



Air Bud Doctrine: How Ambiguity Becomes Strategy—and Undermines Faith

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Is theological silence a loophole? Air Bud logic misreads doctrine and undermines revealed foundations.

Part one of two in the series.

As a child of the '90s, one of my favorite movies is *Air Bud* (1997). For those unfamiliar with this modern cinematic masterpiece—the *Citizen Kane* of our time—*Air Bud* tells the story of a young boy named Josh who discovers a stray Golden Retriever named Buddy with an uncanny talent for basketball. When Josh joins his school's basketball team, the Timberwolves, Buddy's skills quickly earn him a spot as an unofficial team member. During the championship game, when one of the players is injured, Buddy is brought in as a substitute. The opposing team objects, leading to the following exchange:

Josh: Canine checking in.

Opposing Coach: What the heck's going on here?

Timberwolves Coach: I'll handle this, Josh.

Referee: Do the Timberwolves want to substitute a dog?

Opposing Coach: What, are they nuts?

Timberwolves Coach: The dog's a registered member of the team. He practices with the team, he travels with the team. Check your rulebook—I bet you won't find anything in there that says a dog can't play.

Referee: He's right. Ain't no rule that says a dog can't play basketball.

Opposing Coach: This is a joke! C'mon, dogs don't play basketball.

Timberwolves Coach: What's the matter, gentlemen? Afraid your team might get beat by a dog?

Opposing Coach: Put him in!

The rulebook doesn't explicitly prohibit dogs from playing, so by that logic, Buddy is allowed on the court. At the risk of explaining the joke, the humor of the scene lies in the absurdity of a dog playing basketball—and in the equally absurd loophole that allows it to happen.

Defining Air Bud Theology

This same logic is sometimes applied to religious topics. A friend of mine, who graciously permitted me to build on his ideas, calls this Air Bud Theology—a theological method that typically takes one of two forms. First, it justifies a belief or practice not through explicit doctrinal or scriptural support, but rather through the absence (real or perceived) of an explicit prohibition. Second, it recontextualizes recognized past or current behavior or practice as precedent for introducing unrecognized behavior. In either instance, this methodology fundamentally operates on the principle of *"Ain't no rule that says a dog can't play basketball,"* applying similar reasoning to religious doctrine and practice—arguing that if something isn't explicitly forbidden, it must therefore be permissible, even if it was never originally intended or considered within the theological paradigm.

This approach is frequently used to navigate doctrinal gray areas, justify unconventional interpretations, or push the boundaries of traditional teachings, often in alignment with contemporary ideological trends. One of the most prominent recent examples of Air

Bud Theology is the claim that Latter-day Saint theology leaves room for same-sex eternal marriages simply because early church teachings and practices contain ambiguities or because foundational doctrinal sources may not explicitly prohibit them. Rather than engaging with the affirmative teachings of the Church, which explicitly define [celestial marriage](#) as a male-female union, or which establish [a moral standard](#) that “sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife,” this reasoning relies on the fact that same-sex sealings may not have been technically or explicitly ruled out—despite the overwhelming evidence that they were never even conceived of as part of the eternal order in the first place. As I will explain below, however, the absence of an explicit prohibition on same-sex sealings does not indicate doctrinal openness; rather, it reflects the fact that the entire structure of Latter-day Saint cosmology is built upon foundational principles that render same-sex sealings not merely unaddressed, but fundamentally incompatible with the revealed structure of exaltation.

In part one of this two-part series, I will illustrate the first form of Air Bud Theology: justifying a belief or practice not through explicit doctrinal or scriptural support, but rather through the absence of an explicit prohibition. In part two, I will examine the second form: recontextualizing an approved behavior or practice as precedent for introducing a previously unrecognized behavior.

Air Bud Theology in Action

Consider Jim Bennett, a Latter-day Saint [podcaster and blogger](#), who has argued that same-sex marriages are fully compatible with the teachings in [The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#). As Bennett claims, the document “doesn’t say anything about LGBTQ people at all.” Bennett contends that because the proclamation does not explicitly state, in so many words, that same-sex marriage specifically is not ordained of God, it leaves room for an inclusive interpretation. He writes:

What, you say the Family Proclamation condemns same-sex marriage? No, it doesn’t. It talks about how God loves marriage between a man and a woman, and how procreation shouldn’t take place out of wedlock, and many other commendable things with which I can wholeheartedly agree, all the while leaving the negative stuff—“oh, and same-sex marriage is NOT ordained of God! So there!”—to the reader’s imagination.

Bennett made a similar point [in a podcast discussion](#) in July 2023:

The Family Proclamation talks about marriage being ordained of God. It talks about the important nature of the family in the Plan of Salvation. It talks about the importance of putting family life at the centerpiece of every individual's life, and I think all of those are laudable and wonderful things. The things that are taken from the Family Proclamation are inferences.

The “inferences” Bennett refers to include heterosexual exclusivity and, more specifically, the idea of eternal, immutable gender. He argues that because President Dallin H. Oaks [had to explicitly clarify](#) that the word *gender* in the Family Proclamation refers to biological sex at birth—rather than a socially constructed identity—this suggests that the document itself does not make that meaning explicit. For Bennett, if the Family Proclamation had clearly stated this from the outset, there would have been no need for President Oaks to issue a later clarification. From this reasoning, Bennett concludes that transgender ideology and same-sex marriage are not actually precluded by the Family Proclamation but rather remain permissible within its theological boundaries.

This is Air Bud Theology in action: *“Ain’t no rule that says a dog can’t play basketball.”* Bennett’s argument hinges not on what the Family Proclamation overtly affirms but on what it does not seemingly explicitly forbid. He suggests that because the proclamation does not include a direct and emphatic rejection of same-sex marriages in the way he imagines it should if it sought to delegitimize them, it therefore leaves doctrinal space for such unions. In reality, however, Bennett’s reading ignores both the text of the Family Proclamation and its historical origins. The document unequivocally states that “marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God” and that “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” The proclamation does not need to explicitly say “same-sex marriage is not ordained of God” or “transgender identities are not to be recognized” because its entire foundation is built on

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gender essentialism and heteronormativity. That is the baseline theological and moral assumption of the document.

ideological trends.

The [historical context](#) of the Family Proclamation reinforces this. It was issued in 1995 at a time when legal battles over same-sex marriage were emerging in the United States. Church leaders were keenly aware of these developments and issued the proclamation precisely to affirm heterosexual marriage in anticipation of societal shifts. In his recent biography of President Oaks, Richard E. Turley [explains the historical origins](#) of the proclamation:

During the fall of 1994, at the urging of its Acting President, Boyd K. Packer, the Quorum of the Twelve discussed the need for a scripture-based proclamation to set forth the Church's doctrinal position on the family. A committee consisting of Elders Faust, Nelson, and Oaks was assigned to prepare a draft. Their work, for which Elder Nelson was the principal draftsman, was completed over the Christmas holidays. After being approved by the Quorum of the Twelve, the draft was submitted to the First Presidency on January 9, 1995, and warmly received.

Over the next several months, the First Presidency took the proposed proclamation under advisement and made needed amendments. Then, on September 23, 1995, in the general Relief Society meeting held in the Salt Lake Tabernacle and broadcast throughout the world, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley read "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" publicly for the first time.

During the period that the proclamation was being drafted, Church leaders grew concerned about efforts to legalize same-sex marriage in the state of Hawaii. As that movement gained momentum, a group of Church authorities and Latter-day Saint legal scholars, including Elder Oaks, recommended that the Church oppose the Hawaii efforts.

To suggest that the Family Proclamation leaves doctrinal space for same-sex unions is thus to ignore both the explicit teachings of the proclamation and the clear intent of its authors. Any attempt to read doctrinal or moral ambiguity into the proclamation, the

way Bennett does, disregards both its plain language and the historical and theological context in which it was produced. While individuals may interpret or wrestle with its implications in personal ways, the text itself leaves little room for reinterpretation on this issue in the manner encouraged by Bennett.

As we can see from this example, Air Bud Theology often seeks to justify new doctrinal positions based on what is not explicitly prohibited rather than what is clearly taught. This kind of reasoning exemplifies a false premise fallacy—incorrectly assuming, in this instance, that anything not explicitly prohibited must be permissible, even when it contradicts the clear intent of doctrine. It also flirts with equivocation, subtly shifting the meaning of orthodox Latter-day Saint views on the nature of love, marriage, or family to justify conclusions that diverge from the original framework.

In the next installment, we will explore at length the second common form of this reasoning—recontextualizing approved behaviors as precedent for previously unrecognized practices.

About the author

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