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The Influence of Faith on *Marital Commitment*

RELIGION significantly influences many American marriages. Ninety-five percent of married couples in the United States report a religious affiliation (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). Not only is a religious affiliation almost universal, but around 60% of Americans report that religion is important or very important to them (McCullough, Larson, Hoyt, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000). Over half of American married couples say they attend religious services at least monthly (Heaton & Pratt, 1990, p. 196). Even with a tendency to exaggerate religious participation, these statistics indicate that religious involvement is an important part of American marriage and family life (Christiano, 2000), so it seems logical that religious beliefs affect marital relationships. However, it is not universally accepted that religious people actually connect their religious beliefs to their marital relationships. One recent academic review suggested that connection between religious beliefs and practices “appear more heterogeneous [varied] and tenuous than family scholars have expected, with conservative religious beliefs not necessarily translating into conservative familial behavior” (Bulanda, 2011). However, some highly religious people do strongly connect their religious faith to their family life. This chapter



Divorce rates drop dramatically among active Latter-day Saints who were married in the temple. John Luke, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

will examine the research connecting religious beliefs to marital commitment and will examine specific doctrines held sacred by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that seem to influence their marital commitment.

Current State of Marriage

By most accounts, the institution of marriage is in serious decline. The most recent trends regarding the state of marriage are ominous. The latest update by the National Marriage Project includes the following information: From 1970 to 2007, the number of marriages for women 15 and older has dropped by almost half, the number of divorces in the same group has increased by 15%, and the number of cohabitating couples has increased twelve-fold. The percentage of children under the age of 18 living with a single parent has increased by over 100%, whereas the percentage of children living with two married parents has decreased by 20% and the percentage of births to unmarried women has increased by about two and a half times (University of Virginia, 2008).

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are not immune to these troubles. Most members of the Church have firsthand knowledge of broken homes and broken hearts among those they love. Research shows that the overall divorce rate among Latter-day Saints is actually very close to the divorce rate in the general population. However, among active Latter-day Saints, especially those married in the temple, the divorce rate drops dramatically (Heaton, Bahr, & Jacobson, 2005). According to three national data sets, Mormons have a divorce rate 25% lower than the national averages. This is true if there is no differentiation between active and less-active members of the Church. Mormon couples in which at least one spouse attends church weekly have divorce rates which are 36% lower than the national averages. If both spouses attend church weekly they estimate the divorce rate is 40% lower than the national average, and finally, the estimated divorce rate for those who were married in the temple would be 70% lower than the national average at the highest. This is only an estimate

based on several past studies, as the national data sets that were used for the current analysis did not contain information on temple marriage (Heaton, Bahr, & Jacobson, 2005).

Marital Commitment

For years scholars have tried to figure out what leads some couples to stay together and others to separate. One of the primary constructs used to predict whether a person will stay in their marriage is marital commitment. Studies have found that lifetime commitment to marriage is one of the most frequently mentioned attributes considered important by participants in successful, long-term marriages (Robinson, 1994, pp. 210–211). A national survey found that 73% of respondents indicated that divorce occurred because of lack of commitment (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005, p. 32).

Though there are numerous definitions and scales used to measure a person's or couple's commitment to a relationship, most commitment constructs fall under what Stanley and Markman (1992) call *personal dedication* or *constraint commitment*. According to these researchers,

personal dedication refers to the desire of an individual to maintain or improve the quality of his or her relationship for the joint benefit of the participants. It is evidenced by a desire (and associated behaviors) not only to continue in the relationship, but also to improve it, to sacrifice for it, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to seek the partner's welfare, not simply one's own. In contrast, constraint commitment refers to forces that constrain individuals to maintain relationships regardless of their personal dedication to them. Constraints may arise from either external or internal pressures, and they favor relationship stability by making termination of a relationship more economically, socially, personally, or psychologically costly. (pp. 595–596)



Couples with a lifetime commitment to marriage are more likely to stay together. Matt Reier, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Though Stanley and Markman (2011) have continued to refine the tool they use to measure these forms of commitment, the Commitment Inventory Scale, it maintains the same basic constructs. One interesting definition Stanley came to a decade later was that commitment is “a choice to give up other choices” (Stanley, 2002, “Why Commitment Develops,” para. 1). Others use different terms to capture similar ideas. For example, Adams and Jones (1997) used six studies involving 1,787 participants to empirically test different ways of conceptualizing marital commitment. “Results suggested the existence of three primary dimensions of marital commitment: an attraction component based on devotion, satisfaction, and love; a moral-normative component based on a sense of personal responsibility for maintaining the marriage and on the belief that marriage is an

important social and religious institution; and a constraining component based on fear of the social, financial, and emotional costs of relationship termination” (p. 1177).

Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston (1999) divide commitment into three similar components: personal commitment, moral commitment, and structural commitment. The concept of moral commitment adds another important component: commitment to the institution of marriage itself. Though by Stanley and Markman’s definitions, moral commitment would normally be considered a part of dedication commitments, it is possible that it acts as a constraint as well. Wilcox found that a couple’s commitment to the institution of marriage plays a strong role in marital stability (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Regardless of which terms are used to define marital commitment, there seems to be three key elements to marital commitment (though Stanley and Markman combine the first and second into one). However conceptualized, most researchers agree that commitment to each other and to the institution of marriage are essential aspects of marital stability.

Exactly how marital commitment impacts couples is debated. Murray and Holmes (2008) conjecture that relational commitment is of value only when there are problems in the relationship. Others, including Clements and Swensen (2000), argue that relational commitment is related not only to relational stability but also to marital quality as well. Stanley (2005) found that increased marital commitment was related to better communication, increased happiness, and more constructive coping within marital relationships. It seems logical that couples who are more committed to their marriages are willing to work harder to make their relationship work. This effort would likely lead not only to greater marital stability but to greater satisfaction and meaning in their marriages. Several researchers have theorized that as long as a couple is satisfied with their relationship, structural or constraint commitment plays little to no part in a couple’s day-to-day interactions and decisions. It is only when the first two aspects of commitment begin to wane that structural or constraint commitment comes into play. According to this

theory, commitment acts like a seatbelt—it is really only noticed when one makes an attempt to leave. Ultimately though, as Amato (2010) points out, the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of how commitment impacts relationships are still in need of further development.

Religion and Marital Commitment

Several studies have shown that religiosity has been linked with increased marital satisfaction and stability (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985). Greater religiosity has repeatedly been related to reduced risk of divorce (Breault & Kposowa, 1987). Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001) found that the divorce rate for those who attended church was 44% compared to 60% for those who did not attend. This difference was true even after controlling for a broad range of confounding variables. A confounding variable is another known cause of divorce such as financial challenges and lower educational levels. It is important to note that none of these studies claimed to show causality. They simply confirmed that those who are more religious are more likely to have a strong commitment to their marriage and less likely to divorce. But these studies don't explain why or how religion impacts marital commitment and stability.

A few studies have specifically sought to understand how religion influences marital commitment (Larson & Goltz, 1989). However, most studies have only been able to demonstrate the correlation between religion and marital commitment. One study by Allgood, Harris, Skogrand, and Lee (2009) specifically investigated marital commitment among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The researchers conducted the study using a random sample of over 1,000 people, out of which over 70% were Latter-day Saints. The researchers specifically looked at the three different aspects of marital commitment. They found that Latter-day Saints had much higher-than-average marital commitment, especially among those who were most active in their faith. This study is one of the only quantitative studies that focused on marital commitment among Latter-day



Couples who consider religion to be important are less likely to divorce. Christina Smith, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Saints. Yet, the focus on more distal aspects of religion (affiliation and church attendance) prevented the researchers from determining how the Latter-day Saint religion specifically impacted the couple's marital commitment. However, in the last 10 years, several studies based on the American Families of Faith Project have specifically sought to understand which religious beliefs and practices have influence on a couple's marital commitment level (Brown, Lu, Marks, & Dollahite, 2011; Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Dollahite & Lambert, 2007; Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006; Marks, 2005; Marks, 2004).

American Families of Faith Project

The American Families of Faith Project is an ongoing research project led by David Dollahite and Loren Marks that entails in-depth interviews with family members of the three Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. So far over 50 peer-reviewed articles have been published from this study. Couples and their children are interviewed to ascertain how they connected their faith with their family life. The sample was purposive, meaning that the participants are prototypical of the variables being studied; in this case highly religious couples with happy marriages. As such the sample is not random and therefore not immediately generalizable. However, information gained from purposive samples such as these often provide the nuanced information needed for further study of the variables of interest.

As of 2011, 445 individuals from 184 families have been interviewed as part of the project. All of the families had a high level of religious commitment (as reported by both referring clergy and the participants themselves). There were 133 Christian families (including Catholic, Mainstream Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Orthodox, and New Christian Religious Traditions), 31 Jewish families (including Hasidic, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Traditions), and 20 Muslim families (both Sunni and Shia). Slightly more than half of the families (51%) represent an ethnic or racial minority. There were 32 African American families, 13 Latino, 11 Middle Eastern, 4 East Indian, 17 Asian American, 15 Native American, and 1 Pacific Islander, with the balance of the families (90) being Caucasian. Couples were typically in their mid-forties and had been married on average for 20 years. All couples had at least one child (mean = 3.3 children). The couples interviewed resided in all eight regions of the United States.

Several of the interview questions pertained specifically to the concept of marital commitment. These questions allowed the interviewees to explain in their own words and according to their own beliefs exactly how their faith had impacted their marital commitment and how their marital commitment had impacted their family life. Analysis followed the grounded theory



Jewish (left), Christian (top right), and Islamic (bottom right) families participated in the American Families of Faith Project. © Kai Chiang (left), Dmitriy Shironosov (top right), and szefei (bottom right).

approach explicated by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as well as the analytic induction approach advocated by Gilgun (2001). These approaches allowed the researcher to look at the data without attempting to make the data fit a pre-conceived theory. Analysis revealed several themes that shed light on the possible processes by which religious faith can impact marital commitment and how increased marital commitment impacts marriage and family life.

Findings from the American Family of Faiths Project regarding Commitment

In one of the first studies published from the American Families of Faith Project, Loren Marks (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with 38 couples in order to understand how three dimensions of religion (beliefs, practices, and community) influenced the couples' marriages. Couples identified religious beliefs more often than specific practices or community as having the

greatest impact on their marriages, and three themes were found among the responses: a belief supporting marriage and discouraging divorce, a belief in the importance of belief homogamy (husband/wife agreement) and the belief that God is a support to marriage. When asked how these beliefs impacted their marriages, couples listed three outcomes: stability and unity, growth and motivation to succeed, and greater happiness and peace. These outcomes match tightly to the concept of personal dedication commitment explicated by Stanley and Markman (1992), attraction and moral-normative commitment as defined by Adams & Jones (1997), and personal and moral commitment as defined by Johnson (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999).

Next, in a study of 32 couples, Goodman and Dollahite (2006) analyzed what role these couples believed God played in their marital relationship. About 74% of the couples believed that because of God's influence on their marriages, their marriages were more stable and unified. This finding was the most frequently mentioned outcome of all. Findings also indicated that couples who believed that marriage was part of God's plan and that God was involved in their marital life perceived the greatest benefits from their religious faith. Interestingly, though the main question of this study was different from the Marks 2005 study, both studies found that these couples felt that their religious faith produced the exact same outcomes: stability and unity, growth and motivation to succeed, and greater happiness and peace.

In 2006, Lambert and Dollahite released their study of 57 couples, in which they had tried to determine how the religious faith of these couples helped them prevent, resolve, and overcome marital conflict. Couples reported that religiosity affected their marriages at three phases of the conflict process: problem prevention, conflict resolution, and relationship reconciliation. Though this study did not specifically investigate commitment, two aspects of this study add to our understanding of marital commitment. Like the Marks 2005 study, couples in this expanded sample stated that their religious beliefs were a strong influence on their family life and that their beliefs lead to greater levels of marital commitment. Specifically,

couples reported that their religious beliefs increased their commitment to relationship permanence. “God hates divorce” or “marriage is forever” were some of the common expressions couples made regarding commitment to relationship permanence. This commitment generated a desire within couples to reconcile with each other and work through difficult times. Those interviewed emphasized being “committed to the relationship no matter what problems might arise.” (p. 445)

Using the same sample, Dollahite and Lambert (2007) published another study that examined how the religious faith of a couple promoted marital fidelity. The research pointed to four ways that religion impacted a couple’s commitment to remain faithful: (a) religious belief and practice sanctified their marriage and thereby improved marital quality that indirectly promoted fidelity; (b) religious vows and faith involvement fortified marital commitment to fidelity; (c) religious belief strengthened couples’ moral values, which promoted fidelity in marriage; and (d) religious involvement improved spouses’ relationship with God, which encouraged them to avoid actions such as infidelity that they believed would displease God. Notice again the tight match to earlier findings from the original samples in this project as well as to the earlier conceptualizations of marital commitment by Stanley and Markman, Adams and Jones, and Johnson.

A 2008 study by Lambert and Dollahite examined how the faith of couples impacted their marital commitment. Analysis indicated that these couples’ religious beliefs and practices lead to three specific processes by which their commitment to their marriage was strengthened. These processes involved including God as the third cord in their marriage, an inclusion that binds couples to each other with strong ties; believing in marriage as a religious institution that can and should last; and finding meaning in committing to marriage. Overall, Lambert and Dollahite were able to show several connections between the couples’ beliefs and practices and

their marital commitment by researching how couples' religion helps them resolve conflict, how their religious faith promotes fidelity, and how their faith directly impacts their marital commitment.

Based on the data from the American Families of Faith Project, Marks and Dollahite (2011) analyzed data from all 184 couples. In their analysis of the interviews, they found eight specific ways these couples saw their religious faith impacting their marriages.

1. Sacred, meaningful family rituals and practices that unify the marriage and family
2. A shared belief system and worldview
3. A view of God as the "third cord" in their marriage which binds couples to each other with strong ties
4. A specific belief in marriage as a religious institution that can and should last
5. A focused effort to find meaning in committing to marriage
6. A desire to work to prevent problems in the relationship
7. An ability to draw on sacred beliefs and practices to resolve conflict
8. A religiously based motivation to work toward relational reconciliation" (p. 191)

As can be seen, these eight connections match the findings from all of the other studies thus far, which indicates a fair amount of theoretical and conceptual saturation.

Also based on the data from the American Families of Faith Project, Goodman, Dallahite, and Marks (2012) researched using data from 24 LDS couples located in seven states. This study pointed to specific beliefs such as the eternal nature of marriage and specific practices such as temple attendance, prayer, scripture study, and church attendance, which impacted these couples marital commitment. The following section will take a closer look at specific LDS beliefs that are connected to marital commitment.

Latter-day Saint Religious Beliefs and Marital Commitment

As the above literature review demonstrates, some highly religious couples perceive religious beliefs as having a strong influence on their marital behavior. In several studies cited above, religious beliefs were more likely to be specifically associated with marital commitment than other aspects of religiosity were, including religious practices and religious community. In addition, as noted earlier, Goodman and Dollahite (2006) found that couples who believed marriage was part of God's plan experienced more benefits from their religious involvement, including greater marital commitment. This belief appeared to be a gateway that determined the extent of influence religion would play in their marital relationships.

Latter-day Saints mentioned the eternal nature of marriage in relations to marital commitment more frequently than couples of other religious affiliations. Though Latter-day Saints were not the only highly religious couples who believed that marriage can last beyond death, they made the vast majority of such references in the American Families of Faith project. In fact, Goodman, Dollahite, and Marks (2012) noted that all 24 Latter-day Saint couples who were part of the American Families of Faith Project specifically mentioned that their belief that families not only can but should last forever was a strong influence on their personal marital commitment.

The following quotations from this study illustrate some possible pathways by which this fairly distinctive Latter-day Saint belief could impact marital commitment (Goodman, Dollahite, & Marks, 2012). First, several couples reported that they felt greater security in their relationship because divorce was simply not an option. One Latter-day Saint wife stated:

Well, one of the things that [my husband] and I were talking about just the other day is that we know that we are gonna be married forever. Divorce is not an option; just being married until one of us dies isn't part of the plan. So, we know that neither one of us is

going anywhere, you know, even if we are having a miserable day, or week, or month, if it comes to that, we are not worried that the other person is gonna take off, and we are not worried that our marriage is falling apart. (p. 564)

The belief that divorce was not an option lead some couples to say they approach serious problems with the understanding that they must find the solution because failure was not an option. Another Latter-day Saint wife explained:

No matter what happens . . . because we believe in the eternities, and that marriage is forever, that no matter how bad, or whatever happens to us, we're going to make it work no matter what. We like to say that the "D" word [divorce] . . . never come[s] up in the house. (p. 564)

A Latter-day Saint husband described how the belief in eternal marriage helped him and his wife focus on long-term solutions even if those solutions were more difficult than an easier quick fix.

The decisions you make, if you know they are going to affect your eternal future are different than the decisions you make if you knew it was just till you die. . . . If you are looking at long range instead of short range, just here on earth, the decisions you make are different.

Finally, some couples pointed out that their marital commitment went beyond their commitment to their spouses and marriages and extended to their actual commitment to God. Realizing that marriage is part of God's plan for their eternities meant that they were not only accountable to each other but also to God for their relationship. One Latter-day Saint husband stated that "we are committed to the institution I think even more than to one another" (564–565).



Understanding the importance of marriage in God's plan of happiness may help husbands and wives focus on long-term solutions and approaches within their marriage. Craig Dimond, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

As is evident by the above examples, the doctrine of eternal marriage has a potentially powerful effect in the lives of Latter-day Saints who believe it. Latter-day Saint theology on the eternal nature of marriage and family life is extensive, deep, and nuanced. Given the space constraints in most scholarly journals as well as the secular audience, only brief references can be made to the specifics of this doctrine. However, the audience for this volume and the fact that each chapter explicitly seeks to wed current social science research together with specific Latter-day Saint doctrines and beliefs allow a much more nuanced exploration of the doctrines involved here.

The Doctrine of Eternal Marriage

President Boyd K. Packer (2004) has repeatedly taught that “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” (p. 79). This statement seems to be born out in the lives of the highly religious couples interviewed as part of the American Families of Faith Project. Almost all of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim couples linked specific religious beliefs to different aspects of their marital lives. The Latter-day Saint couples universally did. As mentioned above, the doctrine referred to most frequently by the Latter-day Saint couples was the eternal nature of marriage. They felt that this doctrine had tremendous impact on their marital commitment and on how they worked through the difficulties of married life. There are several aspects of the doctrine of eternal marriage which might have an impact on a couple’s commitment. The following discussion will highlight some of these important aspects. This exploration will illustrate why in the gospel of Jesus Christ, marriage is not a tangential issue relating to couple’s’ commitment to their relationship but rather is an integral part of the Latter-day Saint definition of exaltation.

Prophets, seers, and revelators have spoken for millennia regarding the divine origin and centrality of marriage and family in the gospel plan. President Joseph Fielding Smith (1966) taught that marriage involves “an eternal principle ordained before the foundation of the world and instituted on this earth before death came into it” (p. 25). Bruce R. McConkie (1995) taught that “marriage and the family unit are the central part of the plan of progression and exaltation. All things center in and around the family unit in the eternal perspective. Exaltation consists in the continuation of the family unit in eternity. Those for whom the family unit continues have eternal life; all others have a lesser degree of salvation in the mansions that are prepared” (p. 546). Brigham Young (1973) taught that marriage “lays the foundations for worlds, for angels, and for the Gods; for intelligent beings to be crowned with glory, immortality, and eternal lives. In fact, it

is the thread which runs from the beginning to the end of the holy Gospel of salvation.”

In the lifetime of most married Latter-day Saints, no document has had a more central role in shaping what members believe about the doctrine of eternal marriage than “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” The very first paragraph makes clear the preeminent position of marriage and family in Latter-day Saint doctrine: “We the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children” (First Presidency, 1995). The document ends with this solemn warning: “We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.”

Statements like these and countless others that could be cited leave very little ambiguity as to the importance of marriage in God’s plan of happiness. In fact, President Spencer W. Kimball (1973) taught that marriage and family are not only central to Heavenly Father’s plan but that “family is the great plan of life as conceived and organized by our Father in Heaven” (p. 15). As discussed earlier, couples who believe that marriage is part of God’s plan and that God is deeply concerned about marriage approach their marriages differently. Their commitment level rises, and their approach to marital challenges becomes more purposeful. As can be seen from the above doctrinal statements, Latter-day Saints have many reasons to believe the marriage is part of God’s plan and that it is imperative as part of their relationship to him. This belief, in and of itself, may go a long way to explaining why active, believing Latter-day Saints are so committed to their marriages.

Many of these statements hint at the centrality of marriage and family to God’s plan for his children. However, they do not explain *why* marriage and family are so central to the plan of salvation and why President Kimball

(1973) would say “Family *is* the great plan of life.” To understand the reason for such an emphasis, it is necessary to take a closer look at what Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches about the plan itself. When we understand the plan according to Latter-day Saint beliefs, we can see why active members of the Church have a tendency to have very strong commitment to marriage as both a general concept and a personal reality.

The Plan of Salvation and the Nature of God

Like members of virtually every Christian church, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe Jesus Christ died so that they can one day live with God in heaven. Most Christians would refer to this as being saved. This answer is well supported by Latter-day Saint scripture (see 2 Nephi 2:25; Matthew 5:3; 10, 12, Luke 18:22; Mosiah 2:41; Alma 11:37; D&C 6:37; D&C 20:24; Moses 7:21). Sometimes the scriptures refer to this aspect of our eternal destiny as “everlasting life” (see John 3:16; 3 Nephi 5:13; D&C 45:5). If members of the Church were asked why they are here on earth, the answer would, in part, likely refer to *returning* to live with Heavenly Father in His kingdom since they believe we already lived with him once before. We sometimes refer to being saved as inheriting everlasting life. Although the term everlasting life is descriptive of the duration of our destiny, it is less descriptive of the quality.

Doctrine and Covenants 14:7 uses a more descriptive term: “If you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God.” We learn from Doctrine and Covenants 19:10–12 that eternal is another name for God. Therefore, eternal life is another way of saying God’s life, or the kind of life that God lives. God’s work and glory is to bring to pass not only our immortality (or our everlasting life) but our eternal life—life like his. Both concepts, duration and quality, are brought together in Moses 1:39: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” Though living forever is an important part of our destiny, it is important to

make a distinction between immortality and eternal life. Satan and all who follow him are immortal inasmuch as they will have no end, but they certainly don't enjoy eternal life. We seek eternal life—life like God's.

However, such a belief does not propose becoming equal to God. Latter-day Saints believe that he is our Heavenly Father and will always be our Heavenly Father. We worship him as our Creator and our God. That relationship will never change. We will never be his equal and we will always worship him as our God. However, we believe that God intends to make us as he is. We believe that God is truly our Heavenly Father and that we are his offspring (Acts 17:29). Latter-day Saints take seriously, and quite literally, the words of Paul that “the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Romans 8:16–17). Again this does not mean equal to, but instead like unto God, or as he is. But if we are meant to be like God, what is God like?

We must come to better understand the nature of our Heavenly Father and what it means to become like him if we are to fulfill our ultimate destiny. It is obviously beyond our knowledge as well as the scope of this chapter to seek to exhaustively define the nature of our Father in Heaven. The entire canon of scriptures is woefully inadequate for such a task. God's character is made up of all that is beautiful, virtuous, and perfect in infinite measure. If you were to list every attribute that is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (Articles of Faith 1:13), and place the word “all” in front of it, it would be but a beginning of a description of God. As the thirteenth article of faith finishes, “we seek after these things.” Developing these attributes in perfection is completely outside of our ability to do on our own. However, we believe that through Jesus Christ, “[we] can do all things” (Philippians 4:13). We believe it is not only possible for us to develop these attributes but that God wants, even commands, us to do so.

To summarize, Heavenly Father is perfect and he wants us to become perfect also. However, what does becoming perfect have to do with marriage and the plan of salvation? Further, what does becoming like God have to do

with Latter-day Saint commitment to marriage? To answer these question, it is necessary to examine not only what God is like but also what God does. What is God's purpose? Why does he do what he does? These questions get to the very definition of what it means to a Latter-day Saint to be like God. What does our Father in Heaven do with his perfection? A most succinct answer is found in the verse of scriptures quoted earlier from the book of Moses: "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).

Christians throughout the world would likely agree that God is seeking to save his children, or to help them achieve eternal life. However, for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, this truth takes on added meaning because, as was stated above, we believe eternal life is synonymous with living a life like God's. This flows from how Latter-day Saints view God's relationship with His children. Besides viewing God as an all-powerful, perfected being, we view God as our literal Father in Heaven. We believe we are the children, the offspring, of God.

And we believe that God does what righteous earthly parents try to do—help their children grow to be all that they can be. This connection begins to illuminate what President Kimball meant when he said family is the great plan of life. God is a full-time, totally dedicated parent. His work and glory is raising his children. What's more, he is not alone. As is obvious in the natural process of procreation in mortality, you cannot have a father without a mother. So it is in eternity. Our Father in Heaven is not alone in his work. He has an equally glorious and perfected companion—our Heavenly Mother. In other words, God is married. President Harold B. Lee (1996) explained that "that great hymn 'O My Father' puts it correctly when Eliza R. Snow wrote, 'In the heav'ns are parents single? No, the thought makes reason stare! Truth is reason; truth eternal tells me I've a mother there.' Born of a Heavenly Mother, sired by a Heavenly Father, we knew Him, we were in His house . . ." (p. 22).

God is not only married, but the very definition of godhood or exaltation is dependent on his relationship with Heavenly Mother. We learn in

Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–4 that “in the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees; and in order to obtain the highest [to be exalted like our heavenly parents], 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.” In other words, eternal marriage is a necessary precondition of exaltation. There is no such thing as an unmarried god. Doctrine and Covenants 132:19 teaches that those who enter into the new and everlasting covenant of marriage and are faithful to it will “pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever.” It is only through the union of man and woman, eternally married, that a “continuation of the seeds forever and ever” is possible.

Though we know very few details regarding Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother’s marriage, there can be few things more central to their nature. All that they do is for the welfare and eternal salvation of their children. Elder Oaks (2001) taught that “the work of God is to bring to pass the eternal life of His children (see Moses 1:39), and all that this entails in the birth, nurturing, teaching, and sealing of our Heavenly Father’s children. Everything else is lower in priority” (pp. 83–84). As Elder Dennis E. Simmons (2004) explained, “He [God] has already achieved godhood. Now His only objective is to help us—to enable us to return to Him and be like Him and live His kind of life eternally” (p. 73).

This very doctrine is at the foundation of our understanding of eternal marriage. The destiny of mankind is to become like our heavenly parents. This capacity is part of our premortal, mortal, and postmortal nature. The First Presidency of Heber J. Grant, Anthony W. Ivins, and Charles W. Nibley taught that “man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so that undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons,

of evolving into a God” (Clark, 1965–1975, p. 244). Elder Dallin H. Oaks (1995) taught that “the purpose of mortal life and the mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is to prepare the sons and daughters of God for their eternal destiny—to become like our heavenly parents” (p. 7).

Through understanding the nature of God and our relationship to him, we come to understand that our nature is his nature in embryo. God is by nature a relational being, eternally married to his coequal: Heavenly Mother. By eternal destiny we too have the seeds of that same nature within us. If our eternal destiny depends on our being eternally married, our deepest, most innate spiritual nature must be in line with this destiny. As Howard W. Hunter (1997) taught, “My spiritual reasoning tells me that because God is an exalted being, holy and good, that man’s supreme goal (and destiny) is to be like him” (p. 15).

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make himself visible—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man” (Roberts, 1971, p. 304). President Lorenzo Snow (1919) completed this thought with the famous couplet “As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may be” (p. 656).

Being like God means that our supreme goal and destiny is linked to our relationship with our eternal companion. As Elder Henry B. Eyring (1998) explained, “the requirement that we be one is not for this life alone. It is to be without end. The first marriage was performed by God in the garden when Adam and Eve were immortal. He placed in men and women from the beginning a desire to be joined together as man and wife forever to dwell in families in a perfect, righteous union” (66). Though the Lord has not revealed many details of how this will be in the afterlife, we know of a surety that it will be. We know that we are destined to become like he is. We are destined to be married for all eternity.

This doctrine, as shown through both the studies mentioned above, and the daily lives of millions of Latter-day Saints, guides the thoughts and actions of Latter-day Saints who understand the beliefs of the Church in relation to marriage and family. Other than Jesus Christ and his Atonement, it would be hard to find anything more central to the beliefs of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints than eternal marriage. Because Latter-day Saints believe it is both our nature and our destiny to become as God is now, we naturally feel a great commitment to marriage and family. Thus marriage and family are much more than social constructs to believing Latter-day Saints. They are the central organizing constructs of our existence. In some ways, they epitomize the concept of sanctification as defined by Annette Mahoney and colleagues. Marriage and family become endowed with sacred qualities and Latter-day Saints believe that God is not only interested in but also integrally involved in their marriages. They believe that their eternal destiny depends on it. Without eternal marriage, Latter-day Saints do not believe it possible to realize their true nature and divine destiny. For these reasons, Latter-day Saints who understand the basics of their own theology are prone to show a profound and deep commitment to their marriages. Thus marital commitment is not only a social value, it is a divine mandate backed up by divine design and upheld through divine means.

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