

# SPIRIT OF PENTECOST

Samuel Wolfe

Instead of unremitting *lucha libre*, I desired *détente* between my sexuality and birth faith. A gap between graduation from law school and starting work opened a unique space for spiritual odyssey. I resumed attending church near my home in Washington DC in summer of 2006. This is from my journal:

Today I went to church and took the sacrament, I believe, for the first time in ten years. It was a beautiful, meaningful service. This is part of my preparation for my testimony next Sunday. May God be with me; God is with me.

That same Sunday, a visiting high council speaker seemed to look right at me from the pulpit when he said: “I hope you feel welcome here.” I took that, along with an earlier invitation by the local missionaries to join them at church even though I’d told them I’m gay, as a sign that maybe I could find a way within the Church. I do my best to seek, and follow, truth no matter where the path leads. What happens when we receive and surrender to God’s Spirit? I renewed my intent to advance along my best, discernable path of light.

Around that time, a chapter leader of Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Families and Friends wrote about coming out to his ward during fast and testimony meeting with welcome reception. He invited others to do likewise. Riding euphoria from my recent law school graduation, I accepted the invitation as an opportunity to apply an insight confirmed by one of my research papers: Those within oppressive systems are well-placed to advance social progress over time. Bias against LGBTQ people seethes within a misperception that one’s church and other social circles only have straight people. My deepened devotion

to Jesus following a night alone in Auschwitz-Birkenau during a trek through eastern Europe six months earlier further motivated me. I was inspired by Jesus' example of ministry for those least esteemed and his opposition to exclusive tribalism.

My motivation, though, was deeper than advocacy. The Church remains one of my chief spiritual communities despite its insistence on heterosexism, as if the second great commandment could ever be fulfilled by a limp love of LGBTQ neighbors wrapped in hate of homosexuality, such as smug assurance that minority sexuality is an invalid identity.

Later that Sunday evening, favored friends Gabriel and Charlie threw a birthday party for me on their rooftop. As we sat savoring chocolate cake, another friend, Otis (who later became a minister), remarked that by age thirty-four, I'd reached my "Jesus year" because that was Jesus' approximate age when he died and was resurrected, as also recorded in the Book of Mormon (Helaman 14:30; 3 Nephi 8). Otis further noted that my testimony would occur on the day of Pentecost. The swirl of auspicious convergences included Capital Pride celebrations kicking off.

During the week, I prepared my testimony with prayer, fasting, and study about the day of Pentecost when apostles received the gift of the Holy Ghost. Peter spoke on that occasion and quoted Joel, who had earlier prophesied about the "last days" when God would "pour out [his] Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:14–18; Joel 2:28–31). The prophecy impressed upon my mind as I refined and condensed my testimony by rehearsing it before the mirrors on my sliding closet doors.

When Sunday morning arrived, some friends and a cousin joined me together with David Melson, who also planned to speak at the fast and testimony meeting. Dave had invited more LGBTQ Mormon friends from the DC area to join in support.

I was fasting and was lit with the Spirit. The music was joyous. I was about to "come out" at a new level by speaking truth to my Latter-day

Saint community that collectively continued rejecting and persecuting queer souls, especially during that era (from the mid-90s until the US Supreme Court ruling in 2015) of warring over marriage equality. Despite abuse, I choose, even before apologies, forgiveness.

Following opening and sacrament hymns, boys blessed and passed the bread and water in remembrance of Jesus' atonement. I partook and thought of my baptism, when I agreed to take upon myself the name of Jesus and follow him. I continually prayed for the Holy Spirit to be with me and felt powerful support.

After the sacrament service, the brother leading the meeting opened the time to testimonies. I wanted to go close to the start. After the first person spoke, I handed my written version to Gabriel, who was sitting next to me, then stood and walked to the podium, where, after taking a breath, I began by echoing Peter's words from the day of Pentecost, which I'd memorized:

Hearken to my words: . . . And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:14–18)

Like on Peter's day of Pentecost, the congregation appeared filled with individuals "out of every nation under heaven," I said (Acts 2:5). Such diversity is a promising sign that "despite our differences, we can all be united as children of God."

I then related my recent law school graduation to my testimony of Jesus as an advocate, including, I specified, for "the abused, the oppressed, the despised, and the outcasts. . . . He caused the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak, and the lame to walk. Jesus is my kind of advocate." Being a good advocate means being honest, I said, even though "some of us are not so sure that we are welcome here or belong here because of who we are, because of who we love, because

we are different in one way. I am different in this way: I am gay. And I am thankful to God for this difference that has been a great blessing in my life.”

When I said, “I am gay,” I perceived a slight tremor throughout the congregation, like a collectively felt shiver. More, I sensed a near-visible wave of energy from the Holy Spirit, like ripples from a staff placed in still water but more subtle. The feeling of empowerment surely related to exceeding so much of my earlier life of religiously imposed shame about an important aspect of my being. My declaration, given in Spirit, confirmed my internal integration that I prayed to help manifest more broadly, along with others who already were, or have become, engaged in the cause.

I designed my speech to reduce a chance of being stopped from speaking, yet that remained a concern. No one interrupted while I added that I also believe in being chaste and asked: what is the most inspired standard of sexuality for LGBTQ believers? We have not been given a right path. I observed that neither lifetime celibacy, nor straight marriage, nor suicide, nor a riotous life without divine light are true, generally applicable, answers to my question. I concluded with a vision of a church where the members are filled with compassion for one another as Jesus is filled with compassion for us unto the laying down of his life—and of

a church filled with members who believe and act as though they believe in “doing good to all men” (Articles of Faith 13), including to those like the marvelous gay men and women who are with us today.

Some cried during my remarks. After finishing, I returned to my seat next to Gabriel, who patted my knee and squeezed my hand for a moment. David Melson later wrote that he “never attended a more spiritual testimony meeting.” I felt the same.

The bishop then stood to remind the congregation that the Church’s position was clear: “Marriage is only acceptable in the eyes of God when

it's between a man and a woman." I had taken care not to contradict that, nor any other Church doctrine.

The topic was not finished, however. Soon after, David Melson added his testimony that being gay is a gift from God. After the meeting, many people grouped around us to thank us for our testimonies, including the bishop. A young woman said that she had been worried about her gay brother but then felt comfort. Dave heard more than one person whisper to him that they were also gay and were happy for our presence. A leader in the elders quorum who was also a law student said, "I figured you were a lawyer when you began speaking. We have leadership needs in the elders quorum; I hope you'll become more involved."

An older man confided during a quieter moment that he had been a missionary in the southern United States when the Church declined to teach Black people. That was before the 1978 revelation extending the priesthood to all eligible males regardless of race. He said that missionaries avoided Black people back then. He saw a parallel with respect to current exclusion of queer souls from spiritual equality.

Sunday School began after testimony meeting. As is customary, visitors introduced themselves. Seven or so others who had come to support me and Dave each stood and identified themselves as gay Latter-day Saints. It was amazing and, to some, stunning. Such an overt group outing, as far as I knew, was unheard of in Latter-day Saint church meetings.

The congregation's answer to my question of whether there is a place for those like me in the Church was a resounding yes: "You are part of our family." The spiritual outpouring was unmistakable, fitting for the day of Pentecost. My offering of honesty and vulnerability allowed me to receive fuller acceptance from my church family. Yet I guessed that not everyone was pleased with my testimony. I wondered how long I'd have to wait for an answer to my related question about how we may perceive true belonging for sexual minorities within God's

plan. Surely his plan extends to all of his children, even the peculiar ones. I trust in God's timeframe; yet I put faith in the divine invitation: if you lack wisdom, ask in prayer, with real intent, in faith, and it will be given (James 1:5–8). Joseph Smith did so when he was fourteen; that opened what he called a new gospel dispensation. Are miracles too much to ask for nowadays?

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SAMUEL WOLFE {swolfee@gmail.com} is a writer and advocate. His earlier civil rights cases featured the first trial to prove that conversion therapy is consumer fraud (*Ferguson v. JONAH*). After announcing that case, LDS Church–related Evergreen, Exodus International, and other hubs closed. Media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and CNN have covered Sam's cases. This essay is adapted from his upcoming book with the working title "Past Starlit Shadows."