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Views on Marriage Counseling and Making Church Member Marriages Work

Elder Hugh W. Pinnock
Of the Seventy
1982

I am deeply committed to the concept that the Lord, because of the love he has for his people, has revealed to us the principles, concepts, and techniques needed to make a marriage succeed and has given ways to counsel people whose marriages are in trouble. We are to find which principles will work in each situation and then communicate to the counselee his or her responsibilities in the therapy procedure.

My own counseling at the present time is limited to people who are referred to me by other ecclesiastical leaders, following the proper line of authority, and to a few close friends after they have talked with their bishops and stake presidents. However, my views come from twenty years of marriage counseling that began when I was called as a bishop many years ago.

I deeply respect the insights and skills of many professional counselors. I hope that a few of the concepts I offer might prove helpful in what you are doing. I am deeply committed to the concept, when we are dealing with members of the Church of coordinating counseling between the professional counselor and bishop.

Let me share with you some of the techniques that I have found to be effective and enduring. Let us begin with the initial interview. Whenever possible, I ask both the husband and wife to be present

while I explain to them that during our interviews I will be talking with each of them privately. This lets them know that they will have an opportunity to speak freely about anything that would be too sensitive in the presence of their mate. I also let them know that I will listen with empathy to what they say and will hold the conversations in strictest confidence.

I generally ask the one who appears to be least verbal to communicate his or her feelings first and to explain why the marriage is not meeting their expectations. I ask the other person to remain quiet. I then ask the other one to explain why he or she feels the marriage is not successful. A brief discussion of what they expect from their marriage is usually helpful at this time. Sometimes I observe a little therapy taking place during this period. Often—and unfortunately—even the most primary objectives between them have not been verbalized until now. We also talk about the husband's and wife's professions and education; the names, ages, and accomplishments of the children; and other items to help me assess what each party wants to do to make the marriage succeed.

I then excuse either the husband or wife and interview the remaining person briefly. I use an ecclesiastical approach to learn whether their lives conform to the laws and commandments of God, and whether they accept the divine, eternal truths we have been given by revelation.

I ask if the person would like to express anything confidential during the initial interview. I explain that I can help only to the extent that they are honest with me, and want to live the commandments, are willing to conform to the principles we are discussing, and want to lead the marriage to a healthy position. I let them know, if they haven't already discovered it, that I am their friend and am also a friend of their mate. I ask the person I am talking with to take notes as we talk, and provide paper and pencil if they do not have them. I have learned that we have much better results when those being counseled take notes. I then repeat the solo interview with the other marriage partner.

The three of us then review together the gospel principles of personal responsibility, the immense importance of our earthly life in the eternal perspective and, if applicable, the fact that the eternal family relationship is to continue because of the children that have been born to that union. They learn at this time that the success of the marriage is pretty much up to them.

We then often talk about the principles of forgiveness. Assigning blame is a characteristic that retards any progress toward healing, helping, and building relationships. I sympathize with the difficulty of erasing past feelings and memories that are evil or negative but I encourage them to assess their ability to do so at this time. Usually, an extensive amount of time is spent discussing the need to forgive and be less judgmental. It is within this context that much of the therapy seems to take place. If they are comfortable with advice found in the scriptures, we turn to section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants and borrow freely from it.

Fortunately, if we are in tune in our counseling, we are endowed with the companionship of the Holy Ghost. While listening to the couple I often find myself praying for enlightenment to find the way to help each of them want to conform with the gospel principles that will save their marriage.

While preparing this article, I have considered how much of the interview time I spend listening and how much time they are listening to the ideas I want to share with them. My leaning is towards a directive approach in counseling. It happens to fit my own style better than a more passive system that has become popular since Carl Rogers did his fascinating work a number of years ago. An ideal ratio would be to have them do the talking about eighty percent of the time and for me to speak for the remainder of an hour. I believe counseling sessions generally should last no longer than one hour. In fact, most sessions, after the initial confrontation, seem to require about thirty minutes.

I ask each of them to use the notes they have taken during our interviews and give each an assignment to complete before we talk again. Because I often take a few notes also, we can compare to see if we are on the same track. If I observe problems that seem quite

easy to solve during the first interview—and I usually do—I assign them to decide how they can eliminate those difficulties. I also ask them to bring back in writing the steps they are willing to take to work toward a solution of the total problem. I want them to begin experiencing success at this point, even if it is minor. Often, writing out what they are willing to do begins to reduce the stress.

The reason for each of these steps usually is obvious to those being counseled. When people accept the responsibility to use eternal principles to make their marriage succeed, it almost always produces dramatic results. I remind them often of my concern for the success of their marriage and for their own wellbeing. At the same time, I strongly impress upon them the necessity for them to exert tremendous energy to take the action that is necessary. I inform them of the fact that rarely is a problem unsolvable or a condition impossible.

I have learned by sad experience that only those who seriously want to make their marriage and families succeed will complete the assignments and use the principles I suggest. Their response to the initial interview lets me know whether to continue counseling or to terminate it.

Let me give some examples. If either partner is committing unwholesome and unholy sexual practices, dignity, self-confidence, and the the guidance of the Holy Spirit are lost from their marriage until they change their behavior. If they are unwilling to make the change, that unwillingness signals to me that the time is not right for solving their marriage problems. If the family is in financial difficulty but is unwilling to set up a family budget and will not respond to my advice, then I can be of little help to them.

If I were to title this procedure I would simply call it Therapy by Participation: it includes being candid with each other (or self) and with me.

For a period of seven to eight months, I gave an address titled, "Making a Marriage Work." I had never had as large a number of requests for a talk or an article I had given or written as I had for this particular presentation. Even though people found a number of the principles to be helpful, I believe the real reason for so many

requests is that so many marriages are in trouble. I have not included in this address some of the stories and examples that I used in that presentation, but I have retained the key points. I altered the eighth principle to include language that conforms with my expanding feeling I have about the principles and advice it contains. Obviously, many people do not go to their bishop in the first place, but seek counseling sometimes from incompetent people elsewhere. That is why I have stated that point as I have. Otherwise, the basic content of that talk is what follows.

The first idea I suggest is fundamental: Bring the Savior and his teachings into our hearts and homes. To really succeed, an eternal marriage must be Christ-centered. Though directed to priesthood bearers, the principles in Doctrine and Covenants section 121 apply to both husbands and wives. Beginning with verse 41, “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood”—and here are the characteristics by which power and influence can be maintained—“only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile.”

Going to verse 45, “Let thy bowels also be full of charity. . . to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.”

Just as a building must have a strong foundation if it is to endure, a family needs the sure foundation of the Savior and his teachings. We are a spiritual people, believing in spiritual principles. But first and foremost we are to use the Spirit in solving problems and in receiving personal revelations that will guide us. Obviously praying together often—at least daily and hopefully at least twice daily—will lead to this success.

Second, do not feel that an intense disagreement in a marriage indicates that it cannot succeed. If we are to really communicate, we must be honest when we disagree. We must express hurts and let our feelings show. We can do this without becoming angry or

inconsiderate. People who keep things bottled up inside are candidates for a variety of illnesses. And equally serious, that approach does not solve problems.

Serious disagreements between marriage partners do not mean that the two are becoming allergic to one another or that the situation is hopeless. It merely means that they are human and that they are not yet perfect. If they acknowledge their differences in a mature way, they will recognize that their marriage is okay. They simply have, in this situation, failed to communicate. They can work out their differences without jeopardizing their relationship.

Third, never make your mate the object of jokes either in private or in public. Partners who poke fun at their mates may think of it as good-natured humor. It is not. It is degrading and dangerous. To make a joke about private things a husband or wife did at home is a form of ridicule and is a way of demeaning him or her. Too often the laughter conceals a spirit of malice or anger and can cause hurt feelings. Couples who respect each other do not resort to such degradation.

Fourth, do not smother one another with excessive restrictions. A loving wife of many years shared with me one of the secrets of her beautiful marriage. She told me, "It is my duty to maintain an atmosphere in our home in which my husband can reach his full potential. And you know, he is a busy businessman, bishop, and father. In turn, he helps me reach my potential." With her encouragement, he was an outstanding bishop. She later served as a counselor in two auxiliary presidencies and then as president of the stake Relief Society. She had her own room where she sewed, painted, and wrote lovely poetry. He felt comfortable in going fishing, doing some painting, and growing in ways that interested him. Neither of these marriage partners was being smothered by a selfish mate. Both respected the other's needs and goals.

The most fulfilling of all marriages seem to be those in which the husband and wife together commit their lives to the Savior's keeping. They are interested in one another, and yet set each other free to grow and mature; never free to flirt but free to take on new challenges and to pursue new interests. Jealousy is a subtle form of

bondage and is the most smothering of human passions. Husbands and wives who fear the loss of a partner's love weaken their relationship by holding on too tightly. A husband who thinks to himself, "I won't let her out of my sight," is actually expressing a fear that might push her away. Husbands and wives should allow each other plenty of room for personal growth and expression. When both marriage partners are able to develop their talents and interests, the marriage is less likely to suffer from boredom and narrowness.

Fifth, compliment each other sincerely and often. A middle-aged wife once told me, "Somebody has to keep my husband humble. He gets so much attention from others that he needs to be brought down a peg or two. He gets too big for his britches." How sad. Every husband needs a wife who will build him up. Every wife needs a husband to honor and respect her. Building each other with sincere compliments is never a sign of weakness; it is the right thing to do. Anyone who can kneel before a sacred altar with a partner and exchange vows for eternity surely can see enough good in that partner to emphasize the good when talking with others. So often in counseling situations, a divorced woman or man will say, "John has been gone now for three years. How I wish he would come back. The loneliness is unbearable. I neglected to tell him so many things." Or they will say, "If only I had let her know how good she was in so many ways. What a fool I was. I could never learn to compliment her. I was always pointing out her mistakes. When I see how some husbands and wives treat each other so coldly and with such indifference, I want to scream at them to wake up before it is too late. I want to tell them to quit their sarcasm and, instead, to encourage each other."

Wives and husbands tend to become the persons described in the compliments their spouses pay them. They will do almost anything to live up to the compliments and encouragement of a proud wife or husband.

Sixth, never resort to the silent treatment. Always be open and straightforward with each other. Too often, we may respond to marital tension by "clamming up" or "taking a walk." A young wife from the southwest corner of Salt Lake County asked me to "talk

some sense into her husband” saying, “All he does is clam up when we disagree. He won’t communicate. He just walks out the door. When he cools down, he comes home, but he is like ice until I make up with him. He can go on for days or even a week or two without saying a word.” I have learned that we are wrong even to say to our mate, “Just leave me alone. I am going through a rough time. Let me work it out by myself. I just don’t want to be around anybody right now.” That not only is unfair and a genuine insult, but it is stupid. What is marriage if it is not sharing and helping one another through crises? We have heard all of the excuses: “I am going through the change of life; I am not feeling well; things are tough at the office; it’s that time of the month; I have had a bad day at the ward; I lost a big case; my nerves are bad.” But none of these excuses gives the moral right to shut out someone who loves you. Keep the door to your heart open. The times when we shut others out often are the times when we need their help the most. Of course we all need times of privacy, time to think things out, meditate, and pray. We should understand and respect this need in others. However, we should never be inconsiderate or unappreciative of a concerned husband or wife who is trying to help.

Seventh, say “I am sorry,” and really mean it. Contrary to a popular saying, love, in part, means learning how to say, “I am sorry.” So often when we make mistakes, sometimes innocently, damage has been done and an apology is in order. Along with learning to say, “I am sorry,” husbands and wives must learn to say, “I forgive.” Jesus taught that to be forgiven by our Heavenly Father depends, in part, on our ability to forgive those who trespass against us. Even when a husband or wife has cheated, we should be willing to accept their true repentance. Some of the strongest marriages of which I am aware have been between partners who could say, “I am sorry,” and who forgive. In addition to saying they are sorry and really meaning it, husbands and wives must avoid bringing up the past. Thousands of marriages have survived the most critical problems and have been successful only because godly sorrow for sin was followed by Christ-like forgiveness.

Eighth, never turn to a third party in a time of trouble, except your bishop. In sensitive and inspired ways, he will direct you to a competent Latter-day Saint counselor if that is needed. Someone is always ready and eager to console a hurting wife or husband and to side with them. And when marriage partners have no one to talk with at home, unfortunately, too many seek a friend elsewhere. That is where almost all adultery begins. It can happen in the neighborhood, in a ward choir, at the office, or almost anywhere else. Secret affairs begin innocently enough—just by talking about mutual hurts. But then comes a dependency period that too often ends in transferring loyalty and affection, followed by adultery. Never confide your marriage troubles to a third party, no, not even to the closest friend of your own sex. He or she may be the first to tell your troubles to another, becoming the one to hurt you most severely. Lean on the Savior, and rely upon your bishop or stake president. This system, which the Lord has given us, is simple but it works so well.

Ninth, retain the joy in your marriage. God intends us to find joy in life (see Nehemiah 8:10 and 2 Nephi 2:25). Most marriages begin with joy, and those that succeed retain it. When a marriage loses its happiness, it becomes weak and vulnerable. Find a happy home and you will find a joyful couple at the helm. Husbands and wives who no longer laugh and play together are losing their love for each other and their capacity to stay together. True love includes a joyful, almost childlike quality. In other words, have fun.

Tenth, pray often. Adam and Eve, during a period of insecurity, compounded their brief rebellion by hiding from God's presence. God does not hide; only man does. God was vitally involved with that first marriage, and he is just as concerned and involved in every marriage today. Ideally, husband and wife and their children will kneel together in prayer. But, when that is impossible, you husbands and wives be sure to pray for a strong marriage and for the insight needed to be sensitive and caring.

These are common sense and simple ideas. In many ways and for several reasons, they might be considered inappropriate for a professional journal such as this. Simply ask this question: "If

people would incorporate these principles in their relationship with their spouse, would not the results be positive?”

A loved and most practical doctor friend of our family, who became legendary as a “healer and builder of people,” was often asked why his brand of medicine was so universally helpful. Yes, he was well-read and kept amazingly up to date, but his answer caused a depth of understanding beyond past experiences when he simply replied, “I attempt to conform my practice to the healing procedures and counsel of the Great Physician.” Perhaps each of us will become more effective if we consistently in our practice follow this enduring principle: that when eternal truth is communicated simply it provides the power to make well those who are sick and confused.