, every mature member of the Church instinctively begins to classify aspects of Church teachings and practice into two broad categories. Some aspects are peripheral practices or perspectives, subject to change. Others are fixed, foundational truths — unchangeable principles upon which we may build a testimony. For this writing, I will refer to these core, foundational principles as “doctrines.” This aligns with the definition of the term as it is used by modern Church leaders.<sup>25</sup>

For example, the Atonement of Jesus Christ is, by this definition, a doctrine — eternal and unchangeable. On the other hand, some details regarding the *application* of Christ’s Atonement in our lives — such as the wording used to instruct us in the temple — *are* subject to change (and often do). As another example, the priesthood of God is doctrinal, but the requirements for holding specific priesthood offices are not doctrinal.

Learning to separate unchangeable doctrine from changeable principles and policies keeps our faith supple so we do not lose our testimonies when services are reduced to two hours or the Church severs its relationships with the Scouting program. But this flexibility, when taken to the extreme, runs the risk of undermining rather than protecting faith.

This, I believe, is the root of the same-sex marriage debate: How do we classify the nature of marriage? Is it a doctrine, or is it subject to change? I believe the answer is clear.

The nature of marriage is attested throughout scripture.<sup>26</sup> It has been reinforced throughout dispensations.<sup>27</sup> It was reiterated from the start of this dispensation as a key element of the Plan of Salvation (see D&C 132). It has been and is currently taught consistently and frequently by the united voice of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and

---

25. In earlier years, Church leaders used the term “doctrine” very loosely, referring to any teaching, true or false, on any subject. However, Church leaders in recent decades have been more selective in the usage of this term, only applying it to the unchanging, salvific truths of the Gospel. I refer the reader to the treatment of the definition of doctrine by Professor Michael Goodman. See Mike Goodman, “What is Doctrine?” interview by Laura Hales, *The LDS Perspective Podcast*, March 15, 2017, [http://traffic.libsyn.com/ldsperspectives/27LDSP\\_-What\\_is\\_Doctrine\\_with\\_Michael\\_Goodwin.pdf](http://traffic.libsyn.com/ldsperspectives/27LDSP_-What_is_Doctrine_with_Michael_Goodwin.pdf)

26. Refer to the many passages listed under the Guide to the Scriptures entry for “Marriage.”

27. The records of most dispensations include teachings on marriage and family.

the First Presidency,<sup>28</sup> including through formal statements explicitly invoking their authority as prophets, seers, and revelators,<sup>29</sup> telling us that this principle is an unchangeable, eternal doctrine that can never be modified.<sup>30</sup> In short, the nature of marriage and family may be one of the most definitive and core doctrines taught in this dispensation. Because the doctrine of marriage and family is so core to our theology, any attempts to remove it or demote it to a mere “practice” naturally undermines all other Restoration doctrines as well.

I spoke recently with a friend in the Church about the subject of same-sex marriage. He expressed his belief that same-sex relations were not inherently sinful, and that the Church would eventually “come around” and adopt same-sex sealings into temple practices. I asked how he squared this viewpoint with the numerous teachings mentioned earlier. My friend explained that in his view, there are only three great eternal truths:

1. God the Father lives and loves us.
2. Jesus Christ is the Savior.
3. The Book of Mormon is true.

It does not matter if something is taught to be an “irrevocable doctrine”<sup>31</sup> by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve or even canonized. For him, any teaching aside from these three core truths represents only the “best judgment” of Church leadership at the time. It may or may not reflect the mind and will of God, and it is subject to change or even complete reversal at any point. In other words, “we don’t know.”

I hasten to note that my friend is not an advocate against the Church — he is a solid member, devoted to abiding by all Church standards regardless of his personal opinion, and faithfully serves on his stake’s high council. But while my friend does not advocate against Church teachings on same-sex relationships, his view on the Gospel is a primary force motivating those who *do*.

If every teaching that makes the Church unique is, as my friend believes, largely attributed to human judgment and subject to change,

---

28. Oaks, “Trust in the Lord.”

29. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” and many similarly authoritative statements in recent General Conference addresses.

30. Dallin H. Oaks, “Divine Love in the Father’s Plan,” *Liahona* 46, no. 5 (May 2022): 101–104, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/05/51oaks>.

31. *Ibid.*, 103.

what value does the Church offer the world? My friend's "expansive view"<sup>32</sup> of ultimate nuance and total flexibility has reduced his perception of the restored Church to little more than any other Christian denomination. Without the authority to bring the world eternal, unchangeable, revealed truths and God's authority, "where is our religion? We have none."<sup>33</sup>

While I do not agree with my friend's view of the Gospel, his conclusion — not Oman's — is the only logical path to justify a reversal of this magnitude. One must either reduce the restored Gospel to boilerplate Christian nondenominationalism or else assert that the prophets and apostles are knowingly lying while speaking in the name of the Lord (false prophecy). In either case, you destroy the restored Gospel's foundation of authorized apostles and prophets outlined in Ephesians 4. My friend acknowledges and embraces this logical theological conclusion which Oman meticulously avoids.

## Conclusion

I give Nate Oman credit. While many have advocated for same-sex sealings in the past, they have rarely implemented a "*theological rationale*" as Mason called for. I commend Oman for staying within those lines. I also do not wish to question Oman's faith, his sincerity, or his desire to bridge the gap between the Church and his deeply held personal beliefs.

However, Oman promised a pathway to "same-sex marriage sealings in a way that requires minimal theological change and maintains maximum continuity with Church practices" (p. 1). He fails in that promise because it is impossible. Advocates for same-sex sealings may distort history, dismiss scripture, and make flimsy arguments at the periphery, but they cannot skirt around the mammoth theological root of their problem: the doctrine of marriage and the family is inextricably bound to the pillars of the Restoration. There is no way to remove it without losing all confidence in modern revelation and prophetic authority and, by extension, the Book of Mormon, the First Vision, and everything else that makes the Church unique and true.

**Matthew Watkins** is a Latter-day Saint blogger, podcaster, General Conference junkie, and software engineer. He served a full-time mission

---

32. My friend credits his "expansive view" of the Gospel in large measure to the influence of the Faith Matters Foundation (website), <https://faithmatters.org/>.

33. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1904), 2:52.



*in Colorado. Matthew regularly writes his thoughts about the Gospel on his blog, [powerinthebook.com](http://powerinthebook.com), and hosts the ConferenceTalk podcast ([conferencetalk.org](http://conferencetalk.org)). He and his wife, Leah, have three children.*

