



4-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Fackrell, Tamara A. and Hawkins, Alan J. (2011) "Should I Keep Trying to Work It Out? Sacred and Secular Perspectives on the Crossroads of Divorce," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 50 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol50/iss2/7>

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Should I Keep Trying To Work It Out?

Sacred and Secular Perspectives on the Crossroads of Divorce

Alan J. Hawkins and Tamara A. Fackrell

Editor's note: This article will appear as a chapter in a book titled Successful Marriages and Families, edited by Alan Hawkins, David Dollahite, and Thomas Draper, forthcoming from BYU Studies in 2012.

This book aims to strengthen readers' faith of and testimony in the principles of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ especially as they relate to family life. The topics covered in the various chapters will help readers understand and implement principles from "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" and enable readers to share and defend these principles more effectively.

The Family: A Proclamation to the World" states, "Marriage between man and woman is essential to [God's] eternal plan."¹ Virtually all Latter-day Saints desire a healthy, stable marriage, but when a person's marriage does not fit that description, he or she may consider divorce. Researchers have estimated that 40 to 50 percent of first marriages—and about 60 percent of remarriages—are ending in divorce in the United States.² And although the United States unfortunately has one of the world's highest divorce rates, divorce is common in many other countries as well.³

Faithful Latter-day Saints are hardly immune to divorce. Precise estimates of the LDS divorce rate are difficult to obtain. One estimate is that 25 to 30 percent of LDS couples who regularly attend Church experience a divorce.⁴ Other researchers estimate that the lifetime divorce rate for returned missionary men was about 12 percent and for women about

16 percent.⁵ While it is heartening to know that the divorce rate for faithful Latter-day Saints is much lower than the national average, still many Latter-day Saints face difficult decisions regarding serious problems in their marriages at one time or another. Some will find themselves at a crossroads, pondering whether their marriages can be repaired or would best be ended. Our purpose is to provide spiritual principles and secular wisdom pertaining to the decision to divorce or stay together.

After seeing a lot of divorce around them and perhaps even experiencing their parents' divorce, young people today probably already sense what researchers are finding about the impact of divorce on children. While many children are resilient,⁶ still the process of family dissolution is associated with about twice the risk for various social and emotional problems in children of divorce.⁷ Feelings of loneliness are more common for children who experience family breakdown.⁸ They are much more likely to experience financial hardship,⁹ not only in the United States but also in European countries that have more generous social welfare systems than the United States.¹⁰ Children who experience their parents' divorce are less likely to graduate from high school, go to college, or graduate from college once they start.¹¹ They are twice as likely to doubt their parents' religious beliefs and less likely to attend church services.¹² They are at greater risk for early sexual behavior and pregnancy.¹³ And they are much more likely to experience a divorce when they marry.¹⁴ One prominent divorce researcher described children's experience with their parents' divorce this way: "For a young child, psychologically, divorce is the equivalent of lifting a hundred-pound weight over the head. Processing all the radical and unprecedented changes—loss of a parent, loss of a home, of friends—stretches immature cognitive and emotional abilities to the absolute limit and sometimes beyond that limit."¹⁵

Spiritual Counsel on Divorce

Marriage is ordained of God and central to our spiritual and temporal well-being. Accordingly, ancient and modern prophets have provided important counsel on marriage and divorce. Though our actions often fall short, celestial law treats the bonds of marriage as permanent. The Lord taught: "But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife. . . . What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:6–9). That God intended from the beginning for us to cleave to our spouse and not separate is evident in Adam's response to God's inquiry of whether he had partaken of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil: "The woman thou gavest me, and commandest that she should remain with me,

she gave me of the fruit of the tree and I did eat” (Moses 4:18). In the celestial law of marriage, God has commanded us to remain together and keep our marriages strong, even when that means we must partake of some of the bitter fruits of life together.

In our day, latter-day prophets and apostles have provided valuable clarifications and counsel regarding divorce. First, President Gordon B. Hinckley said: “There is now and again a legitimate cause for divorce. I am not one to say that it is never justified. But I say without hesitation that this plague among us . . . is not of God.”¹⁶ Referring directly to the doctrine of marriage, Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained: “Because ‘of the hardness of [our] hearts’ (Matt. 19:8–9), the Lord does not currently enforce the consequences of the celestial standard [of marriage]. He permits divorced persons to marry again.”¹⁷ Like the ancient Israelites whom Moses suffered to divorce (see Deut. 24:1), Latter-day Saints too struggle to live the higher law. Thus, a loving God gives us a law more aligned with mortal capabilities and circumstances.

In addition, Elder Oaks taught that “when a marriage is dead and beyond hope of resuscitation, it is needful to have a means to end it.”¹⁸ For LDS couples, it would be wise to make this determination in consultation with a bishop. Elder Oaks also explained that when one spouse abandons the other, the option of divorce allows an innocent spouse to remarry. He adds that this is not an available option in some places, for example the Philippines, and those situations prevent abandoned spouses from moving forward with their lives. In other cases, there is complete psychological abandonment, as well.

Although the Lord permits divorce and remarriage, the standard for divorce is still high. President James E. Faust addressed this issue directly:

In my opinion, any promise between a man and a woman incident to a marriage ceremony rises to the dignity of a covenant. . . .

Over a lifetime of dealing with human problems, I have struggled to understand what might be considered “just cause” for breaking of covenants. I confess I do not claim the wisdom nor authority to definitely state what is “just cause.” Only the parties to the marriage can determine this. They must bear the responsibility for the train of consequences which inevitably follow if these covenants are not honored. In my opinion, “just cause” should be nothing less serious than *a prolonged and apparently irredeemable relationship which is destructive of a person’s dignity as a human being.*

At the same time, I have strong feelings about what is not provocation for breaking the sacred covenants of marriage. Surely it is not simply “mental distress” nor “personality differences,” nor “having grown apart,” nor “having fallen out of love.” This is especially so where there are children.¹⁹

President Faust's humble statement is striking in that he does not claim to possess "the wisdom [or] authority to definitively state what is 'just cause.'" His statement underlies an important principle—circumstances surrounding each marital breakdown are unique and perhaps cannot be fully understood by others. Thus, only the individuals involved—and an omniscient and all-loving God—can determine just cause.

President Faust provides some counsel, however, on the decision to divorce. He gives a three-part "test" for those seeking to determine if ending a marriage is justified: "just cause" should be nothing less serious than "a prolonged and apparently irredeemable relationship which is destructive of a person's dignity as a human being." In the sections that follow, we explore President Faust's counsel. Then, from a secular perspective, we show how social science research supports this counsel. Finally, we address the question of how we are to act when the possibility of divorce presents itself.

Prolonged difficulties. The first part of President Faust's test is that only prolonged marital difficulties should be considered just cause for divorce. By this we believe President Faust counsels that spouses should not seek a divorce without a lengthy period of time to attempt to repair or reduce serious problems. The standard does not require that couples spend the time living together, and in cases where a spouse's or child's personal safety is at stake, a separation likely is necessary while determining whether repentance, forgiveness, and change are possible. For obvious reasons, President Faust does not specify how long is long enough to meet the "prolonged" standard, and indeed behavior that places family members at risk may require immediate separation from the perpetrating spouse. But the principle President Faust sustains is that a determination of just cause for divorce requires a substantial period of problems, time for potential change to occur, and an unrushed, careful decision. Elder Oaks counseled: "Even those who think their spouse is entirely to blame should not act hastily,"²⁰ noting that most unhappy marriages become happy again if couples hang on and work to resolve their problems.

As professionals, we strive to promote this counsel not to be hasty about a divorce decision. We encourage people at the crossroads of divorce to do everything possible to correct the problems: get rid of the computer (if internet pornography is an issue), go to counseling, move (if needed)—whatever it takes. At the end of this process, a person can look her or his children—and God—in the eyes and honestly say, "I tried everything possible." The process of trying everything to keep the marriage covenant is as important as the outcome of staying married. One case involved a man who had been having an affair for several months. His wife had small promptings that led to the discovery of the sinful secret. Upon discovery, instead

of being brash and advertising the offense to many others, she was wise and kept the issue from her children and others except for the closest friends and family. She began slowly and decided she would try everything possible to save her marriage. The road was extremely difficult, but through the repentance process, the support of ecclesiastical leaders, and the gift of forgiveness, the couple was able to repair their marriage. Several years later, the couple is thriving, and both are extremely grateful they made the decision not to act hastily.

Apparently irredeemable relationship. The second part of the test is directly related to the first. The marital relationship must reach the point where it is apparently irredeemable. By this we believe President Faust means that there appears to be little hope for repairing the marital relationship. This determination requires that sincere and sustained efforts have been made to understand and fix the problems. If one spouse is unwilling or unable to make such an effort, this does not excuse the other spouse from determining his or her part in any problems and making needed change. Elder Oaks reassures us that the Lord will “consecrate [our] afflictions for [our] gain” (2 Ne. 2:1–2) in difficult circumstances such as these, and promises, “I am sure the Lord loves and blesses husbands and wives who lovingly try to help spouses struggling with such deep problems as pornography or other addictive behavior or with the long-term consequences of childhood abuse.”²¹ Elder Bruce C. Hafen reminds us that we have a shepherd’s covenant in our marriages, not a hireling’s contract: “The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep; but he that is an hireling . . . seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep and fleeth” (John 10:11–12). Even in the face of serious problems, Elder Hafen urges us to do all that we can to protect the marriage.²²

In one case, a marriage survived one spouse’s addiction. After surgery, a spouse became addicted to prescription drugs and later other drugs, which adversely affected the marriage. Further, the addicted spouse incurred large debts to purchase the drugs. The husband lost his employment because of the drug problem. The wife needed to learn to set limits within the marriage and attended the LDS twelve-step program.²³ She felt tremendous support through this program. After a time of separation and rehabilitation for the addicted spouse, the family was reunited. Many years later, both spouses are grateful that they made the decision to work together on the issue.

Destruction of human dignity. The third part of the test is that the relationship has deteriorated to the point that it threatens to destroy the dignity of one or both spouses. By this we believe President Faust means that the marital problems have become serious enough over a period of time that an individual begins to lose his or her sense of worth. Although this may

be a difficult standard to discern, certainly abuse or repeated infidelity can threaten a victim's sense of worth. President Faust's counsel suggests that feeling unhappy or unfulfilled in the marriage does not meet this standard. Nor do feelings of emotional or psychological distance or growing apart. Irritations or conflicts brought on by personality differences and other personal preferences rarely rise to the level of threatening our sense of worth. Indeed, these kinds of problems motivate us to pursue changes and improvements that affirm our agency, good desires, and skills that, in turn, reinforce our personal dignity. If this appears to be the hardest course, we can take strength in knowing that we are on the right path. Elder Bruce C. Hafen, again referring to the parable of the shepherd, the sheep, and the wolf, taught that "life is hard and full of problems—wolves. Dealing with the wolves is central to life's purpose. For a husband and wife to deal with the wolves together is central to the purpose of marriage."²⁴

In a case of a couple confronting the serious challenge of adultery, the husband also was insulting to his wife and belittled her often in front of friends and family. Not surprisingly, the wife's sense of worth eventually hit rock bottom. Nevertheless, the couple was able to work through this difficult time through tears and counseling. Many years later, however, the husband again had multiple affairs. At this point, the wife knew that the marriage needed to end. Later the wife remarried a good man. She was confident she made the right choice to divorce. Another couple began the divorce process because of a pornography addiction, but with the aid of professional counseling, the couple overcame the problem and eventually reconciled.

The three-part test that President Faust offers to determine just cause for ending marital covenants is a high standard by contemporary secular ethics. Such a high standard is best understood in light of God's eternal plan for his children. In "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," the Lord's anointed proclaim that marriage is "ordained of God"; it is "essential to His eternal plan" and "central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children."²⁵ In this context we can fully understand the spiritual significance of marriage and God's commandment not to "put asunder" (Mark 10:9) the marital bonds that God ordains for his purposes.

Secular Perspectives on the Crossroads of Divorce

A strong case for a high standard in determining just cause for divorce also can be made with secular research. In the next section, we review the secular case for a high bar on the decision to divorce. We believe reviewing this research provides more insight into the wisdom of President Faust's counsel.

Allowing time for deciding about divorce. The first test President Faust gave was that serious marital problems should exist for a prolonged period of time before one can determine if there is just cause for ending a marriage. (Although if there are safety issues, then a separation is likely necessary while assessing whether change can occur.) There is not much research on how long people experience problems before seeking a divorce. However, research documents that the first five years of a marriage are the years with the highest risk of divorce, and these risks are even higher for remarriages.²⁶ Apparently, then, many who divorce are married for a relatively short period of time. In our own professional work, we have learned that unfortunately many people divorce after a short period of problems and make their decision quickly, based almost solely on emotion.

Some research suggests that many who divorce have regrets about the divorce later. Divorce scholar Robert Emery reports that ambivalent or mixed feelings about a divorce are common.²⁷ A handful of surveys from various states in the United States estimate that perhaps half of individuals wished they had worked harder to overcome their differences.²⁸ A study that followed divorced individuals over a long period of time found that in 75 percent of divorced couples, at least one partner was having regrets about the decision to divorce one year after the breakup.²⁹ If feelings of regret are common, this suggests that the decision to divorce may not have been fully considered. One divorced woman remarked: “Now that I’m older and more mature, I look back and I think, ‘Oh my goodness, the issues were really not as big as we made them out to be.’ And truly, I wish I would have done things differently to maybe work on that relationship further.”

Trying to resolve problems before deciding to divorce. The second part of President Faust’s test of just cause is that the marriage is “apparently irredeemable,” or that there is little hope of repairing the relationship. Related to this point, researchers estimate that only about 30 percent of U.S. couples who divorce make an attempt to reconcile before the divorce.³⁰ Other research suggests that most couples do not seek counseling before they divorce. A survey of Utah adults found that only about half of couples who divorced first sought either secular or religious counseling.³¹ This is unfortunate because researchers have estimated about 80 percent of couples may see improvement in their relationship after visiting a marriage counselor³² and, over the short term, almost half say all of their major problems were resolved.³³ One LDS couple said, “One of the things we’ve worked on since [we decided to try to save our marriage], we’ve actually gone to counseling a lot. . . . It’s been really helpful. . . . I think [counseling] opened up a backbone of stability for us.” A final determination of whether problems are

“irredeemable” rests with each spouse. However, we should seek help from various sources, including religious leaders and professional counselors who provide needed perspective and help distressed couples develop the skills to resolve their problems.

Many people seem to believe that once a marriage has gone “bad,” it is like bruised fruit that cannot be restored, but instead needs to be thrown out and new fruit bought. But research shows that a high percentage of people who say they are unhappy in their marriage but persevere for several years later report that their marriages are happy again.³⁴ More than 75 percent of individuals in Waite and Gallagher’s study who gave the lowest rating on a marital satisfaction scale but persisted reported a few years later that they were happy or very happy. This study suggests that long-lasting marital unhappiness is uncommon; unhappy marriages often improve significantly over time for those who are patient and keep trying to work things out. Thus, we think there should be a presumption that current unhappiness in a marriage will diminish, problems will be resolved, and happiness will return. Patience and perseverance can make a real difference.

Perhaps this intriguing research finding can be better understood in the context of the common reasons people give for divorce. A national study documented that the most common reason people gave for their divorce was a lack of commitment; nearly 75 percent said it was a major factor.³⁵ Other common reasons were too much arguing (56 percent), infidelity (55 percent), unrealistic expectations (45 percent), lack of equality in the relationship (44 percent), and lack of effective preparation for marriage (41 percent). A survey in Utah found a similar pattern of common reasons.³⁶

Most of these reasons seem amenable to patience and effort. People can learn better communication and problem-solving skills; they can establish more realistic expectations; they can learn to treat each with greater respect and act as equal partners. Also, many good resources are available for engaged couples who want to work before their marriage to prepare better for the challenges that lie ahead.³⁷ There are ways to strengthen commitment to each other and to the marriage before and after the wedding.³⁸ While infidelity is one of the most difficult marital injuries to heal, therapists devoted to helping couples recover from infidelity report significant success.³⁹ Even though most Americans (63 percent) say they would not forgive their spouse and would get a divorce if they discovered he or she had been unfaithful,⁴⁰ in actuality, researchers have found that about half of men and women who have been unfaithful are still married to their same spouse.⁴¹

Another interesting finding that sheds light on whether marriages can be repaired is that most divorces come from marriages that were not

experiencing abuse or high levels of conflict. One set of researchers estimated that from half to two-thirds of divorces come from couples who were not having a lot of serious arguments or experiencing abuse.⁴² Instead, these divorces seem to result from other problems, such as one or both spouses having unrealistically high expectations about the marriage. Also noteworthy is the finding that the children of these divorces are generally the ones who have the hardest time adjusting to divorce.⁴³ In high-conflict marriages, the children likely are aware of the problems and divorce may be an expected and even welcome resolution. But in low-conflict marriages that end in divorce, the children likely are surprised and bewildered; a key foundation of their world has been cracked and they struggle to deal with these unwanted and, from their perspective, unwarranted changes in their family.

An LDS couple was married for decades before divorcing because of solvable irritations. The wife was mad at her husband because she felt he was not a good provider; she had grudgingly worked most of their married lives. They experienced serious friction regarding the cleanliness of the home and the undefined roles of each spouse. The children, although all adults, were furious about the divorce. Some of the children have refused to talk to their mother, who initiated the action.

In our professional work, we see that family and friends often encourage a struggling couple to bail out. They see the pain these struggles are causing and instinctively want to end the pain. But instincts are often shortsighted. Again, we acknowledge that there are situations in which divorce is justified, and family and friends should support the difficult choice to end such marriages. But as a general principle, we believe that family and friends should encourage their loved ones to work hard to repair their marriage.

Divorce, dignity, and well-being. The third, interrelated part of President Faust's test of just cause for divorce is that the marital relationship has become destructive to a person's basic human dignity. Certainly there is ample evidence that the process of marital breakdown, the aftermath of divorce, and struggles to rebuild a life and meet daily challenges can leave people feeling exhausted, lost, beaten down, lacking confidence, and depressed.⁴⁴ Of course, for some adults, divorce, despite its difficulties, can be the beginning of a new, energizing, and exciting path.⁴⁵ But for most, marital breakdown and divorce carry with them difficult adjustments that challenge our personal resources to adapt.⁴⁶ In this body of research findings, it is difficult to separate the effects of marital breakdown from the effects of adjustment to divorce. Most likely both contribute to adjustment difficulties. That is, problems in the marriage make people unhappy and contribute to lower self-esteem, for instance, but problems adjusting to divorce exacerbate

these problems and likely spawn additional ones. Moreover, research finds little evidence that, overall, those who divorce rather than stay together are able to rebuild a greater sense of well-being and happiness.⁴⁷ Specifically, those who were unhappy in their marriage and divorced did not end up having greater emotional well-being a few years down the road compared to unhappily married individuals who stayed together. This was true even for those who remarried (or repartnered) after the divorce. Evidently, for most, divorce is not a reliable path to improving one's well-being over time.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this is only a general statement. Certainly there are far too many instances when one's basic human dignity or safety—as well as children's well-being—is put in jeopardy by a destructive marital relationship. Spousal abuse carries with it a high risk of destructive consequences, including poor mental and physical health.⁴⁸ Similarly, the discovery of infidelity, especially a pattern of repeated infidelity, can produce feelings of traumatic stress, anger, depression, anxiety, disorientation, and psychological paralysis.⁴⁹ Furthermore, when children are witnesses to ongoing high levels of marital conflict, research suggests that most are better off if their parents divorce.⁵⁰

One challenge associated with this third principle is that sometimes individuals struggling in a destructive marriage get so worn down that they lose a sense of self-efficacy and an ability to trust their own judgment. Hence, they may be unable to make a difficult but correct decision to divorce. In these instances, caring family and friends may need to help. As we said earlier, generally we believe family and friends should encourage loved ones at the crossroads of divorce to act with faith and do all they can to repair the marriage. But there may be times when a family member or close friend will need to prayerfully and carefully intervene to help a loved one see that the marriage has become destructive or unsafe and strengthen them to make a difficult decision to divorce.

One situation that can cause great marital pain occurs when one spouse rejects or questions his or her faith while the other remains devout. We do not believe that by itself a spouse's spiritual wandering is just cause for divorce. With the right perspective, this situation does not constitute a threat to human dignity. Instead, the other spouse should offer compassion, love, and patience as a light to attract him or her back onto the path of full righteousness. One LDS husband left the Church early in the marriage. The wife remained devoted to the Church and her husband, even during his struggle with addiction. She raised her children in the Church and all of her children were married in the temple. After more than twenty-five years of inactivity, the husband again embraced his faith.

The Best Course

The Lord's standard for just cause for a divorce is a high one, even if God mercifully allows us to live by something less than the celestial law. In no way do we want to imply that adhering to this standard is easy. Without question, it takes courage and discipline to stay in an unhappy marriage for a prolonged period of time to attempt change and improvement. It takes wisdom (and perhaps seeking some wise counsel) to evaluate whether a highly troubled marriage can be redeemed, plus skill and effort and humility to repair the relationship. And it takes spiritual insight to discern if an unhappy marriage is becoming destructive of one's basic human dignity. But because marriage is "central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children," the bar should be set high, encouraging couples to work to preserve the marriage. Moreover, from a secular perspective, research suggests that a wise course includes patient efforts to repair the relationship, if possible, and that there is wisdom in carefully considering the potential consequences of divorce for all in the family.

Then what is the best course if we come to the crossroads of divorce? Echoing similar, earlier teachings from President Gordon B. Hinckley, Elder Dallin H. Oaks provided challenging but needed counsel:

Now I speak to married members, especially to any who may be considering divorce.

I strongly urge you and those who advise you to face up to the reality that for most marriage problems, the remedy is not divorce but repentance. Often the cause is not incompatibility but selfishness. The first step is not separation but reformation. . . . Under the law of the Lord, a marriage, like a human life, is a precious, living thing. If our bodies are sick, we seek to heal them. We do not give up. While there is any prospect of life, we seek healing again and again. The same should be true of our marriages, and if we seek Him, the Lord will help us and heal us.

Latter-day Saint spouses should do all within their power to preserve their marriages.⁵¹

Some divorces are necessary and just, and may actually serve to clarify the moral boundaries of marriage by identifying behavior that seriously violates marriage covenants. But both spiritual principles and secular learning should motivate us to do all we can to keep our marital covenants. If we find ourselves at the crossroads of divorce, the best path usually is to seek divine help to change course and repair the marriage. Prayer can be invaluable in this process. There is social science evidence that personal and couple prayer and the faith that motivates it can soften hearts and help strengthen marital relationships.⁵² Seeking spiritual guidance from

priesthood leaders can also be helpful, even though it is difficult for some because they do not want to reveal their personal struggles to others. Similarly, it can be helpful to seek out trusted family members or friends who have overcome struggles in their marriages and gain strength, perspective, and support from them. In addition, it is important for those at the crossroads of divorce to surround themselves with a network of friends and family who will support their efforts to repair and strengthen their marriage rather than urge them to abandon the marriage. It is more effective to work on repairing the relationship together, but if only one spouse is willing to do so, there is still hope that the actions of one can create positive change in the relationship and spur the other spouse to action.⁵³ We also recommend several excellent books—some with a secular focus and some with a spiritual focus—for those at the crossroads of divorce to give them perspective and guidance: *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*⁵⁴ (secular focus), *The Divorce Remedy*⁵⁵ (secular focus), and *Covenant Hearts*⁵⁶ (sacred focus).

Whatever sincere actions are taken, we know that a loving God will support those efforts to help couples preserve a union that is essential to his plan for the eternal welfare of his children. And if those efforts ultimately prove unfruitful, then they can know that they have done all they could to honor a relationship ordained of God.

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