

“THE SPIRIT OF CONTENTION IS NOT OF ME”

Working through Differences

Just as couples can build intimacy in their relationship through purposeful efforts, as we have discussed in chapters 5 and 6, they can also undermine and damage it through high levels of conflict or destructive behaviors. In essence, the emotional bank account we discussed in chapter 5 can become completely bankrupt. Conflict undermines trust and loyalty, creates self-doubt, and brings an abrasive tone into the relationship that will make it difficult for the Spirit of the Lord to reside in a couple's relationship. Herein we will discuss causes of marital conflict, factors that can either escalate or minimize those causes, and ways to repair and prevent those stressful moments of conflict in marriage. We will also address how to work through perpetual issues so that couples can become more self-aware of these repeating cycles of destructive behavior and stop hurting each other again and again.



Marital Conflict and Resolve

There are many behaviors that can be destructive to relationships. John Gottman's research on marital conflict has identified four destructive behaviors in marriage: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. According to Gottman and colleague, the chronic presence of these forces can predict divorce with 82 percent accuracy.¹ Due to these factors' highly destructive nature in the marital relationship, we will explore their full meaning here. Following, we will also discuss the impact of negative affectivity on conflict.

Criticism

Criticism in marriage is destructive; it hurts our spouse and undermines trust and love, thus weakening the marital relationship. However, it doesn't mean we can never make a complaint to our spouse. Gottman makes a clear distinction between a criticism and a complaint. When difficulties arise, a complaint about something your spouse has done focuses on a specific behavior and how that behavior was problematic.² This is generally a healthy option by which couples may address conflict.

For example, in the Book of Mormon, Alma had significant reason to confront his son Corianton, who had forsaken his ministry and sought after the harlot Isabel. In his address to his son in Alma 39, we see that in spite of the severe nature of the transgression, Alma issued a complaint to Corianton (and taught him doctrine) while avoiding criticism: "Now this is what I have against thee; thou didst go on unto boasting . . . and this is not all, my son. Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me" (verses 2–3). A basic complaint common in many marriages might include the following: "There's no gas in the car. Why didn't you fill it up like you said you would?" or "I've noticed your side of the closet is messy again. Would you please keep it clean?"

Reflections

When I was six years old, my parents would put me to bed at night and then begin to argue, argue, argue. I could hear them. I would think to myself, "I wonder if they're going to get a divorce." I swore to myself then, even at that young age, that I would never argue with my husband where the children could hear us. I am now eighty-six years old and fighting has always bothered me. Once I was married, my husband and I got along pretty well. We had disagreements but never big hollering, crying, and blaming fights like my parents had. When we did disagree, we would try to work it out wherever we happened to be working together at the time, such as in the pigpen, but not in the bedroom or the living room, where the children could hear us. We would sometimes let it work itself out over a couple of days after we pouted for a little bit. In time one of us would decide the other person was right, such as, "That was a good idea you had." We just didn't like to fight with each other. It always seemed to work out without hollering or fussing.

Contrast this process to that of criticizing our spouse; criticism takes a specific behavior that has bothered you and layers on top of it blame and general insult of one's character.³ For example, criticisms of the situations involving the gas tank and closet might look like this: "Why can't you ever remember anything? I reminded you several times to fill up the tank, and you said you would. You couldn't even manage to get that right!" or "You are such a slob! No matter what I say, you can't seem to keep your side of the closet clean!" We read in James 3:10: "Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be." In many cases the difference between a complaint and a criticism has a lot to do with the tone and delivery of the statement. And as James counsels, it can bless or curse the marriage relationship. Thus, a complaint may be necessary or justified in marriage in order to address pertinent issues, but criticism, never.

Contempt

Disgust with one's partner constitutes contempt. Contempt often arises out of resentment that a spouse allows to build up inside. It tends to be communicated through sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor. Contempt tends to be fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about one's spouse.⁴

If we find ourselves talking negatively about or bad-mouthing our spouse to our other family members or friends, what is the attitude by which we do so? Upon honest reflection we may discover that the bad-mouthing originates from our contemptuous attitude. This attitude is devoid of respect for, or loyalty to, our spouse. Furthermore, because of the severe nature of this attitude—there is no hiding it!—the lack of respect and loyalty is clearly communicated not only to those to whom we vent but to

our spouse as well. It is guaranteed that if we feel contempt for our spouse, our spouse knows it.

In contrast, let's consider the example of our Savior, Jesus Christ, as given to us in Isaiah 53. Regardless of being "despised," "rejected" (verse 3), "stricken," "smitten," "afflicted" (verse 4), "wounded," "bruised" (verse 5), and "oppressed" (verse 7)—all feelings we may likely feel at times relative to our relationship with our spouse, feelings that often can build resentment inside us—the scriptures report that "neither was any deceit in his mouth" (verse 9). We can work toward the ability to do this. If we keep the foundation of our marriage relationship steady, such as by utilizing the spirit of forgiveness discussed in chapter 4 and by building up our emotional bank account as discussed in chapter 5, then when we feel wounded in our marriage we can fairly easily resist resorting to a contemptuous attitude. Gottman and colleague teach, "Fondness and admiration are antidotes for contempt."⁵ When we focus on the positive aspects of our spouse, we will build respect for them rather than contempt and will be "less likely to act disgusted with him or her when [we] disagree."⁶

Defensiveness

Defensiveness is an act of justifying oneself for poor behavior (or maybe for behavior we thought was just fine but for some reason we find out was hurtful to our spouse and they are letting us know). Although criticism and contempt are clearly damaging to a relationship, defensiveness may be a bit trickier to understand as a destructive force. It seems natural and understandable to be defensive, especially if one is feeling attacked or simply trying to "save face." However, in reality, defensiveness serves only to escalate the conflict, never resolve it, because it attaches blame to one's partner, promoting the attitude "The problem isn't *me*; it's *you*."⁷

The Book of Mormon story of Lehi and Sariah illustrates the positive influence that comes when we choose humility and meekness rather than defensiveness. It also provides us with a step-by-step process of how we can diffuse accusation within our own marital relationship without resorting to defensiveness. In 1 Nephi 5:2–3, we see that Sariah has been mourning the perceived loss of her sons after they have gone to recover the brass plates from Laban and have failed to return yet. In her distress, she lays upon her husband severe accusations, including that the death of her sons is *his* fault: “She also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man; saying: Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness. And after this manner of language had my mother complained against my father.”

Although Sariah has some legitimate complaints within this exchange, this would qualify as a criticism because she attempts to lay blame and attack Lehi’s character. Let’s read Sariah’s criticism in modern lingo: “Oh, great visionary man! You always have these grand ideas and think you’re following God. But, because of this, we’ve lost our dream home, my sons are dead, and now the rest of us are going to die too!”

Let’s just imagine for a moment how this intense scenario might have played out had Lehi jumped to acting in a defensive manner when the criticism came. Sariah makes the observation to Lehi that he is a “visionary man,” and he immediately and defensively retorts, “No, I’m not! You are just so negative all the time! If you would just . . .” Most of us have made this mistake at one time or another, and, frankly, we’ve probably made it many times, so it is probably pretty easy to play out in our minds how quickly that interaction would completely fall apart.

Instead, we know from the scriptural account that continues that Lehi chose to honestly look at what Sariah had said and found that there *was* truth in what she had spoken. He then validated her



SCOTT SNOW, *Lehi's Family Leaving Jerusalem*.

by acknowledging that truth (which will always serve to diffuse a hostile combatant!): “And it had come to pass that my father spake unto her, saying: I know that I am a visionary man,” or, in other words, “You know, Honey, you are right.” After diffusing her negative energy, Lehi continues by explaining how his being a “visionary man” was actually a good thing for them and their family (verses 4–5). Again, in modern lingo, with a few embellishments for fun: “If I didn’t see the things of God, I would not have the strong testimony of Him that I have, and, therefore, we *all* would have died already if we had stayed in Jerusalem. But, look, Sweetheart, we will get a new dream home, and it will be even better than the last one!”

Now, after offering this explanation as to the positive benefits of his visionariness, Lehi continues on the positive vein in verse 5 and shares his faith and testimony about the power of the

Lord to comfort his wife: “Yea, and I know that the Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and bring them down again unto us in the wilderness.” Lehi’s efforts to soothe his wife were masterfully successful! We learn in verses 6–8 that Sariah was comforted. Later, when her sons returned, just as Lehi had testified they would, Sariah’s joy was full, and she was additionally comforted so that she was then prompted to offer her own newly strengthened testimony not only of the Lord but of her husband’s role as a prophet—in essence, she embraced the great blessing that her husband was a visionary man (see verse 8). This great transformation in Sariah was possible only because Lehi chose not to become defensive when a criticism from his spouse came his way.

In some couples, defensiveness may be a pervasive problem, rather than one that occurs only on occasion when one spouse is attacking another. Sometimes, a spouse gets defensive about almost everything—a chronic defensiveness, if you will. If we find that we get upset at the slightest suggestion from our spouse or even the slightest hint of disagreement or any other such minor stressor, we may fall into this category. Has your spouse ever told you that you get mad at everything they say? If so, you are likely displaying a more chronic defensiveness that is indicative of deeper emotional or psychological wounds, perhaps even stemming from childhood.

DEBRA: *For example, one client I worked with was never good enough for his parents while he was growing up. He was often picked on. He was not allowed to join with his father in his favorite hobby because he wasn’t “good enough” at the activity. Now, as an adult, he felt intense insecurity in his relationship with his wife, feeling often that he was not good enough for her too. Thus, many times when she would say things to him, he would interpret the situation through the lens of his childhood, feeling that she was now attacking his competency and value because she, too, must have been thinking he was not good enough for her. He would raise his voice and get defensive. This was a chronic problem for them, and*

after ten years of marriage she was very unhappy. They entered therapy to try to work through the process.

If you have been wounded, it makes sense that you would try to protect yourself at even the slightest hint of danger. The problem comes when you have grown so accustomed to doing so that you are now trying to protect yourself even when you are *not* in danger. Overgeneralizing this protective instinct is pathological. Being defensive with your spouse when they make benign suggestions through the course of daily living creates a tense environment in which your spouse feels like they are walking on eggshells.

If you feel frequently that your ego or sense of self is threatened by your spouse (i.e., you do not feel the suggestions they make to you are benign but instead feel they are implying something deeper about your competence, value, intelligence, etc.), it may be helpful to examine on a deeper level the wounds that necessitate your feeling a need for continued protection. Have courage to go there and find healing. You and your spouse may benefit significantly from an openness and willingness to talk through the issues together, seeking the Lord for guidance. You may also consider attending therapy.

Stonewalling

Stonewalling involves tuning out and turning away from one's spouse.⁸ Failing to respond in an argument, hanging up on someone when having an argument on the phone, or giving one's spouse the silent treatment are clear examples of stonewalling. Two subtle and unfortunately common forms of stonewalling today are consistently staying up late after your spouse has gone to bed, and hiding out with your smart phone or being on the computer for hours on end; both can be done for the purpose of avoiding as much interaction with one's spouse as possible. One study examining recently married LDS couples found that unregulated, habitual Internet use among wives was negatively related

Challenge

Stonewalling can become very easily accomplished if spouses get in the habit of going to bed at different times. For example, one spouse goes to bed while the other stays up surfing the Internet or watching movies. Going to bed at different times will exacerbate any felt emotional distance by increasing the physical distance between spouses and the temporal distance of being on different schedules. It will nix any opportunities to reconcile, talk, or have any other interaction that could foster intimacy. It may also create additional problems, such as putting someone at risk for getting involved with pornography. Make a commitment to go to bed together if at all possible.

to marital satisfaction from both the wives' and husbands' perspectives. The researchers proposed that this finding was possibly due to the wives using the Internet for mood-altering purposes, such as to avoid negative feelings and emotions.⁹

When we stonewall, we are giving our spouse the silent treatment. Stonewalling is not only a way of avoiding arguments, it is a way of avoiding the marriage relationship altogether.¹⁰ And if we give our spouse the silent treatment for days or weeks on end, we are stonewalling in a *really* big way.

Criticism and contempt tend to lead to defensiveness, which escalates the negativity, leading to more contempt and more defensiveness. This toxic cycle gets intense enough that eventually one partner tunes out and stonewalls. Thus, stonewalling tends to be seen later in the marriage conflict process than the other three.¹¹

Negative Affectivity

The destructive processes of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling can be caused by and exacerbated through a spouse's negative affective style. Negative affectivity includes the tendency to be emotionally reactive, such as responding to distressing situations by being intensely critical or expressing anger, anxiety, disgust, embarrassment, helplessness, or sadness.



By definition, this is a difficulty in emotional regulation (ways to improve this were discussed in chapter 3), and it affects how people perceive and resolve conflict. Negative affectivity has been shown to be significantly related with poor marital quality and risk for divorce.¹²

Research examining newlywed couples that had been married for five years or less found that for all spouses, negative affectivity was associated with a tendency to engage in more dysfunctional conflict styles. The research also found that the wives' negative affectivity was significantly associated with lower perceptions of marital satisfaction both from their own perspectives as well as from their husbands' perspectives; whereas, the study found that the husbands' negative affectivity was associated with only their own lower marital satisfaction.¹³ Thus, negative affectivity will significantly decrease the quality of the marital relationship, particularly so if it is the wife that struggles to regulate her emotions.

Reflections

I have been married for twenty-two years, and the early years were the hardest. But now, to tell you the truth, I can't even remember the last time we had an argument. We are too busy to argue. But those early years the littlest things would set me off, and I would pick fights or arguments with my husband. At first he would argue back, but one day he just stared at me and then scooped me up into a big bear hug. At first I thought, "Oh, no! He is trying to snuff me out!" But then he caressed my head and whispered, "Everything is going to be okay." I instantly started crying and felt peace. He has done this many times in our marriage over the years. It's amazing how a simple hug can do so much. Now I have a married daughter, and I remember the call from her husband one night telling me that my daughter was crying and unreasonable. I told him to not argue but instead to go and hug her. He was amazed at how wonderfully that worked. Now they too have a peaceful way to calm down and talk reasonably.

Repair Attempts

Even in our best efforts to get along and to resolve conflict, we will sometimes fall short in our interactions with our spouse. We may fall prey to one of the difficulties we have just discussed or make other relationship mistakes. Because of this, we need to understand how to make repair attempts to try to recover from our mistakes and promote healing within the relationship. A repair attempt is any effort made by a partner to try to reduce negativity or increase positivity during a conflict.

Gottman and colleagues have studied repair attempts. In a study of newlywed couples that had been married six months or less, they found that the most effective repair attempts were *preemptive* repairs, which occurred in the first three minutes of a conflict. These types of repairs primarily sought to establish emotional connection, such as shared humor, affection, self-disclosure, expressions of understanding, empathy, acceptance of personal responsibility for a part of the issue being discussed, and messages of "we're okay." Repairs that took a logical, rational, or cognitive problem-solving approach were not as effective. The effectiveness of the repair attempt was also largely influenced by the reaction of the recipient. Thus, this study shows us

that regardless of who actually initiates the repair attempt, both spouses have the ability to turn a tough situation around.¹⁴

As a note, these researchers did not find repair attempts to be very effective at the tail end of a conflict—it was just too late. So, as we consider making repair attempts in the midst of our own marital conflict, it's best to use them earlier, when negative emotion has not gotten too intense and the course of the conflict not gone too far awry.¹⁵

Process Commentary

A very helpful repair attempt or communication skill is to be able to shift the focus of a hostile interaction away from specific content and onto the process of the moment. For example, an unhappy spouse may offer criticism on a myriad of topics, sometimes within only a matter of minutes, not necessarily because those issues (such as filling up the gas tank, emptying the trash, paying the bills, etc.) are so very important at that moment but just because they are angry, hurt, or grumpy. If we try to discuss the issues they are criticizing, we may get lost in strange pathways, with no hope of finding our way out without causing a lot of pain and damage to the marital relationship. Instead, we can focus on the process of the interaction (i.e., what is happening in the room at that very moment) to avoid getting sucked into the specific content of the criticism. This also serves to make a more personal, emotional connection as a repair attempt.

When stonewalling occurs in our marital relationships, efforts to break the ice with a joke or other interaction may occasionally work but may just as often fail. A more direct and effective route requires a brave spouse to confront the stonewalling spouse, not with more negativity but with a loving process commentary. A comment such as “I know you are avoiding me because you are hurting and you don't know how to resolve the issue” can go a long way in softening hearts and initiating a

Reflections

I feel apologizing to my wife is a priesthood responsibility. Our eternal love for and commitment to each other far outweigh any disagreement or argument we may have. I remember a disagreement my wife and I had with each other that of course turned into an argument. We kind of gave each other the silent treatment for the better part of the day. I remember walking upstairs to our bedroom and finding my wife on her knees, praying. I was very humbled by this beautiful sight. I went downstairs to the bathroom, closed the door, and got on my knees and prayed. I felt an overwhelming feeling that I needed to humble myself and go to her and tell her that I was sorry and how much I loved her. She was very receptive and also apologized to me, with a nice hug. It is my experience and strong belief that any argument is caused by misunderstanding and pride. My remedy for that is to always humble myself by going to the Lord in prayer and asking for His help. It is then that He always reminds me to go to her with a kind attitude and apologize, no matter how much I am right or wrong. It is amazing how well that works.

discussion that has the potential for real healing. Another process commentary in this scenario could sound like this: “I know you are hurting. I am sorry I have hurt you. I want to move past this. What can I do to help you feel more comfortable interacting with me?”

In our own relationship, we have practiced using process commentary so much that we do it almost automatically now when there is tension. Our most commonly used observations are very simple but effective: “We don’t seem to be communicating very well” or “We don’t seem to be getting along right now.” When one of us makes these no-brainer statements to the other, we usually get a chuckle out of it because by the time we feel prompted to make one of these comments it is clearly obvious to both of us that we are at odds with each other. Although these are simple process commentaries, just by *labeling what is actually going on in the moment*, we are almost always successful at shifting the tone of the interaction away from the tension and what may have previously become a downward spiral of negativity to a slightly lighter or even more productive discussion. In this way these process commentaries become repair attempts because they attempt to deescalate rising tension.

Other examples of process-focused commentary include the following:

“You seem to be really upset with me. No matter what I do, you seem displeased. Why are you grumpy?” “What is happening right now? What are you really trying to say? I don’t think this is really about . . .” “What is this conversation like for you?” As we have learned, you also may be surprised at how quickly a process commentary can soften the feeling of hostility in the room and promote a deeper relationship discussion that can be therapeutic, instead of continuing destructive patterns.

RICHARD: *Here is an example of process commentary from our marriage. One evening we were both testy and short with each other; it was nothing serious, but we were both tired and a bit cranky from a long day. We kind of let things cool down until the next day, when we tried to move on and did pretty well at interacting, but just to make sure the air was fully clear Debra made a playful repair attempt that evening during dinner: “We need to be nice to each other,” to which I enthusiastically responded, “I agree!” This was a subtle yet effective process commentary because Debra implicitly labeled what had been going on with us earlier—that we had not been nice to each other—with the explicit statement of how we should now choose to act moving forward.*

The Power of an Apology

An apology is also a type of repair attempt. We must never forget the power that comes by offering a genuine apology to our spouse when we have caused them pain. “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (James 5:16). Wendy Ulrich,

Reflections

When we were newly married our arguments were more often and lasted longer. We were both focused more on being heard than on hearing the other’s point of view, and on being right rather than on being loving. As time has gone on I have noticed we work to resolve things quickly. I will say to my husband, “I’m sorry.” As time has gone on my words of apology have been quicker to come and more sincere.

LDS psychologist and public speaker, has outlined steps to an effective apology.¹⁶ First, we admit our mistake or empathically acknowledge the hurt our spouse is feeling because of our actions. Second, we tell our spouse what we can do to fix the situation (or what we will do differently in the future to prevent it). Third, we can ask our spouse what else we could do to make things right. As we seek their feedback, it may bring up other issues we were not aware of or other such feedback we had not anticipated. If we also accept this new information with Christlike grace and humility, the process of apologizing itself will create a greater sense of closeness and trust in each other that will not only resolve the difficulty at hand but increase bonds of love and tenderness.

Researchers have examined the role of an apology, and other efforts to make amends, in romantic relationships. One study has shown that a partner that was hurt by the other felt more forgiving of them when they apologized by extending a sincere apology, offering compensation, sincerely accepting responsibility, and conveying remorse and regret for the hurtful action. Being sincere in offering an apology to our spouse is vital. In this study sincerity in the apology was found to be a very important mediating factor because the partner that had been hurt perceived that the offender understood and validated their experience of the hurtful event.¹⁷ Unfortunately, some may utter the words “I’m sorry” without really being thoughtful about the situation or without great sincerity in wanting to resolve the current issues. In these times, they expect the spouse to accept this token and “clear the air” emotionally. For many, this type of apology not only fails to perform its intended function but also exacerbates an already tense situation.

Prevention against Destructive Conflict

We have discussed these destructive forces and have offered means by which we can work to resolve them when they occur in our rela-

tionship. But how do we avoid falling prey to these destructive dynamics in our marital relationship in the first place? Let's take a look at some important behavioral and theoretical principles of prevention that provide couples with valuable interpersonal tools.

Learn to Pause

One effective behavioral strategy we can employ in our efforts to prevent destructive communication and infuse positive qualities into our interaction is a simple one: learn to pause before responding. Just pause. When we get caught up in the heat of an argument, we often begin to say things very quickly without thinking. In this rash manner much of our communication tends to violate our Christian values and falls into the realm of destructive communication. Yet we will find that if we can slow down the interaction of a tense moment, we can be thoughtful about our response and then respond in a way that will generally be more in line with our personal values and love for our spouse.

For example, before retorting critically or contemptuously to an accusation laid upon us by our spouse, we can pause, take a breath, and collect our thoughts in order to speak them in peace. As we pause, we can also ask ourselves additional questions to check the content of what we are about to say. Questions such as "Is what I am about to say kind?" "Will this help resolve tension or escalate it?" and "Is it even important?" can cause us to completely alter the words that will next come out of our mouths. We may be surprised at how often a simple check on what we are about to say will change the whole tone of an interaction. So try this simple strategy: when tempted to respond negatively, pause with a deep breath before speaking. That pause can offer bounteous protection from destructive forces and help us preserve our own Christianity.

Timing

Another practical conflict-prevention strategy is to consider the timing of a discussion that holds the potential for conflict. First, some couples believe that they should never go to bed without resolving an argument. We have heard of some couples staying up until the early hours of the morning, working to resolve their problems. We applaud any and all who work this hard. If this is an effective strategy for you in your efforts to resolve marital conflict, please continue.

Yet this has not been a good approach for us. Trying to follow this principle at various times, we have found that the conversation and our feelings toward each other deteriorate rapidly as the clock ticks later and later. And then we struggle the next day from fatigue and lack of sleep. Instead, we have found that much of the work of the argument is accomplished peacefully with a good night's sleep, a fresh day, and a new perspective. We tend to be much more humble in the mornings once we are both engaged in our respective duties and we have both had time to think things through independently. We will generally call each other a couple of hours later and, with a spirit of love, express remorse and a desire to reconnect.

In marriage therapy, therapists often encourage couples *not* to engage in conflict resolution, discuss topics with the potential for conflict, or air grievances after 9:00 p.m. This standard is understood when we acknowledge that many of us are unable to think clearly or that we have little desire to be humble or resolve conflict when we are both upset *and* exhausted. So, in considering the timing of a conflict-potential discussion, waiting until morning might be an option that may serve your marital relationship.

Second, as we consider issues of timing, we would also do well to keep a careful eye on the context surrounding our spouse. For example, if we want to discuss a perpetual issue that has risen

to the surface again and yet we know our spouse is overly burdened by other current stressors (such as a deadline at work or fatigue from taking care of sick children), it would be better to hold off. With the extra stress, our spouse is likely unable to tolerate a difficult discussion the same way they would if they were feeling stronger, thus increasing the likelihood of conflict.

Third, we need to consider when to bring up issues for discussion when we have multiple complaints we'd like to discuss with our spouse. Don't bring them up all at the same time. There is a tendency for some spouses to think that if they are already arguing about one issue, they might as well throw all of their complaints into the mix.

DEBRA: Admittedly, earlier in our marriage, Richard at times brought up multiple complaints during our efforts to work through a difficult issue. He thought that, since we were already arguing, by bringing up his other complaints, it would minimize conflict later by just getting it all out on the table. However, this approach proved unwise. It took energy away from the issue already at hand and directed it to other issues that were unrelated. When Richard did this, it immediately exploded the dynamic: we were then not arguing about one thing, but we were arguing about four, and I was steaming! The exponential increase in negative energy was significantly more destructive to our relationship than the smaller discussions to address the other issues would have ever been. Although these types of interactions were relatively rare, to date they have been the most heated arguments of our marriage. He has since learned better.

Lastly, as we think about timing, we may need to consider taking a time-out from conflict resolution that has already begun when it becomes apparent nothing will actually be resolved. The attitude with which each of us goes into the conflict-resolution process becomes an important player here. If the discussion begins with criticism and contempt, with the spouses feeling negative or accusatory, Gottman and colleague indicate that we are likely to have a negative outcome to the discussion. They have reported that for a fifteen-minute discussion between spouses, they can predict the outcome of the interaction with 96 percent

accuracy by examining only the first three minutes.¹⁸ In other words, if the discussion starts badly, we would do well to put it on hold and try again another time, rather than continuing a process that may increase the problems and further undermine feelings of security or trust. (Time-outs are not just for children. They work great for adults too.)

The ultimate goal of any conflict-resolution process is to resolve the interpersonal difficulty quickly and allow the Spirit to be restored within the relationship. We want an eternal relationship in both duration and quality. We should be thoughtful, use wisdom and personal restraint, and make the choices that will encourage the greatest probability of peaceful resolution.

Principles and Preferences

A theoretical concept that will prevent conflict and destructive forces in our marriage before they even start and limit them if they do appear is to learn and apply the difference between principles and preferences. Sometimes we create unnecessary conflict because we wrongfully view the actions of our spouse as some major offense against God or His commandments or simply against us. In these cases, we need to ask, “Is the issue based on a principle or is it a preference?” Principles are eternal; their application makes a difference in our eternal well-being. A preference, on the other hand, is only about the here and now; it has nothing to do with eternal consequences. Far too many conflicts in marriage are because couples fail to recognize this distinction. The husband or wife thinks their spouse’s behavior is a significant threat, but in fact it is only a behavior of preference that is of little consequence.

A blogger’s story illustrates this concept:

My “Aha Moment” happened because of a package of hamburger meat. I asked my husband to stop by the store to pick up a few things for dinner, and when he got home [I] realized he’d gotten

the 70/30 hamburger meat—which means it’s 70% lean and 30% fat. I asked, “What’s this?”

“Hamburger meat,” he replied, slightly confused.

“You didn’t get the right kind,” I said.

“I didn’t?” He replied with his brow furrowed. “Was there some other brand you wanted or something?”

“No. You’re missing the point,” I said. “You got the 70/30. I always get at least the 80/20.”

He laughed. “Oh. That’s all? I thought I’d really messed up or something.”

That’s how it started. I launched into him. I berated him for not being smarter. Why would he not get the more healthy option? Did he even read the labels? Why can’t I trust him? Do I need to spell out every little thing for him in minute detail so he gets it right? Also, and the thing I was probably most offended by, why wasn’t he more observant? How could he not have noticed over the years what I always get? Does he not pay attention to anything I do?

As he sat there, bearing the brunt of my righteous indignation and muttering responses like, “I never noticed,” “I really don’t think it’s that big of a deal,” and “I’ll get it right next time,” I saw his face gradually take on an expression that I’d seen on him a lot in recent years. It was a combination of resignation and demoralization. . . . I suddenly felt terrible. And embarrassed for myself. He was right. It really wasn’t anything to get bent out of shape over.¹⁹

Perhaps many of us have found ourselves in a similarly painful interaction over something so trivial. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf defined for us more clearly the differences between principles and preferences:

While the Atonement is meant to help us all become more like Christ, it is not meant to make us all the same. Sometimes we confuse differences in personality with sin. We can even make the mistake of thinking that because someone is different from us, it must mean they are not pleasing to God. This line of thinking leads some to believe that the Church wants to create every member from a single mold—that each one should look, feel, think, and behave like every other.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are united in our testimony of the restored gospel and our commitment to keep God’s commandments. But we are diverse in our cultural, social, and political preferences.

Reflections

My wife and I approach some things in life in completely different ways. I have a deep need to have order and cleanliness in my home and life because of the intense chaos of my childhood. My wife struggles in these areas. She is more of a creative personality that flits from project to project, most often without what I would consider “finishing” the job and cleaning up the mess. These two very different styles, of course, tend to create conflict in our family life. Many times our house is a wreck and I am stressed as a result, to say the least! It is hard for me, especially when my need for the other way—what I would consider the better way—is so great. Yet I have learned that my wife is more important than order, the house, or anything else.

The Church thrives when we take advantage of this diversity and encourage each other to develop and use our talents to lift and strengthen our fellow disciples.²⁰

DEBRA: *We have successfully navigated several principle-preference issues throughout our marriage. Yet we have also gotten caught up in principle-preference confusion at times. Richard’s personality style is to remain fairly even-keeled. He is steady, looks for solutions to problems, continues to move forward in spite of difficulties, and has faith that things will always work out. He doesn’t get riled up very often. This is a strength in our relationship, especially in high-intensity moments that are caused by external sources. Yet, as part of this style, he tends to minimize himself; he does not draw attention to himself, if at all possible. This has created some problems for us.*

For example, early in our dating and marriage, Richard believed this personal preference to minimize himself was a principle relative to gospel teachings on pride. So, when he overheard me say something about myself or my daughters to friends, he chastised me for trying to draw attention to myself, being self-focused, or being prideful. I did not feel I was being self-focused, but in conversations with friends, I did spend time sharing about myself, just as my friends spent time sharing about themselves. On one occasion, while I was teaching a university class, I briefly mentioned the blessing that my education was in my life. I intended the disclosure to encourage the students and impress upon them the importance of continuing their education so they could have more stable, fulfilling lives. Richard, who happened to be in attendance, saw my comment as an effort to promote myself and later sought to correct me. Accusations such as these from Richard were frequent in those early years, were very painful, and created conflict as I felt unrighteously judged and completely misunderstood.

RICHARD: *Over time the pressure on this issue eased. In full irony I recognized that my corrective attitudes toward Debra were illustrative of my own self-righteous pride. I began to see that my minimizing style was my preference and that I had skewed my interpretation of what constituted the problem of pride. I also came to realize that connecting with people in a personable manner is one of Debra's great strengths and allows others to feel she is a trusted friend, teacher, and therapist. It became a powerful and important lesson to me that self-righteousness in marriage can be more damaging than any other type of pride. We both now seek to find ways to celebrate each other's preferences rather than judge them.*

Marriage gives us the task of learning to respect and support each other's principles and preferences. When we do so, we simply will have fewer conflicts. Period. Our general approach for marital navigation is that principles are worth discussing so that partners can attempt to become unified in those areas. Preferences are also worth discussing, but with a different aim—to ultimately recognize that there is strength in

Reflections

About a year and a half after my husband of twenty years died, I met my current husband. In time, as our relationship grew and I started having feelings for him, fear began to overtake me. I had only ever loved one man in all my life. Also, my new love was no longer Mormon, and he and his children had a different lifestyle than my girls and I did. Many of my favorite family members and friends are not Mormon, and I have tremendous respect for them, but this was different, or so I thought. As I prayed and contemplated these things, I received a powerful answer: "Just love him." Loving someone who is like me is easy, but loving someone who is different from me—truly loving that person, without judgments or assumptions—is what I believe expands my capacity to love and is the very thing that makes me more like Christ. The feeling I had was that I was trying to make sense of heavenly things with a mortal mind and that I should just let go and love him. I felt incredible peace in this. After I made my decision to let myself fall in love, I learned quickly that focusing on our differences always brings confusion and fear, but when I focus on what we have in common, we experience incredible joy and power. I've learned that our belief systems are fundamentally in alignment. We both believe that the most important things in life are love, kindness, forgiveness, service, honesty, and light. He's been a tremendous influence for good in our home. He continually inspires and empowers me. Recognizing his profound goodness allows me to let go and not feel the need to change him but, instead, to just love him.

diversity and use the discussion to promote and encourage personal preferences.

Sometimes it may be the case that our spouse *is* struggling to obey *principles* of the gospel. If we feel something is vital to the welfare of our marriage or our family and we decide a discussion with our spouse is warranted, it is necessary to always remember seeking to behave in a Christlike manner, particularly employing the principle of charity and remembering the gift of agency. President Dallin H. Oaks has counseled: “In so many relationships and circumstances in life, we must live with differences. Where vital, our side of these differences should not be denied or abandoned, but as followers of Christ we should live peacefully with others who do not share our values or accept the teachings upon which they are based. The Father’s plan of salvation, which we know by prophetic revelation, places us in a mortal circumstance where we are to keep His commandments. That includes loving our neighbors of different cultures and beliefs as He has loved us.”²¹

Our spouse may be this neighbor. This teaching becomes particularly relevant in marriages where spouses are not unified in gospel living or even Church membership. Rupertus Melde-nius, a Lutheran theologian and educator, called for unity and the practice of charity. In time his teaching shortened to read, “In the essentials, let there be unity. In the non-essentials, let there be liberty. In all things, let there be charity.”²² Without charity, the pure love of Christ, we *all* have the potential to become self-righteous jerks.

When these types of sensitive discussions occur, we each must remember the Savior’s mandate to avoid contention—even when we and our spouse have different opinions over points of principle: “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” (3 Nephi 11:28–29). Rather than live in contention, it is the Savior’s will that we love one another: “And he commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye . . . having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another” (Mosiah 18:21). As we do this and remember the glorious gift of agency that we all enjoy, we will be able to have discussions when our principles differ without resorting to destructive means, thus drawing our hearts closer. It is only under these circumstances that perspectives on the principle we are discussing may draw nearer together as well.

On the other hand, if a particular issue of conflict represents an issue of preference, ask the following question: “What *principle* is illustrated by my spouse’s preference?” Identifying the answer to this question is very important for reducing moments of conflict. Our preferences may reveal our valued principles. If we identify our spouse’s values in a moment of potential conflict, we may be able to shift our attention to the good intentions of our spouse. This inevitably will produce a more respectful feeling towards them.

Reflections

Being an extrovert married to an introvert has its challenges. While I need to have friends and be able to visit with them, my husband needs small groups for short periods. In the beginning of our marriage, I thought I needed to force social gatherings on my spouse and that he should just be able to get used to it. When going to events, our nights would always end at about 9:00 p.m., which is ordinarily when he had enough and would want to go home. Having been taught that I should always leave an event with my spouse, I would leave, which meant our nights ended with at least one of us being very unhappy. After some struggling and even depression, we finally figured out that through communication, understanding, and love, there was a solution. We have found that it is very important to be together at social gatherings most of the time, but not all the time. Now, when we go out and my loving introvert has had enough, he will often head home and relieve our son from babysitting, while I stay with our friends for a little longer. While this is not always the case—as sometimes I will still go home with him, and sometimes he’ll even stay with me—we have recognized that there are times when we have different needs. Our love grows from this understanding.

Reflections

My wife and I were married earlier this year. Since then we've learned to be better at kindly but openly communicating how we feel when there is a difference of opinion. Going into a discussion about a conflict, we both try to acknowledge that our feelings may be the result of a misinterpretation of the other's words or actions, or of ineffectively communicating our expectations. We try to have conversations at a time and place that we can both be comfortable and then show respect by waiting, listening, and taking turns. We have found that all of these things together bring us closer to the root of the conflict and serve as the foundation for compromise.

For example, if you are feeling irritated because your spouse is talking too much, you can ascertain that their style of interpersonal interaction is a preference. If you went on the attack at the smallest irritation or provocation, you might say something like this: "Gosh, I can't even hear myself think. Can you just stop talking for even a moment?" A rant such as this will inevitably provoke conflict. However, if you take the time to consider the *principle* that is illustrated by your spouse's talking-a-lot preferential behavior, you may, perhaps, realize that your spouse talks a lot because they value feeling connected with you and want to feel closer to you. Realizing that they are trying to feel closer to you would make it fairly difficult to continue to feel irritated in that moment and could entice you toward feelings of affection.

There will be times when we feel prompted to discuss issues of preference relative to how they influence the marital relationship. Sometimes, in discussions of preferences we can, through loving gentleness, persuade our spouse to adopt our preferences over time. Yet this is *not* necessary for a couple to be unified in principle and to have a strong and fulfilling relationship. A marriage will be magnified and strengthened when spouses recognize that in principles there is strength in unity, and in preferences there is strength in diversity. When spouses are unified in principles and yet have diversity in preferences, the marriage gains great strength and richness.

Being unified in principle helps us work together to apply gospel principles and build an

eternal marriage. Being diverse in preferences helps us enjoy different views in life and to specialize in interests that bring individual personality and flavor to the relationship. Our Heavenly Father loves and promotes both.

“Lord, Is It I?”

In the New Testament, during the Last Supper, Jesus Christ announced to the Apostles that one of them would betray Him. Rather than pointing fingers at each other, the responses of the Apostles were acts of humility: “They were exceedingly sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I?” (Matthew 26:22). John Bytheway discussed the principle of meekness relative to this scripture:

If someone were to ask whether communication skills or meekness is most important to a marriage, I’d answer meekness, hands down. You can be a superb communicator but still never have the humility to ask, “Is it I?” *Communication skills are no substitute for Christlike attributes.*²³

Humility and meekness play a far greater role in minimizing and even eliminating marital conflict than any other characteristics. One writer observed:

Without . . . theological perspectives, . . . secular exercises designed to improve our relationship and our communication skills (the common

Reflections

Several years ago, I noticed something in my own marriage that began to bother me. I wished I could blame this problem on my wife, but I knew that I was the problem. I became aware that each time my wife would question a decision I had made or take another approach or angle to an idea I had, I began to be defensive. I would immediately counter back with, “Why don’t you ever like my ideas?” or “Do I get a say on this?” or “How come you never like the way I do things?” The more I defended myself, the more angry and resentful I became. Then, one day, with sudden clarity, I realized that I was not being meek. Instead, I was being proud, selfish, and defensive. After all, my wife’s ideas were not a direct attack on me—she was simply trying to help me improve my business, our lawn, or the ward where I was serving as bishop. And frankly, her ideas were very good. I recognized that had I been meek and humble, I would have received her counsel and wisdom as revelation from heaven.

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

tools of counselors and marriage books) will never work any permanent change in one's heart: *they simply develop more clever and skilled fighters!*²⁴

DEBRA: *In marital therapy it is common to teach I-statements to help couples improve communication. An I-statement is one in which one spouse expresses to the other how they feel—their experience in the moment—rather than making statements that are accusatory and hostile, for example, “I felt hurt that I didn’t hear from you while you were away” or “I felt unloved when you were sarcastic last night.” Someone who has not sought the spirit of meekness in the moment of confrontation might still feel justified in their hostility if they seek to only apply communication skills and fail to implement fundamental Christlike attributes. To make the point with therapy clients about how we can inappropriately manipulate communication skills if we don’t have the right spirit in our hearts, I have joked with them as I have counseled: “I feel like you are a jerk!” is not an I-statement!*

Yet, as we seek humbly to ask, “Lord, is it I?” we may still be tempted to hold on to a deeper-level belief that even though we have some things we need to change, our spouse’s problems are *really* at the heart of the issue. Holding onto this belief can be especially tempting if our spouse is struggling with something quite glaring and obviously pathological or problematic. In these circumstances, we must make the Olympic effort to dig deep within ourselves in the search for Christlike humility and meekness and refocus ourselves upon this all-important question: “Lord, is it I?”

In a priesthood session of general conference, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf addressed the need to ask, “Lord, is it I?” and spoke of the humility needed to accept the answer: “And if the Lord’s answer happens to be ‘Yes, my son, there are things you must improve, things I can help you to overcome,’ I pray that we will accept this answer, humbly acknowledge our sins and shortcomings, and then change our ways by becoming better husbands, better fathers, better sons.”²⁵ The ability to accept the answer to this question requires sincere humility and determination to follow our Savior in all things.

A powerful example of this principle comes from LDS, *New York Times* best-selling author Richard Paul Evans, as he candidly shared a blog post entitled “How I Saved My Marriage”:

For years my wife Keri and I struggled. Looking back, I’m not exactly sure what initially drew us together, but our personalities didn’t quite match up. And the longer we were married the more extreme the differences seemed. . . . We were on the edge of divorce and more than once we discussed it.

I was on book tour when things came to a head. . . . I had reached my limit. That’s when I turned to God. . . . I don’t know if you could call it prayer—maybe shouting at God isn’t prayer, maybe it is—but whatever I was engaged in I’ll never forget it. I was standing in the shower of the [hotel] yelling at God that marriage was wrong and I couldn’t do it anymore. As much as I hated the idea of divorce, the pain of being together was just too much. . . . Why had I married someone so different than me? Why wouldn’t *she* change?

Finally, hoarse and broken, I sat down in the shower and began to cry. In the depths of my despair powerful inspiration came to me. *You can’t change her, Rick. You can only change yourself.* At that moment I began to pray. If I can’t change *her*, God, then change *me*. I prayed late into the night. I prayed the next day on the flight home. I prayed as I walked in the door. . . . That night, as we lay in our bed, inches from each other yet miles apart, the inspiration came. I knew what I had to do.

The next morning I rolled over in my bed next to Keri and asked, “How can I make your day better?” . . .

The next day I asked the same thing. . . .

The next morning came. “What can I do to make your day better?” . . .

The next morning I asked again. And the next. And the next. Then, during the second week, a miracle occurred. As I asked the question Keri’s eyes welled up with tears. Then she broke down crying. . . .

I continued asking for more than a month. And things did change. The fighting stopped. Then Keri began asking, “What do you need from me? How can I be a better wife?”

The walls between us fell. We began having meaningful discussion on what we wanted from life and how we could make each other happier. No, we didn’t solve all our problems, I can’t even say that we never fought again. But the nature of our fights changed. Not only were they becoming more and more rare, they lacked the

Gems

“David and Mary were Quakers, and mutual respect was the bedrock of their relationship. Even when they argued, they addressed each other as ‘thee’ and ‘thou,’ so the underlying tone was one of civility, caring, and intimacy. When I asked them how you can take a marriage vow that will last for the rest of your life, I was surprised by David’s answer: ‘You don’t.’ Then Mary explained, ‘You take it anew every day.’”²⁹

energy they’d once had. We’d deprived them of oxygen. We just didn’t have it in us to hurt each other anymore.

Keri and I have now been married for more than thirty years. I not only love my wife, I like her. I like being with her. I crave her. I need her. Many of our differences have become strengths and the others don’t really matter. We’ve learned how to take care of each other and, more importantly, we’ve gained the desire to do so.²⁶

Following Christ’s Example

Ultimately, following the example of Jesus Christ will provide the greatest inoculation against marital conflict. James 3:13, 17–18 states:

Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. . . .

The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

Seeking to employ the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ with a genuine heart, thus working to become more Christlike in character, will inoculate our marriage against destructive processes. Being Christlike doesn’t mean there will never be disagreement, but it will protect us from causing greater damage to the eternal quality of our relationship while we try to resolve the disagreement. In other words, we will be able to disagree without being disagreeable.

President Wilford Woodruff spoke of protection from the destroying angels and other

destructive influences: “If you do your duty, and I do my duty, we’ll have protection, and shall pass through the afflictions in peace and safety. Read the scriptures and the revelations. . . . It’s by the power of the gospel that we shall escape.”²⁷ On another occasion, President Woodruff spoke again of how we may obtain protection from the destroying angels: “Wherever the eternal, everlasting and holy priesthood or its influence dwells, there is protection and salvation.”²⁸ The more common destroying angels in our marriages, against which we can secure protection, are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, and affective negativity.

President Woodruff spoke of the “power of the gospel” and the “holy priesthood or its influence” as means of protection against these destructive angels. These may be summarized with several verses from Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 121:41–46) which not only speak of destructive forces we need to remove from our characters but also highlight the necessity of infusing a variety of positive qualities into our interactions with others: persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned (i.e., being genuine and sincere), kindness, pure knowledge, faithfulness, charity, and virtue. In order to employ these qualities in our relationship, we have to internalize these qualities within our own hearts. The presence of positive qualities—such as simple kindness, meekness, and humility—will provide protection against destructive forces

Reflections

A principle that has made an impression in my life stems from the scripture Ephesians 5:25, which says, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” For nineteen years growing up at home, and the subsequent times over the past twenty-six years I have been back to visit, I have never heard my father raise his voice to my mother. I am grateful to say that my father’s example has made a profound impression on my marriage too. For twenty-two years, I can say my voice has not been raised to my beautiful princess, nor her voice to me. It isn’t to say that we have not disagreed on things. But we committed to each other while we dated that working out differences would never occur with raised voices. I know this principle of loving each other as Christ loved the Church has blessed and strengthened our marriage in countless ways.

and lead to harmony, joy, and happiness within the marriage relationship.

Navigating Perpetual Issues

This chapter would be incomplete without a discussion of how to address those irksome recurrent, or perpetual, issues that cause conflict in marriage. Perpetual issues are ongoing relationship dynamics or specific reoccurring behaviors that cause marital frustration, annoyance, or even conflict over and over again in a variety of contexts. Each of us that has been married for more than a couple of months has experience with perpetual issues.

In spite of the honest and even effective efforts we may make to resolve conflict in any given moment, we generally find that because of the weakness of the flesh, the same or similar difficulties come up again and again—and again—over many years. We often see a difficulty as something our spouse does that drives us nuts. It may be a problem we seem to resolve for a time, but then we soon find it back again. Each time *that* problem comes up, we confront and discuss and negotiate and attempt to solve, feeling a bit empowered with renewed hope in the relationship; and each time the problem arises again we feel deflated and defeated, even feeling discouraged that we really haven't made any progress in our marriage at all.

In his work, John Gottman indicates that perpetual issues generally stem from life dreams that are hidden or not being respected in the marriage. This creates a lot of emotion that tends to lead to conflict. Gottman and colleague have counseled: "One good indicator that you're wrestling with a hidden dream is that you see your spouse as being the sole source of the marital problem. . . . It may indicate that you don't see your part in creating the conflict because it has been hidden from view."³⁰ Openly acknowledging the deeper meanings behind the issue can expose unacknowledged dreams. Examples of hidden dreams may

include “I want to feel connected to my extended family” or “I want to feel that my life is meaningful” or “I want to feel stable financially so I have energy for other things.”

So what can be done about these sticky, ongoing problems? As we have indicated throughout this chapter, our first step is always to turn to our Savior, Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul struggled with a perpetual problem in his life. Relative to the purpose of the problem, his efforts to eradicate it from his life, and the Lord’s response to his efforts, he records:

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians 12:7–9)

The word sufficient means “enough.” Christ assures Paul that His grace is enough for the Apostle. We must remember that He can sustain and support us, even when a problem remains ongoing. Are you feeling overwhelmed by a “yet again” situation? Pull out the scriptures and read what our Savior would say to you. There is great power in His word and His assurances (see chapter 9). In John 16:33, the Savior says, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Even as we try to draw near to our Savior, we would do well to also increase our ability to navigate these issues more productively with our spouse. Thus, we also need to work directly with our spouse through purposeful and effortful discussion. Gottman and colleague indicate that in these types of problems the goal is *not* to solve the problem but to “move from gridlock to dialogue. The gridlocked conflict will probably always be a perpetual issue in your marriage, but one day you will be able to talk about it without hurting each other.”³¹

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

Gottman and colleague suggest five steps we can take to navigate the gridlock of a perpetual issue in our marital relationship:

1. Discover the dream that is not being honored in the marriage. Did you bury a dream, thinking you needed to do so to make the marriage work?

2. Write about your side of the dream, while your spouse writes about their side. Each of you explains where your dream came from and why it is meaningful to you. Then dialogue with your spouse, each of you taking fifteen minutes to speak while the other listens. The goal is not to problem solve or offer rebuttals to each other but to achieve understanding about why each of you feels the way you do about the issue.

3. Offer support to each other through this stressful process by soothing or calming each other.

4. Begin to work through accepting the differences between you and coming to an initial compromise that will allow you to continue discussion without the issue being so painful. This can be done by identifying core aspects of the issue on which you feel you cannot compromise and aspects for which you feel you can be more flexible. Use these lists to guide the compromise process and then practice those positions for a few months before revisiting the discussion. Although it is not expected that this will solve the problem, it will allow some peace to surround the issue.

5. Express gratitude to your spouse for all that you have together and for the effort you both went through in working to build up your relationship by addressing the perpetual issue. Tell your spouse three things you appreciate about them. This will help you end the discussion on a positive note.³²

This process gets to the heart. It takes energy and commitment, but it will pay handsome dividends. Gottman and colleague have counseled, "Keep working on your unresolvable conflicts. Couples who are demanding of their marriage are more likely to have deeply satisfying unions than those who lower their expectations."³³

Over the course of our marriage, we have found greater acceptance and peace relative to many of our perpetual issues. Discrepancy in desires and needs on a variety of fronts used to be cause for many a strong discussion early in our marriage. In one flavor or another, over a variety of issues, a similar dynamic would emerge again and again that would leave us feeling unloved, misunderstood, and dissatisfied. Over time we have learned that this process does not occur because we are trying purposely to fail each other but because we just *can't* meet 100 percent of each other's needs. As we have come to recognize and accept this truth without feeling threatened by it, we have found peace and stability within our relationship even though we are still not meeting each other's needs as we would prefer. So now, instead of conflict around these issues, there is flexibility.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have discussed the necessity of being meek and humble, following the Savior's example in all things—even when there is conflict. The antithesis of any destructive force in marriage is meekness.

Avoiding or minimizing conflict in marriage requires hard work and ongoing, purposeful efforts. There really are no shortcuts. We need to look to God to discover what we can change about ourselves rather than placing blame on our spouse. Avoiding destructive behaviors, gaining a clearer perspective, and building personal Christlike characteristics will help each spouse in their ongoing efforts to be peacemakers rather than marriage wreckers.

Notes

1. John M. Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 40.
2. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 27–29.

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

3. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 28.
4. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 29–31.
5. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 65.
6. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 65.
7. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 31–33; emphasis in original.
8. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 33.
9. John J. Davies et al., “Habitual, Unregulated Media Use and Marital Satisfaction in Recently Married LDS Couples,” *Western Journal of Communication* 76, no. 1 (2012): 65–85.
10. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 33.
11. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 33.
12. Alesia Hanzal and Chris Segrin, “The Role of Conflict Resolution Styles in Mediating the Relationship Between Enduring Vulnerabilities and Marital Quality,” *Journal of Family Communication* 9 (2009): 150–69.
13. Hanzal and Segrin, “Role of Conflict Resolution.”
14. John M. Gottman, Janice Driver, and Amber Tabares, “Repair During Marital Conflict in Newlyweds: How Couples Move from Attack-Defend to Collaboration,” *Journal of Family Psychotherapy* 26, no. 2 (2015): 85–108.
15. Gottman, Driver, and Tabares, “Repair During Marital Conflict.”
16. Wendy Ulrich, “‘Stop it’ and Forgive,” 5 June 2012, <http://www.ksl.com/index.php?sid=20705426&nid=481>.
17. Carolina Pansera and Jennifer La Guardia, “The Role of Sincere Amends and Perceived Partner Responsiveness in Forgiveness,” *Personal Relationships* 19 (2012): 696–711.
18. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 27.
19. MissFranJanSan, “I Wasn’t Treating My Husband Fairly, and It Wasn’t Fair,” *Sunny Skyz*, 28 December 2014, <http://www.sunnyskyz.com/blog/610/I-Wasn-t-Treating-My-Husband-Fairly-And-It-Wasn-t-Fair>; story originally posted on Reddit.
20. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Four Titles,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 59.
21. Dallin H. Oaks, “Loving Others and Living with Differences,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 28.
22. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. M. Eerdmans, 1910), 7:650–53.
23. John Bytheway, *When Times are Tough: 5 Scriptures That Will Help You Get through Almost Anything* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 42.
24. Douglas E. Brinley, *Toward a Celestial Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 7.
25. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Lord, Is It I?,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 58.

WORKING THROUGH DIFFERENCES

26. Richard Paul Evans, "How I Saved My Marriage," 9 February 2015, <http://www.richardpaulevans.com/saved-marriage/#6FgOUXBlJxdjTGrf.01>.
27. Wilford Woodruff, "The Temple Workers' Excursion," *Young Woman's Journal* 5 (August 1894): 512–13.
28. Wilford Woodruff, quoted in Donald W. Parry, *Angels: Agents of Light, Love, and Power* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 159.
29. Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008), 262–63.
30. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 224.
31. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 217.
32. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 225–41.
33. Gottman and Silver, *Seven Principles*, 224.