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Portrait 2, Eggplant

That We May Be One: A Personal Journey

Tom Christofferson. *That We May Be One: A Gay Mormon's Perspective on Faith and Family*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2017. 154 pp. Paper. \$15.99 ISBN: 9781629723914.

Reviewed by Gerald S. Argetsinger

Tom Christofferson's *That We May Be One* exploded onto the LDS book market with a series of news releases, interviews, and appearances.¹ It represents a gigantic leap in the Deseret Book LDS conversation on LGBTQ+ (hereafter: gay) members since the publication of Ty Mansfield's *In Quiet Desperation: Understanding the Challenge of Same-gender Attraction*.² Even the use of the descriptor "gay" in place of "same-gender attraction" still raises the hackles of many in the faith.³ In contrast to Mansfield's desperate struggle, Tom Christofferson declares "There is nothing intrinsically about who I am that is offensive to God."⁴ Behind that statement is

1. Such as "Gay Mormon author, brother of an apostle, builds bridges between the LDS and LGBTQ communities," interview by Jana Riess, *Religion News Service*, 5 October 2017; "Mormon apostle's gay brother shares his religious journey," interview by Peggy Fletcher Stack, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 17 Sept 2017; "Mormon & Gay," interview by Jamie Armstrong, *LDS Living*, September/October 2017, pp. 26–35; "Becoming One: Panel Discussion with Tom Christofferson on LGBT Inclusion in the LDS Church," Deseret Book Facebook Live, 5 October 2017; and *That We May Be One*, KSL Television, Salt Lake City, 15 October 2017.

2. Ty Mansfield, Fred Matis, and Marilyn Matis, *In Quiet Desperation: Understanding the Challenge of Same-gender Attraction* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2004)

3. See, for example, "There are no homosexual members in the church," YouTube video, from an interview with David A. Bednar and others, 23 February 2016.

4. Jamie Armstrong, "Mormon and Gay: One Man's Journey Away From the Church and Back Again," *LDS Living*, 16, iss. 91 (Sep./Oct. 2017): 32.

the strength of Deseret Book Company, its president, Sherri Dew (ostensibly the most powerful woman in the LDS Church), and the author's brother, Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve. *That We May Be One* can be divided into "Tom's Coming Out Story," "Tom's Advice to the Parents of Gay Youth," "Tom's Rediscovery of the Church," and "Tom's Divine Mandate for Gay Mormons." Tom's "coming out" story is similar to most gay young men in the LDS Church. He believed that spiritual development, church service, serving a mission, and getting married in the temple would change his sexual orientation. Like other gay Mormons, he learned that he was wrong. Shortly after his temple wedding, Tom discovered that trying to be married to a woman was impossible for him. He realized that to be honest with his life, he must travel a different path. In the early 1980s a person could be excommunicated from the LDS Church merely for "coming out," so Tom first called his brother Greg, then his parents and other brothers explaining that he was going to be divorced and ask to be excommunicated because he was homosexual. While this represents the typical tragedy of the young gay Mormon, this is where Tom's experience begins to be atypical.

Tom proceeds to demonstrate how his family's Mormon faith, heritage, and reaction were similar to other Mormon parents who discovered that their son is gay. They were devastated. They wept and prayed. His brother Greg sought out a LDS social service counselor who worked extensively with homosexuality to ask how Tom could be "fixed." Then his parents called a family council, where Tom's experience breaks the mold of his time. His mother stated that the most important thing their family could do was to love Tom. It was their responsibility to keep Tom in the family circle. That declaration made all the difference in the world.

Even though his family understood that the circumstances within the Church at that time meant there was no place for Tom, his family demonstrated unconditional love for him. For two decades, his parents focused on the joy of the times they had together. They ensured that Tom and his partner were always included in every family gathering.

Tom writes, “They weren’t waiting for me to return to church before they could fully love me” (23–24). The Spirit confirmed that this was God’s plan for them.

The majority of *That We May Be One* addresses the parents and leaders of gay youth with lessons Tom learned as an out gay man who was loved unconditionally by his family. One of the strengths of the volume is that it follows the pattern of other Deseret Books discussing gospel topics by quoting scriptures and commentary by various Church leaders. These emphasize how to live in the light of the present rather than in the shadow of future uncertainties; how parents and leaders of gay members can move on after the initial shock of discovery wears off. Tom concludes with how being gay is one of the great blessings of his life.

That We May Be One repeatedly emphasizes that gay individuals must learn for themselves what God’s path is for each of them. This is underlined by the publisher’s introduction as well as by the author. Loving parents can create the environment for experiences, both temporal and spiritual, that their children need to find and follow their own path. His lesson is that if his family could support him, given their background and church experience, then anyone’s family can support their gay children, siblings, and relatives.

Tom returns to his personal history describing how, without really intending to do so, he was eventually re-baptized a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He had never left family and cultural Mormonism, but he began to long for more spiritual experiences. And so, he began to quietly attend sacrament meetings in the nearby New Canaan, Connecticut chapel. The experience of his slow immersion back into the Church is a quintessential lesson for Church leaders on how to interact with their own gay members, both those who are coming out and those who are again exploring whether or not there is a place for them. Tom’s bishop allowed him to live the law he had and to mature line upon line as he slowly moved toward full activity. This also impacted his relationship with his partner of twenty years, whom

he still loves despite his inability to join Tom on his spiritual journey. To those on their own journeys, Tom concludes, “may God bless you for your determination to bear the burdens of those you love, for your willingness to wrestle with angels” (89). In the final pages, Tom tells about the restoration of his priesthood and temple ordinances. He bears witness that each of us is unique and that each of us is worthy of the love of our families. He describes how we cannot live perfectly, but we can learn to love perfectly (140).

Announcements of the pending publication of *That We May Be One* were mixed in the gay LDS community. Gay individuals have individual paths. But the concern that “Tom’s journey” might be prescribed as “*the* journey” is clearly denied several times within the book itself. From the first pages of the publisher’s preface and Tom’s introduction, it is made clear that this book is about Tom’s personal journey and that it should not be considered the only true journey. Tom often states how important it is for every gay member, their parents, and their church leaders to remain close to the Spirit so that each individual can find and be supported in the journey that has been appointed them by God.

Less successful is the concern about Tom’s dealing with the November 2015 handbook change that declares that Mormons engaged in same-sex marriages are considered apostates and their under-eighteen-year-old children are denied church blessings, baptism, and ordinations to the priesthood. After age eighteen, those children who renounced their gay parents’ unions can receive the ordinances of the Church. The topic is given its own chapter but is more brushed aside than confronted.

The final concern, that Tom’s journey might be co-opted by those with their own agendas, is more directed to the book’s readers. On the surface, it might seem easy to pass off Tom Christofferson’s story as a straightforward prodigal son tale of the “return of the sinner” (Luke 15:11–32). It should be clear that is a perversion of Tom’s journey. The Bible’s prodigal son collects his inheritance, leaves home to seek his fortune, and falls in with evil companions who beguile him for their

own lustful purposes. Broken, the youth returns home where his father rejoices at the return of his wayward son. The youth pays for his greed, stubbornness, and transgression.

Tom's story is different. It is the tale of the son who is obedient in all things. He suffers unbearably in spite of his obedience and sorrowfully leaves his family because there is no place for him because of the traditional rules of his society that condemn him merely for who he is. Nevertheless, his father, mother, and family vow to love and support him on his journey. They celebrate his accomplishments and include him and those he loves in their family gatherings. Through time, their society begins to change. Feeling the need for the spiritual blessings, the son quietly seeks out the company of that society in his own land. He is fortunate to find loving leaders who welcome him as one of their own and show him that there is now a place for him alongside his brothers and sisters. The combined love of his parents, family, and spiritually aware leaders invite him back to the home he had been forced to flee.

That We May Be One is the book gay Mormons have been waiting for. It should be required reading for every LDS Church leader. Whether you know it or not, there are gay members in your congregations. Tom Christofferson has provided an example and a guidebook based on his family's experiences coupled with scriptures and stories from their Mormon heritage. Together we can all experience the joy with which Tom proclaims, "I am a happy gay Mormon" (xvi).