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Douglas E. Brinley

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS PRESENTED AT THE FALL 2002 AMCAP CONVENTION - 3 OCTOBER 2002

Spiritual Perspectives in Marriage and Family Relationships

DOUGLAS E. BRINLEY, PhD

Brigham Young University

When I completed graduate school at BYU, I was assigned to the Church's institute of religion at Weber State University. There, I taught a class on marriage only to find that most of the students were single. They didn't even know when to laugh at my jokes about marriage. So I took my act on the road, out into the stakes of the Church where married couples were struggling with real problems. As I began to teach these short courses of six to eight weeks, I started getting phone calls. The individual on the other end of the line would say, "I think our problems are a little more complex than what you covered in the class in Clearfield (or Layton, or Kaysville), so we were wondering if we could come and see you privately?" I agreed. But before I hung up the phone, they would often surprise me by saying, "Oh, by the way, if you can't fix us, I'm afraid this is it; I don't think we'll stay together if you can't help us." Talk about pressure!

That kind of statement from a caller would drive me to my knees: "Heavenly Father," I prayed earnestly, "what theory that I learned in graduate school should I use with this couple? They are threatening divorce if I can't help them." It was very serious to me at the time. After asking the Lord over a period of time, the answer from him was clear: "get the Saints to live the gospel." Consequently, I have tried over the years to help the saints understand and apply the principles of the gospel in their marriage and family situations.

Since that time I've learned that many of the Saints are not convinced that the gospel is the key to a successful

marriage—because most think they already know the doctrines of the gospel and are living them. They assume that because they hear them every week in Church, there's nothing new that they haven't heard. What does Lehi's trip through the wilderness have to do with my three-year-old's temper tantrums or my husband's spending habits?

It seems to me, as I look at the statistics on dysfunctional families, that many are not "getting it" in the Church—we are not making the connection between the doctrines of the kingdom and resolving marital and family issues.

I think we are embarrassing the Lord and his prophets with the extent of divorce, abuse, and marriage and family problems that keep surfacing in spite of the fact that we have greater access to resources that could help us: church books and magazines, temples, videos, counselors, manuals, general conference addresses, etc.

The classic story regarding the inability to apply

Douglas E. Brinley PhD graduated from Utah State University (BS, MS) and Brigham Young University (PhD). He is currently Professor of Church History and Doctrine in the Department of Religion at Brigham Young University. He is the author of numerous books on family relationships, including Strengthening Your Marriage and Family (1994, Bookcraft), and co-author (with Stephen E. Lamb MD) of Between Husband and Wife: Gospel Perspectives on Marital Intimacy (2000, Covenant Communications). For many years he has been a popular speaker at Education Week and the Know Your Religion lecture series. Address for correspondence: 316 D JSB, BYU, Provo UT 84502 (801) 422-3367 email: <doug_brinley@byu.edu>

gospel principles to family problems comes from our own Carlfred Broderick, PhD [*AMCAP President, 1982-83*]. A number of years ago I asked him to write a chapter for one of my books (Brinley & Judd, 1995). In the article, he indicated his surprise that divorce rates among Church members mirrored those of the population in general. He gave this explanation:

[Our] problem[s] seem to come in making the special applications from the general Gospel principles to the specific marital situation.

The point was illustrated vividly in a recent experience with a colleague. He is Jewish and one of the finest family therapists I know. I have referred close friends and relatives to him with good results. One day a[n LDS] woman called me to see if she could make an appointment to bring in her family for some counseling. Their problem was a rebellious teenager and an escalating power struggle between her and her parents that was getting out of hand.

After only a couple of weeks I got a call from my friend. "Carl, I need some help with this couple you referred to me."

"What's the problem? They probably just need to loosen up the parental iron fist a little."

"Of course. If they don't, this kid is about to run away from home or attempt suicide or do something else drastic. But, Carl, every time I suggest any movement in the direction of loosening up they patiently explain to me that I just don't understand their religious obligations as Mormon parents to keep this kid in line. Frankly, I don't know how to deal with this. I don't want to attack their religious beliefs, but the situation is explosive."

I thought a moment and then said, "Here's what you do. First, tell them that since you have started working with them on their problems you have developed a real curiosity about the Mormon religion. Then say that there is one issue that keeps coming up when you ask about it that has you mystified. You keep hearing about some 'War in Heaven,' but you can never quite figure out what it is about."

"That's it? I just ask them to explain this 'War in Heaven?'"

"That's it."

"Carl, what's the 'War in Heaven?'"

"It doesn't matter; just do what I said, and let me know how it goes."

A few days later he called: "Carl, I can't believe it; I did

what you said and it was like magic."

"So tell me about the session."

"Well, as you suggested, I told them that since I started working with them I got sort of interested in the Mormon religion. You wouldn't believe the response. Even the rebellious teenage kid promised to give me a copy of some book on the church with the family picture in the front. Then I said there was just one thing that kind of confused me about their beliefs. I kept hearing about some 'War in Heaven.' What was this 'War in Heaven'? Well, the mom in this family didn't as much as take a minute to collect her thoughts. In seconds she has launched into some story about a Council in Heaven and two Plans and she gets about three minutes into it and she stops cold in her tracks and gives me a funny look and says, 'Alright, Doctor, you've made your point.' From that point on they were like putty in my hands. It was like magic, Carl, what is this 'War in Heaven?'" (Broderick, 1995, pp. 11-12)

Another story comes from a good friend who taught marriage seminars for the parents of those with children in the Anasazi wilderness program (see Sanchez, 2000). During a break one day, an LDS mother came to him and asked, "What book would you recommend to improve marriages?" He picked up a scriptures triple combination that was on the table and handed it to her. She refused it saying, "Well, I already know about that. I mean something helpful and practical to a married couple in our day and time." When he tried again to hand her these scriptures she responded, "Look, you professionals read stuff to help people improve their marriages; now, can you tell me what it is that you read?" He made one last attempt to hand her the triple combination.

I have found that many of the Saints have that same mindset. They agree that we need the standard scriptural works for Sunday worship, of course. Besides, we need to prepare missionaries for the field; they must learn the scriptures before they go into the world to serve the Lord. But the attitude is that if there is a marital problem or a parent-child issue, the gospel is inadequate to resolve those types of problems. The only recourse, we think, is to leave the gospel framework and find someone trained in professional secular studies who can *really* help us solve our problems.

Thus, we have had a dichotomy in the church for a long time. Bishops and stake presidents and religious educators are accused of telling the saints to just pray harder, read the scriptures, and keep the commandments—and they can solve any problem. In contrast, counselors send

the message that, “you can’t solve personal and marriage problems just by reading the scriptures and praying.” Those of us who work with couples and families agree that with serious mental issues, more help is needed than can be provided by the bishop and stake president, by the scriptures or the prophets. I think most of us understand that if an accurate diagnosis of bipolar, schizophrenia or other mental abnormalities is made—one that goes beyond relationship problems—these people need medication and perhaps special insights into their problems to help them re-orient to the real world. On the other hand, for the relationship problems that most couples and families face, it seems that we don’t draw on the powers that come from a knowledge of the plan of salvation; that is, gospel principles.

Now, I realize that when people pay money for professional services that a therapist cannot exactly launch into a theology lesson. I am glad that I can; I have that luxury because I teach at a university and don’t depend on counseling for my source of income. So, when people come to me (from marriage classes or groups where I speak), I can have a theology lesson with them. And, I do remind them of the purposes of mortality and the importance of marriage and family relations in the Father’s plan. My “therapy,” so to speak, is to review with them the principles of the plan of salvation. It is obvious to me that couples in trouble over relationship issues are not applying gospel principles to resolve their difficulties. But professional psychotherapists would have a hard time reviewing the plan of salvation. Besides, they deal with many who are not members of the Church, or who are part-member families where the gospel is a source of contention in the marriage. But I agree with Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1984):

One of the great blessings flowing from ... latter-day revelation is the crucial, doctrinal framework known as the plan of salvation, the plan of happiness, or the plan of mercy ... So vital is this [plan of salvation] that if one stays or strays outside it, he risks ... misery. In fact, most human misery represents ignorance of or non-compliance with this plan. A cessation of such mortal suffering will not come without compliance to it. (Maxwell, 1984 p. 21)

Let me explain my point. The “pop psychology” of our day generally says that marital problems can best be solved by this formula:

- an increase in the quantity of communication,
- better communication skills, and
- greater listening skills.

These three ideas are thought to be the common solutions that most people on the street view as essential to resolving typical marital and family problems. My first reaction is, “well, it sounds good; it sounds like it should work; all right.” And, of course we all can agree that we can do better in the way we communicate in our families. But to concentrate on these ideas as solutions is not the Lord’s approach, nor do I find it in the scriptures, nor do we hear about it in general conference sessions from prophets, seers, and revelators. It seems to me that the Lord does not approach marriage and family problems from a “communication” perspective.

Let’s think about our practices as Latter-day Saints. Have you men ever been in a priesthood meeting where you were split up into pairs so you could practice rephrasing what your partner said so that you could learn better listening skills to use with your wife and children? Have you women ever been to a Relief Society meeting where you practiced making *I-statements* so as to become better able to express your feelings without being accusatory? I don’t think so— and I don’t think the gospel system will change in our lifetime.

Many people in the Church today cannot figure out why we study the teachings of Presidents Brigham Young, Joseph F. Smith and Harold B. Lee when President Gordon B. Hinckley’s greatest concern is families in the kingdom falling apart; recall his statement:

I am concerned about family life in the Church. We have wonderful people, but we have too many whose families are falling apart. It is a matter of serious concern. I think it is my most serious concern. (Hinckley, 1995a, p. 6)

I suppose many of the saints would propose that what we ought to do is to get single adults together in the same classes to work on dating skills while married couples work on communication skills until they become proficient.

What do the Lord and his prophets teach? They label marriage and family problems as *heart problems*, as *selfishness*, as *pride* issues. President Spencer W. Kimball (1982, p. 313) has said that every divorce is the result of selfishness; President Ezra Taft Benson (1989) called our attention to the destructive nature of pride,

while President Gordon B. Hinckley (1991) provided this perspective:

Why all of these broken homes? What happens to marriages that begin with sincere love and a desire to be loyal and faithful and true one to another? There is no simple answer. I acknowledge that. But it appears to me that there are some obvious reasons that account for a very high percentage of these problems. I say this out of experience in dealing with such tragedies. I find selfishness to be the root cause of most of it [broken homes]. I am satisfied that a happy marriage is not so much a matter of romance as it is an anxious concern for the comfort and well being of one's companion. Selfishness so often is the basis of money problems, which are a very serious and real factor affecting the stability of family life. Selfishness is at the root of adultery, the breaking of solemn and sacred covenants to satisfy selfish lust. Selfishness is the antithesis of love. It is a cankering expression of greed. It destroys self-discipline. It obliterates loyalty. It tears up sacred covenants. It afflicts both men and women. Too many who come to marriage have been coddled and spoiled and somehow led to feel that everything must be precisely right at all times, that life is a series of entertainments, that appetites are to be satisfied without regard to principle. How tragic the consequences of such hollow and unreasonable thinking! ... There is a remedy for all of this [marital stress]. It is not found in divorce. It is found in the gospel of the Son of God. He it was who said, "What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). The remedy for most marriage stress is not in divorce. It is in repentance. It is not in separation. It is in simple integrity that leads a man to square up his shoulders and meet his obligations. It is found in the Golden Rule ... There must be recognition on the part of both husband and wife of the solemnity and sanctity of marriage and of the God-given design behind it. There must be a willingness to overlook small faults, to forgive, and then to forget. There must be a holding of one's tongue. Temper is a vicious and corrosive thing that destroys affection and casts out love. There must be self-discipline that constrains against abuse of wives and children and self. There must be the Spirit of God, invited and worked for, nurtured and strengthened. There must be recognition of the fact that each is a child of God—father, mother, son, and daughter, each with a divine birthright—and also recognition of the fact that when we offend one of these, we offend our Father in Heaven. (Hinckley, 1991, pp. 94-98)

Notice that President Hinckley did not discuss communication, listening or skills as solutions at all. He did not talk about our inadequacies in communicating with each other. What the prophets discuss are not terms that you generally use with people in a professional setting (although you could translate them into similar terms). Prophets teach principles. If we could eliminate selfishness and pride in our hearts, they tell us, we would all perform more effectively as married partners and as parents.

I maintain that communication is neutral, that it can be used two ways: to bless or curse. Notice how well we communicate in public when we want to influence someone or we are trying to gain new customers. But, we can also use communication to be critical, sarcastic, temperamental, moody, or use the "silent treatment." What makes the difference as to how we communicate with others? The answer from the Lord and the scriptures has to do with our *heart condition*.

A CHANGE OF HEART

What do we know about *heart conditions*? They come with *soft* or *hard* properties. A *soft* heart is reflected in one's humility, in a softness of tone and demeanor from one who is pliable, humble, anxious to learn from others and who is full of charity; one who is a peacemaker, a companion, and a "therapist" to loved ones. A *hard* heart is possessed by one who is typically defensive, moody, uncooperative, arrogant, manipulative and who discourages open dialogue and unity.

For example, if a wife were to say to her husband, "Honey, I know you are busy with your graduate work (or getting your business off the ground), but I need more dad for our kids. They hardly know you. You leave early in the morning, come home late at night. I really need more help with the children."

If a soft-hearted husband felt the anguish in his spouse's voice and his heart was not hard or defensive, how would he respond to his wife's plea? He would probably say something like this, "Honey, I've got to get this business off the ground or they are going to foreclose on our home. But, I know you're right. I've felt the same way. Let's plan together how I can get more involved. Any ideas?"

How would a hard-hearted husband respond to the same wife's request? "I can't believe how much you complain. Don't you like the home we live in? Don't you

understand what it costs to make payments on this place? Do you think that I like working that much? I wish you could see it from my point of view for a change!"

Defensiveness in this husband's hard heart is obvious. Would such a reply encourage a wife to want to share more of her feelings with him or would she hesitate to bring up a substantial issue again just to get her head bitten off once more? It is not that this husband doesn't know a better way to respond. He would not say such a defensive thing to a complete stranger or a neighbor. But when hearts are hardened, we manifest defensiveness, anger, or grumpiness. We would certainly not act that way in front of other people, or just after payday, or if we wanted our spouse to be intimate that evening!

What is it, then, that softens hearts and keeps them soft? Recall Elder Boyd K. Packer's statement:

True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. Preoccupation with unworthy behavior can lead to unworthy behavior. That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel. Our behavior is not totally controlled by natural impulses. Behavior begins with belief as well. Beliefs are born of philosophies, of doctrines. Doctrines can be spiritual or secular, wholesome or destructive, true or false. (Packer, 1986, p. 17; italics added)

I see the Lord's model this way (see Mosiah 5:2 and Alma 5:11-13 to see the model in scriptural form):

True doctrine ➤ softens hearts ➤ behavior modification

Let me illustrate how doctrine softens hearts through the following principles.

PRINCIPLE I—THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT OF JESUS CHRIST

Through his atonement, the Savior made it possible for us to be resurrected as male and female. Once resurrected, we can never die again (D&C 11:45). If death is no longer possible, that means that we will be immortal males or females. If we marry in the temple and remain worthy, we can be married sweethearts forever. Mortality will not end our relationship. If a husband really believes that his wife is to be his sweetheart not just for a few years

of mortal life, but to be an eternal companion, lover, the mother of his children both here and in eternity, his wife forever—how would he treat her? How should he treat her? If a wife really believes that the man she agreed to marry is to be her husband, lover, the father of her children both here and hereafter, an eternal companion—how would she treat him? How should she treat him?

This "heart principle" is illustrated in a powerful way in the Book of Mormon:

And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And now, behold, it came to pass that the people of Nephi did wax strong, and did multiply exceedingly fast, and became an exceedingly fair and delightsome people ... And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, *because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people.* [and the results were] ... there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God. There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God. And how blessed were they! For the Lord did bless them in all their doings; yea, even they were blessed and prospered ... and there was no contention in all the land. (4 Nephi 1:2-18)

These Nephites were righteous, then, for approximately 200 years. Here is a question to consider: "Why were these Nephites, even with large families, able to go 200 years without contention and fighting amongst themselves?" Did the Savior establish an extensive series of communication seminars for the Nephites to attend? Likely not. According to the record, it was because they had the *love of God in their hearts*. After touching the resurrected Lord, they understood the doctrine of the resurrection very clearly. They could now appreciate the work of the Savior. Jesus Christ made available to them as married couples, through his atonement and resurrection, the possibility of being together forever.

In looking at this example a little closer, we read that all 2,500 survivors of the great destruction in that area of

the promised land went forth and physically touched the Savior. I don't think this was an open house for the Savior (it appears more like a priesthood ordinance between the Savior and those who felt of the prints and wounds; perhaps if we had the full story, we would relate it to something revealed in modern temple worship). I picture a Nephite husband, after this rather profound experience, saying to his wife:

Sweetheart, do you know who that man is? Do you realize what we just did? He is Jesus Christ. He made this earth and all the worlds we see at night in the heavens. He is the God of Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Lehi, Nephi, Alma, Helaman. Remember the teachings of King Benjamin, Abinadi, and Samuel and their prophecies about him? Sweetheart, notice that he is a man. I too, am a man. I will someday die, as will you, but we will be resurrected as a male or female. We can then no longer die. That means if we love each other here in this life we could be husband and wife forever! Oh, honey, you've got to help me. I don't know how to be a husband to you. I know there are times when I really frustrate you. Please teach me how to be a better husband to you. We need to talk, we need to listen to the prophets, we need to read the scriptures.

I think his wife would be equally humbled. Perhaps she would say:

Sweetheart, if you can stand me that long, I will try to stand you. I don't know how to be your wife for that long of a period of time. I know that I upset you in this life. You'll need to teach me, we'll need to talk, we'll need to listen to the prophets, to read the scriptures. We'll have to help each other.

I picture the father reaching down and grabbing one of their children going by and saying to his wife:

Sweetheart, do you realize who this little guy is? This is one of Heavenly Father's very own spirit children and he has lent him to us to practice on; we are *apprenticing* as spouses and parents! If we can get this child back to his heavenly home, then our Father will reassign this child to be part of our eternal family. Oh, honey, I don't know how to be a father. I get so frustrated with the few we have. You'll have to help me. We need to talk. We need to

listen to the prophets. We need to read the scriptures and teach our little ones in a family setting.

I picture his wife saying:

Honey, I don't know how to be a mother. I frustrate the kids so many times, as you know. You'll have to help me. We have to talk more. We have to read the scriptures and listen to what our prophets are telling us.

And they both would understand this insight:

Once we are resurrected, we will begin to have the kind of children our heavenly parents had in the premortal life, the kind of beings we were before this mortal life. If we live forever after this life, we could have another large family. We must prepare now for that eternal opportunity.

This scripture from 4 Nephi (1:2-18) indicates that when individuals understand the basic truths about marriage and family relations, their hearts are softened and humbled and they want to be a blessing to each other and to their children.

The Book of Mormon is filled with comments on the human *heart condition*. There are 453 references to *heart* issues in this sacred text. The Lord seems to be saying to its readers: first soften your heart by understanding my doctrine, and then your behavior will match your beliefs.

Heart Versus "Communication Skills" Solutions

Let me come back to the *heart issue* versus the world's emphasis on *communication skills*. I indicated that the pop psychology of our day suggests that the solutions to marital problems are (a) to talk more, (b) to be better skilled in communicating, and (c) to listen more effectively to each other—all good suggestions if our hearts are soft. If they are not, you easily see the folly of trying to solve marital problems through those means. Consider:

- When you try to get people who don't like each other to communicate more, it does not lead to a peaceful solution. To put Prime Minister Sharone and Yassar Arafat together and let them *talk it out* won't bring peace to the Middle-East. Why or why not, do you suppose?
- When people like each other, they communicate quite adequately.

- We are all good listeners when we are motivated by self-interest to be such. We are quite cordial in public settings, around a boss or supervisor, which indicates that we do have the necessary ability to treat others well when we want to.

Think of it this way: if President Hinckley or President Monson were to be your constant companion, how would you behave? Would you need to take a communication class before they began their companionship with you? Would you need to learn new ways of speaking or communicating, or would you function quite well because of what you already know and the opportunity you had to spend time with them?

My point is that unless our hearts are softened, unless we have the “love of God” in our hearts, as did the Nephites mentioned in 4 Nephi, we will not use our ability to communicate in positive ways to bless our spouse and children. In fact, I would say it this way: if all we do is stress communication skills to people without softening their hearts, we will simply make people more clever fighters!

I confess to having trouble with the term *communication skills* when we are talking about a spouse or children. This will no doubt sound heretical, but hear me out. A skill is developed by practicing over and over in order to improve our ability to do something better. We need skills to play basketball, football, to play a musical instrument, or to operate a computer. There are specific dexterity skills that we can improve by repetition. But talking about “skills” in family relations doesn’t seem to be the issue. I don’t ever recall asking a husband to practice expressing his love to his wife in this manner:

“Honey, I love you,” he says.

“No,” you tell him, “that was not the right intonation; try it again.”

“Honey, I really love you.”

“Good, that’s better; she will like that.”

I don’t think we should do that with people. Love either exists in your heart so that the expression is genuine, or it will not be said. Saying something that one does not feel or believe would be an attempt to manipulate, extort, or flatter. Practicing saying things better so that we can coerce people into doing something we want

them to do seems to me to be the wrong approach. Again, when our hearts are soft, we do not need to practice saying things in the “right” way.

We can improve hand-eye coordination, our ability to strike the keys on the piano or computer more proficiently. Perhaps lawyers can even practice oratory skills or debate logic. But they are in the business of manipulating people and decisions. I have found very few people who married individuals they thought were incapable of talking or speaking. They would have not married such an individual if that were the case. Suppose your daughter came to you and said, “this guy is so sarcastic, so hard to understand! Sometimes he will go half the day without even talking to me. But I am so glad we are getting married next month; I can hardly wait!” You would probably be very surprised to hear that! The fact is, most of us marry with the idea that this person we are going to spend our life with is good at sharing heartfelt feelings with us—or we would not make the commitment.

Now, there is another side of communication that does need our attention. When a person shares his/her feelings with a spouse and the other person ignores, indicates disdain, rolls the eyes, negates the message or is critical or sarcastic, then we have a different problem. It now becomes a matter of spouses or family members not wanting to share their ideas and thoughts with one who disregards or disrespects feelings or opinions. But, this is something different.

Looking at it from a *heart* perspective, as I see it, a great marriage is developed as people are able to repent, to apologize, to make a more effective effort to meet the needs of their spouses and children. It is a matter of sensitivity, compassion and charity, not an inability to speak or carry on a conversation. We prove that we can communicate well when we are courting.

In case I was alone in this thinking, I looked through years of conference talks to see how many times “communication skills” were used by the apostles and prophets in their remarks. I found only one reference to “communication skills” – by Elder Dallin H. Oaks. He stated, “Persons spend many hours mastering *communication skills* in other mediums, such as poetry or prose, vocal or instrumental music, and even the language of access to computers” (Oaks, 1993, p.18). In this regard, one of my married students shared the following experience:

A key point from our class that I wholeheartedly applaud is the folly of focusing on communication skills to save a marriage. My ex-wife and I went to a few different marriage counselors and every one of them tried to treat our “communication skills.” My biggest frustration with counseling was, in fact, this “communication training.” None of them ever seemed to understand that communication was the least of our problems. We were really good at talking with each other. We could maintain civility and stick to the issues even during our biggest fights. We knew what our problems were and were looking for more of a mediator to add an unbiased perspective, but every one of the counselors practically refused to address the issues we brought up and instead focused on *how* we were talking to each other. It was very frustrating.

PRINCIPLE 2—THE SAVIOR’S DISDAIN FOR CONTENTION

Here’s another principle that should help soften our hearts—the *Savior’s disdain for contention*. It is obvious that there are a lot of people who contend with each other. They holler and yell, or they may be quietly angry. Contention is offensive to retaining the Spirit of the Lord; recall the words of the Lord to the Nephites:

And there shall be no disputations among you as there have hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine as there have hitherto been. For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away. (3 Nephi 11:28-30)

Can Latter-day Saints be yelling at each other and retain the Spirit of the Lord? Recall the *Joseph Smith Translation’s* correction of Ephesians 4:26, “can ye be angry, and not sin?” And, in Proverbs (16:32) we read, “he that is slow to anger is better than the mighty.” Couples who yell at each other or their children offend the Spirit of the Lord.

I have always loved this story as told by David Whitmer about Joseph Smith and his wife Emma:

One morning when he was getting ready to continue the translation [of *The Book of Mormon*], something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it – something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went upstairs and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went downstairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord, was gone about an hour – came back to the house and asked Emma’s forgiveness, and then came upstairs where we were and then the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful. (Roberts, 1930, p. 131)

PRINCIPLE 3—COVENANTS

Covenants provide us with the power to live righteously in a fallen, wicked world. When I think of this principle, I think of an experience I had in Las Vegas (with apologies to the saints there). I have the chance to travel there occasionally to address the saints on marriage matters. On one occasion, on the way back to my hotel, I noticed a number of business establishments not available in Provo. The depravity and sensuality of mortals amazed me – and Las Vegas is the worldly public forum for voyeurism and sordid happenings. When I was alone in that desert city I wondered what my wife at home thought of my being away from her. Was she worried about me being there surrounded by such “interesting” business establishments? Then it dawned on me why she had confidence in my sensibilities—she knew that the two of us had been before our Father in Heaven years ago and made promises to him that we would not do anything that would embarrass each other or cause either one of us to lose our eternal relationship with each other or our family members. On the other hand, while I was away from her I never worried that she would fall prey to the wiles of the devil because I recalled that she, too, made similar promises to the Lord in sacred precincts.

PRINCIPLE 4—COVENANTS WITH THREE MEMBERS OF THE GODHEAD

We covenant with all three members of the Godhead when we marry in the house of the Lord. Apparently, all but two ordinances of the gospel—baptism and sealings—are performed in the name of Jesus Christ. These two ordinances include a commitment to the entire

Godhead. These two ordinances are necessary to qualify for entrance into and exaltation within the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom. We might ask the question, "What interest does the Father have in the success of our marriages?" These thoughts come to mind:

- The Father instituted his plan of salvation so that we could become as he is (Moses 1:39).
- He is married and wants us, as his children, to enjoy what he enjoys. As spirits, we were unable to marry in the pre-mortal life, so this life becomes our first opportunity to get married, as our Heavenly Father has done.
- He lends us some of his very own children to "practice" on. As a parent, he is interested in their coming to earthly homes where they can experience good role models and excellent teachers. He created the earth so that we could leave our pre-mortal home and apprentice in the great adventure of marriage and family life during our mortal lives. When children are old enough to exercise their agency and leave your home, parents lose influence over them and don't normally interfere in children's lives unless they ask for help: they must grow through personal experiences with good and evil.

What interest does Jesus Christ have in the success of your marriage? Answers may be:

- The Savior gave his life for us to be forgiven, resurrected, and to allow our marriage covenants to still be valid.
- We can have our sins forgiven when we apologize, repent, and change our behavior.
- We belong to the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus directs the labor of the kingdom of God; it is his priesthood and prophetic direction that we sustain.
- He, like the Father, hates contention between marriage partners (3 Nephi 11:28-30), and he is absent when couples are fighting and contending. Divorce should be unthinkable, except in cases of extreme disobedience.

What interest does the Holy Ghost have in our success? Answers may be:

- He has the assignment to be with us, to monitor our lives as individuals and as a married couple.

- He inspires us to do better, to eliminate personality characteristics that are negative and destructive to marriage relationships.
- He, too, hates contention and leaves us when we mistreat each other.

PRINCIPLE 5—PROCLAMATION ON THE FAMILY

Further principles to assist us in marriage are given in *The Proclamation to the World on the Family* (Hinckley, 1995b). This document contains a summary of doctrine and counsel on issues of marriage and parenting. In this proclamation, prophets, seers, and revelators of our day suggest that "successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work and wholesome recreational activities" (Hinckley, 1995b, p.101). If Latter-day Saints would contemplate how each of these nine suggestions would strengthen marriages, we would gain added power to be more effective spouses and parents.

PRINCIPLE 6—REPENTANCE

There is great therapeutic value in repentance when two (or more) people apologize to each other. It is very difficult to get people to apologize, but if they will, they will feel the Spirit of the Lord come back into their lives and associations. "Say nothing but repentance to this generation," the Lord counseled in D&C 6:9 and 11:9. Repentance is open to us whether we offend God or men. Selfishness and pride prevent both men and women from apologizing and correcting offenses and hurt feelings. It is obvious that repentance is a difficult principle for mortals to apply within the marriage covenant.

Consider the results if one or the other spouse would repent and share his/her heart in this manner:

Honey, I know that you are not happy and I know that I'm not happy. I think we have gotten away from doing the simple things that brought us together in the first place. I felt inspired to marry you and I've heard you say that you felt good about marrying me. Apparently, we have just gotten away from our initial goals. I know that I have not been the kind of husband/wife I should be and I'm going to start now to be the kind of spouse you hoped

I would be when we planned our marriage. I hope you will join me in prayer, in some scripture study, in getting back to the temple, and in renewing our intimacy again.

Generally when we apologize, our spouse is also humbled and is willing to take responsibility for his/her part in our waywardness. If both marital partners will take responsibility and repent, the Spirit of the Lord returns to their union.

PRINCIPLE 7—THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Perhaps this scenario will take place at a future time:

A wife will be asked the following question, "How did you enjoy being married to your husband?" If her response is, "whew – am I glad that's over; that was not a lot of fun for me!" Your children will be asked, "Tell me about your dad." Consider the implications if they answer, "I really did not like my father; he was so temperamental, so impatient. He was quite abusive; it was not enjoyable for me and other family members to be around him." A husband will be asked about his wife's traits, "How did you feel about being married to your wife?" If a husband answers, "I really didn't enjoy being married to her—she is such a domineering woman; she always had to be right; she was not interested in intimate contact, and she spent money very unwisely," there is not much likelihood that the marriage will continue. The children will be asked, "tell me about your mother." Again, consider if the response were to be: "my mother was seldom home; she was always gone somewhere. I came home to an empty house most of the time; and when Mom was home, she was not easy to get along with—she was certainly not my best friend. She seemed to be upset most of the time so I spent a lot of my time at my friend's place."

For marriage to continue beyond this life, a wife's response should sound something like this: "My husband was the greatest man I knew in mortal life. He was kind to me and to our children. Our children loved their father; he taught them so many things. He was terrific. He taught them how to play, to work hard, and they loved him. I loved him dearly because of the way he treated me and our children."

Children should respond like this, after being asked about their father's behavior: "My dad was my hero. I loved spending time with him. He was patient with me;

even when I made mistakes, he was kind and loving. He taught me the gospel and was an inspired father. I served an honorable mission because of him. I learned the gospel at his feet."

A husband's response to the question "tell me about your wife," would imply hope for an eternal relationship if the comments were something like this: "my wife was a saint to live with; she was the kindest, sweetest woman I ever knew. She loved me, she loved the children, she gave her life for their welfare and happiness. If I can't be married to her, I am not interested in marriage with anyone else."

And the children will no doubt be asked about their mother. If the response sounds something like this, there will be rejoicing on the part of both parents and children: "my mom was the sweetest soul I ever knew. She took us to soccer and music lessons; she cooked and she taught. I learned to pray at her knee; she was a great blessing to all of us children. She was a wonderful mother."

If such are not the kinds of reports given by your family members, perhaps you are kidding yourself about an eternal marriage and family relationship. Here is the way Elder Robert D. Hales (1996) explained the concept:

As taught in this scripture (D&C 132:19), an eternal bond doesn't just happen as a result of sealing covenants we make in the temple. How we conduct ourselves in this life will determine what we will be in all the eternities to come. To receive the blessings of the sealing that our Heavenly Father has given to us, we have to keep the commandments and conduct ourselves in such a way that our families will want to live with us in the eternities ... The Lord clearly declares, "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else" (D&C 42:22). (Hales, 1996, p. 65)

Too many people think that because they married in the temple, they will be together regardless of whether or not they liked each other in mortality. How silly! Why would someone who did not like his/her spouse in this life suddenly love them after we revert back to a spirit existence after death?

PRINCIPLE 8—THE DOCTRINE OF THE PRE-MORTAL LIFE

We lived in the pre-mortal realm for ages and eons, eagerly anticipating the opportunity to come to this

earth, marry, and become parents ourselves for the very first time in our long existence. How disappointing it would be for us, as well as for our Heavenly Father, if we don't succeed in marriage and family when we have waited so long to come to the earth and participate in this ultimate adventure of our eternal lives—marriage and family relations?

PRINCIPLE 9—THE DEGREES OF GLORY

We learn from the Lord's instructions through the prophet Joseph Smith that only those who obtain the highest degree of glory will continue to be married and capable of parenthood:

In the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees; and in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]; And if he does not, he cannot obtain it. He may enter into the other, but that is the end of his kingdom; he cannot have an increase. (D&C 131:1-4)

The prophet Joseph Smith taught this principle:

Except a man and his wife enter into an everlasting covenant and be married for eternity, while in this probation, by the power and authority of the Holy Priesthood, they will cease to increase when they die; that is, they will not have any children after the resurrection. But those who are married by the power and authority of the priesthood in this life, and continue without committing the sin against the Holy Ghost, will continue to increase and have children in the celestial glory. (Smith, 1976, pp. 300-301)

PRINCIPLE 10—THE CURSE GIVEN TO LUCIFER

The first time any of us could be married or become parents is when our spirit body, (which is the offspring of Heavenly Parents) and our flesh body (sired by mortal parents) were united together. Satan rejected the plan of the Father (D&C 29:36, Moses 4:3) in the pre-mortal life and therefore he will never obtain a body of physical element (D&C 76:25,33,37). His curse, therefore, is to never be a husband or father. Undoubtedly, his greatest efforts in our behalf are to prevent us from marrying

and becoming parents. President Joseph Fielding Smith (1955) taught:

Some will gain celestial bodies with all the powers of exaltation and eternal increase ... In both of these [lower] kingdoms there will be changes in the bodies and limitations. They will not have the power of increase, neither the power or nature to live as husbands and wives, for this will be denied them and they cannot increase ... Some of the functions in the celestial body will not appear in the terrestrial body neither in the telestial body, and the power of procreation will be removed. (Smith, 1955, pp. 287-288)

Elder Orson Pratt gave this insight:

Could wicked and malicious beings, who have eradicated every feeling of love from their bosoms, be permitted to propagate their species, the offspring would partake of all the evil, wicked, and malicious nature of their parents ... It is for this reason that God will not permit Satan and his followers to multiply; it is for this reason that God has ordained marriages for the righteous only; it is for this reason that God will put a final stop to the multiplication of the wicked after this life; it is for this reason that none but those who have kept the celestial law will be permitted to multiply after the resurrection ... for they alone are prepared to beget and bring forth [spirit] children. (Pratt, 1853, p. 157; see also *Journal of Discourses*, 13:186)

A CASE STUDY

These and other doctrines should have the effect of softening our hearts and changing our behavior to motivate us to incorporate Christlike traits in our lives, attributes that are so abundantly presented in the scriptures. To illustrate their use in a counseling situation, I submit the following from an earlier writing (Brinley, 1994):

Paul and Clara were an older couple who been married for over thirty-five years. As I visited with them on several occasions, it was clear that their marriage was a disaster, and had been for many years. Yet they had stayed together and reared a number of children. Though they attended church, their marriage, from nearly every aspect, was a disaster. As I met with them several times, they seemed to take pleasure in cataloging each other's sins in

front of me. As soon as one took a breath, the other began his or her list of offenses against the spouse. I listened patiently until I felt that I had the courage to intervene. "Excuse me," I interrupted their mutual bash session, "I'd like to share an impression ... of course, I am not the Final Judge; the Lord will do that. But if the Judgment were held today and the Lord called me in as a witness ... I would say ... I think you have offended the Spirit of the Lord so badly by the way you treat each other that surely the heavens must weep at what they see. Though you have had the gospel all your lives, you have missed the major theme. You have become critical and devastating in your comments to each other ..."

"Paul," I said looking him straight in the eye, "I don't think you understand the majesty of the priesthood you hold. You have made a mockery of its beauty, influence, and power, especially as it relates to being a husband ..."

"Clara," I turned to her, "after all these years of living with Paul, you still have no idea what makes a man tick; how you can lift and inspire him to be a better companion to you."

"The two of you," I shifted back to both of them, "have used your marital years to destroy rather than strengthen each other ... as I see it, you have another twenty, maybe thirty, more years left to live with each other. Then one of you will die and that will be the end of your experience with marriage. Never again, through all eternity, will either of you live in a marriage relationship. I think [I paused, hoping this would sink in] you will look back at these years of being nasty with each other with sadness for what could have been different. I think you two will wish that you had made some different choices along the way. Of course, you have your agency; you may do as you please. God has given us that power [but] up until now you seem to want to use it to devastate each other."

"On the other hand," I said, in an effort to bring something positive out of the whole mess, "wouldn't it be great on Judgment Day to have the Lord say, 'You two had a rough thirty-five years, didn't you! And then you made some wonderful changes. You came to realize what mortal life, agency and my atonement were all about, and the past thirty years have been a complete reversal from those earlier ones. Thank you for making the necessary changes! Thank you for doing what needed to be done in order to qualify for the highest degree of the celestial kingdom. Thank you for making my atonement worth my effort. I want to welcome you into a society of people who love their companions as you two now do, a society of couples who have conducted

their lives so that they are eligible to be together forever."

I waited, holding my breath, thinking that they might run out the door offended. Instead, they both bowed their heads and began to weep. To my surprise, Paul took Clara's hand and apologized—right there in front of me. She reached out to him and accepted his embrace. Both admitted that the Lord must be disappointed with them, that they had treated each other terribly, and that they had a long way to go—but that they could do better; indeed, they promised each other that they would do better. Their apologies were acknowledged and forgiveness extended. They committed to each other that they would make the necessary changes. They seemed determined to turn things around.

When I see them now, they are grateful. But all I did was to remind them of the Plan of Salvation and its grand purposes. It was up to them to make the gospel work for them in their marriage. (Brimley, 1994, pp. 1-3)

Now, you could not have that kind of success with very many people because selfishness and pride would prevent them taking responsibility to repent and apologize. But that is what the gospel teaches—and what it requires if we are going to be eternal sweethearts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, after talking about a soft heart, I want you to think about what it is like when your heart is soft: do you feel like being charitable and compassionate, or are you frustrated and angry? I predict that the words of this song, "The Last Touch," by Carol Lynn Pearson and Lex De Azevedo (1987), will soften your heart, if only temporarily:

Their first touch at seventeen was in the park, and the moon was full.

She was beautiful to him.

And her hair was long and her eyes were blue and her skin was warm

and she turned to him.

And he thought that he knew what love was.

Another touch at twenty two, on their wedding night, and the stars were bright.

She was beautiful to him.

And her hair smelled sweet and her lips were full and her skin was warm and she turned to him.

And he thought that he knew what love was.
 And then again at twenty-five, when the baby came and
 the sun was high.
 She was beautiful to him.
 And her hair was damp and her fingers (trembled) and
 her skin was warm and she (and the baby) turned to him.
 And he thought that he knew what love was

Later on at fifty four, sitting on the porch
 all the children gone. She was beautiful to him.
 And her hair was gray and her fore-head lined and her
 skin was warm
 and she turned to him.
 And he thought that he knew what love was.

Their last touch at eighty five—was by her bed
 and the moon was full. She was beautiful to him.
 And her hair was thin and her eyes were closed and her
 skin was cold
 and she turned to him –

And he knew that he knew—what love was.

After sixty-eight years of laughter and tears
 He *knew* that he *knew* what love was.

In this, the greatest adventure of mortal life, we can indeed come to know what love is all about: we make marriage vows with a virtual stranger, and then we spend the rest of our lives trying to convince each other that we made a good decision. Then, a few kids are thrown in—seemingly just to test our souls. Indeed, children will make of us gods or devils, depending on how we react to them. When, finally, the kids grow up and leave, then we help each other across the bar—with a few massages along the way to smooth the physical pain—until we enter the great eternity awaiting us. Being faithful in our marriages and families for the few years we are here will lead to an eternity of appreciation and enjoyment for each other, and the blessings God designed for us in planning this Plan of Salvation. That this might be our success, in our ability to bless others, is my prayer.

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