A Physician Looks at Treatment Strategies For Troubled LDS Marriages

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I feel a little bit at a loss speaking today because I am not a marriage counselor—at least not by choice. As a family physician, I intended when I left medical school to be a great healer and a great humanitarian, or as I frequently say to my wife, save lives and stamp out disease. It turned out that most of the disease I am not capable of stamping out, most of the lives I’m not capable of saving, and most of the problems that people present me with are emotional and
psychological problems, not physical problems at all. For this reason I have found myself in a position of being a reluctant and somewhat rebellious counselor and psychotherapist.

This is especially true in the field of marriage counseling. My training as a marriage counselor has been from the University of Hard Knocks and being married to a psychologist—and that’s the toughest part of all! But I have to admit that the average family physician is not a good qualified marriage counselor. Training in counseling and guidance for us was minimal. True, we spent four years in certain lectures in the Department of Psychiatry and various psychiatric rounds and so on, and we had lectures from counselors and psychologists and so on, but you really didn’t learn anything about interviewing and how to talk to people about their problems of a psychological nature.

Perhaps as a family physician, I see these marriages that are in trouble before a lot of other people; before even the people themselves realize that the marriage is in trouble. The most common situation is that the wife comes in (99 times out of 100, it’s the wife) with a physical complaint of some kind. You know, she’s having pelvic pains, she’s having irregular menstrual problems, usually in association with some kind of gynecological complaint. Women may also come in with symptoms of depression, with headaches, tiredness, fatigue, lethargy, they can’t sleep or they sleep all the time. We check them over and find nothing. Then we run all these tests and find nothing. Then after several visits (if they continue to come back and don’t get discouraged and leave), we finally get down to what are the real problems and discover that she and her husband are involved in a relationship that’s in trouble. They really haven’t been aware of it, or if they have been aware of it, they haven’t volunteered this information.

The topic today is treatment strategies for LDS families that are in trouble. Well, obviously, in my case, from the point of view of a family practitioner the first thing that we have to decide is that the marriage is in trouble. So let’s assume that we’ve established that for one reason or another. The next thing you really need to find out is why is this marriage in trouble. What has caused it to go astray? What’s the matter? I’ve written down a few things that I have seen as reasons that LDS marriages go astray, and a lot of times there are other reasons.

One of the first reasons that I believe that an LDS marriage becomes a troubled marriage is that one or both of the spouses are not converted to their religion. I think this is a big thing. I’ve seen it in many cases. In an area where we live where there are many, many mixed marriages. I mean mixed by LDS people marrying outside their own religion, or two LDS people one or both of whom have never been converted to their own religion. And you and I know that there are a lot of people that fall in this category. Right along this same line is the almost certainly doomed marriage of that couple, one of whom joins the Church either to win the other over or to satisfy the in-law’s because, “you can’t marry that kid until he joins the Church” type thing. My experience with that has been almost universally poor. I don’t see that kind of marriage having a chance.

Alcohol! Yes, there are many Mormons who drink alcohol. There are many Mormon alcoholics, and alcohol (I don’t care whether it’s an LDS home or not) is a very destructive force to marriage and very frequently dooms it to being a failure unless something is done about it.

Failure to communicate. How many people say one thing and mean something else? Of course, this is a big thing now. You can go to any bookstore and find 400 books right now on this very subject. How frequently we say one thing and mean something else. This happens in a lot of marriages, too.

Neuroses! Oh, boy! I’m not going to talk about the neuroses, but I’ve seen some good LDS marriages that I consider to be the rockiest marriages in the world because one or the other of the partners were neurotic about one thing or another.

Psychoses! I’m not going into detail on that but obviously the marriage is in serious trouble if one or more of the partners is psychotic.

Perversions of all kinds! Sadism! A lot of people are more sadistic than they would like to admit.

Homosexuality and various other sexual perversions. This produces a real problem.

Drug abuse! I could name you 100 good LDS women that are the worst drug addicts you’ve ever seen. Valium is the number one abused drug in the United States and there are just as many Mormon women hooked on valium as there are any other religion, and it’s a very sad but true situation. Marriages can’t survive, I don’t think, with these people addicted to medications like this.

Adultery! Obviously a serious problem. Maybe it stems from one of the other problems that I’ve mentioned above.

Family interference! How many people, how many couples are broken up by their in-law’s or, I might add, by their children? Not maybe their own children but their step-children. How many elderly marriages have had to break up because so-and-so’s children are afraid that her children are going to get the inheritance?

And then, perhaps, the inability to really forgive and forget the minor things that transpire in a marriage.

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Seen through the eyes of the average family practitioner, what does he do about these kinds of problems? Does he handle them himself? Does he punt? I'd rather punt on some of them myself, but many of these people won't go see another counselor so I'm forced against my will. Sometimes I'm forced to learn to cope with some of these problems to learn how to help these people come to a realization that they have a problem, and then what the problem is, and hopefully be able to get on top of it before it gets too severe and winds up in the divorce court or worse.

Some of the things that come to mind as suggestions for these people obviously are specific. If there's an alcohol problem, try and get to the root for the reason for it. Try and help the alcoholic partner. Try and help the alcoholic partner to realize that there is a problem and what may be the basis for it. See if something can be done about that specific problem, and then help the spouse to cope with the situation. It requires a lot of counseling. Very frequently, very frequently, much, much more time than the average family practitioner can provide. Now television and Marcus Welby would lead us all to believe that the average general practitioner spends approximately two, three, four days with each patient. You know, drives out to the farm and sees them and chauffeurs them around and takes them to lunch and meets them at the lobby of the hospital and, you know, all this stuff. Well, that's not really true. The average family practitioner doesn't have that much time, and he doesn't really have enough time, in my opinion, to do an adequate job of counseling. I think if most of us who are forced into this position from time to time were really honest, and some of us try to be, that we have to admit that we do not do first-rate jobs of counseling. It's only a stop-gap measure until these people can get better help, hopefully from people like you who are trained in counseling as a primary function.

We can encourage these people to seek the root of the problem and to learn to communicate with each other, and to do things together. Boy, there's just a pile of families including good LDS families where the husband and wife don't do anything together. You know, the Church institutes a program called "Family Home Evening" and everybody says what a wonderful program it is, and about 20% of the families in the Church actually do it. How about a program called "Couple Evening"? The husband could take a little time and spend it communicating with his wife—not with a whole herd of kids, not with the family, but just with his wife. I think this would be great therapy. There are a lot of physical things they can do together: they can ski, they can bowl, they can square dance, they can back pack, they can bicycle, they can even jog (if you can stand the boring nature of jogging).

Brothers and sisters, if you will notice that my first thing on the list was that people are not living their religion. I believe that's the most important thing of all because the religion that these people claim to believe in espouses the ideas of togetherness, of communication, of openness, of honesty, of chastity, of faithfulness, and everything. All these things that tend to break up a marriage would not exist if these people were living their religion the way that they know they should.

I would like to convey my testimony to you that Jesus is the Christ and that the Church He has caused to be re-established on the earth at this time has the answers that are necessary, and I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.