



Marriage: More Than a Commitment—A Sacred Covenant Ordained of God

By Alan J. Hawkins and Lisa Bolin Hawkins

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What defines marriage? It is a sacred, God-ordained covenant rooted in divine purpose, not just a social or legal contract.

“The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (the Proclamation) begins with an affirmation of the divine nature of marriage: “We, the First Presidency and 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 ...” In this essay, we want to help readers find a deeper understanding of this doctrinal principle by exploring the meaning of the word *marriage* as used in the Proclamation. Careful reading clarifies that marriage has a specific quality; it is not just a relational or legal status, an official ceremony, or a rich cultural practice.

Unfortunately, across time and place, common practices associated with marriage have diverged significantly—sometimes tragically—from the divine design of marriage. Many elements of the divine meaning of marriage have been ignored in the past or are being damaged in the present, so we need to define the meaning of marriage as intended in the Proclamation.

The Meaning of Marriage

The Proclamation provides a strong internal narrative about the divine meaning of marriage. We see seven core elements of the meaning of God-ordained marriage as set forth in the Proclamation.

Woman and Man

The Proclamation twice directly (and several times indirectly) states that marriage is the union of a woman and a man: “[M]arriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God”; “Marriage between man and woman is essential to [God’s] eternal plan.” President Dallin H. Oaks [writes](#): “God’s purposes for establishing marriage have not changed. One purpose of [the Proclamation] is to reaffirm the Church’s declaration that marriage is the lawful union of a man and a woman. ... No mortal law ... can override or nullify the moral standards established by God.”

The Proclamation’s redundantly explicit statements about the gender complementarity of marriage can be understood in its political context in 1995 when the movement to legally recognize same-sex unions was gaining early momentum. In the next two decades, many U.S. states and, eventually, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed this legal right. Currently, 38 countries, with more than 20% of the world’s population, provide legal recognition to same-sex unions.

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President Oaks gives several reasons for the man-woman meaning of marriage in “[The Divine Institution of Marriage](#),” including the close link between the God-given power of procreation and marriage’s vital role in rearing and teaching children. He also argues that legalized same-sex marriage decouples gender

from the meaning of marriage and strains the complementary natures of fathering and mothering. President Oaks concludes: "Same-sex marriage cannot be regarded simply as the granting of a 'new right.' It is a far-reaching redefinition of the very nature of marriage itself. It marks a fundamental change in the institution of marriage in ways that are contrary to God's purposes for His children."

While affirming the Church's teachings about the divine nature of marriage, President Oaks also "reaffirms that church members should address the issue of same-sex marriage with respect and civility and should treat all people with love and humanity." The Church has openly supported state legislation to solidify certain LGBT+ rights and has supported federal legislation that tries to balance the legal right for same-sex couples to marry with legal protections for individuals and organizations that follow deeply held religious teachings on the divine man-woman meaning of marriage. The law strives to protect those who believe in the Proclamation's divine approval of marriage between a woman and a man.

Legal, Sexual Union

God ordained marriage to be the proper public guardian and host of sexual union. The Proclamation declares, "God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, *legally and lawfully wedded* as husband and wife," and "children are entitled to birth *within the [legal] bonds* of marriage ..." (emphases added).

Perhaps this is the most widely disregarded and challenged aspect of the meaning of marriage in contemporary society. **Most people** now choose to live together in a sexual union without legal recognition before they marry. For some, premarital cohabitation is a form of dating, while for others it is a significant stage in romantic relationship development that may lead to a decision to marry. Many believe that cohabitation provides the basis for a wise decision about marriage. But cohabiting unions across the world are much less stable than marriages, and in the United States, most do not evolve into marriage. Moreover, those who live together first but go on to marry actually experience, on average, **lower marital quality** and higher risk of divorce than those who do not cohabit before marriage (or who are formally engaged before moving in together).

Nevertheless, people cling to the secular logic of cohabitation despite the empirical evidence challenging it. To refrain from sex before marriage is no simple ask anymore. We live in a sex-saturated society that views chastity as backward and unnatural, even unwise and possibly harmful. Those who strive to live the Lord's law of chastity swim against a strong cultural current and get little support from society.

Sex within the bonds of marriage is, however, divinely ordained as a beautiful and powerful way to express love, bond spouses, and bring God's children into the world. The Proclamation states: "We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed." God's latter-day endorsement of marriage, then, is also an affirmation of the good of sexual union within the bonds of legal marriage.

Fertility and Childrearing

God commanded Eve and Adam—and their descendants—to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Moses 2:28). The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that marriage is ordained of God in part so that "the earth might answer the end of its creation; And that it might be filled with the measure of man" (Doctrine and Covenants 49:16–17). The Proclamation affirms that this commandment applies today: "The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force." Modern methods give couples some choice about when and how many children to have. (And the Church does not inquire into these personal choices.) But the Lord's commandment to bring God's children into mortality "remains in force."

Of course, infertility always has been and continues to be a challenge. Medical interventions help some couples to overcome infertility. Adoption may be possible for some couples. Adopting children who need a stable, loving home [blesses](#) the adopted children and their parents and siblings.

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The Proclamation also reminds us of the divine pattern for rearing these precious spirit children of God: "Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity." A

vast [research literature](#) documents the benefits to children of being born and reared in a stable two-parent family, so much so that scholarly fudging on this finding now comes off more and more like [science denial](#) than compassion for alternative family forms. When possible, married couples are to bring children into their homes and bring them up in stability with a loving father and mother.

Complete Fidelity

The Proclamation affirms that marriage is a sexually exclusive union: “The sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman lawfully wedded as husband and wife.” And the unrepentant sin of infidelity will follow us to the judgment bar of God: “We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity ... will one day stand accountable before God.”

Even in our age of sexual so-called liberation, the norm of marital fidelity is still relatively strong, although [younger people](#) seem to be more accepting of infidelity than older people. A third of all adults say that “open marriages,” where spouses mutually agree that it’s okay to date and have sex with someone else, are acceptable. But half (51%) of *young* adults (18–29, mostly unmarried) today say that open marriages are acceptable. The best [estimates](#) of marital infidelity are that about 20% of men and 13% of women have been sexually unfaithful while married.

Infidelity is strongly associated with a [high risk](#) of marital breakdown. One study finds that infidelity is the [second most common factor](#) reported by divorced individuals as contributing to their divorce (lack of commitment is first). Violated trust is very difficult to restore. In Restoration scripture, the Lord affirms that the commandment against infidelity, which has been given since the beginning, remains in force today: “Thou shalt not commit adultery; and he that committeth adultery, and repenteth not, shall be cast out” (Doctrine and Covenants 42:24). But the Lord also enhances this fundamental commandment: “Thou shalt love thy wife [or husband] with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her [or him] and none else” (Doctrine and Covenants 42:22). Full-hearted cleaving includes “forsaking all others.”

Equal Partnership and Oneness

The Proclamation clarifies that marriage is a partnership of equals: “In these sacred responsibilities [as parents], fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.” **President Hinckley**, under whose leadership the Proclamation was written, taught young men: “The wife you choose will be your equal. ... In the marriage companionship, there is neither inferiority nor superiority. The woman does not walk ahead of the man; neither does the man walk ahead of the woman. They walk side by side as a son and daughter of God on an eternal journey.”

Younger readers may not fully comprehend how impactful the term “equal partners” was when the Proclamation was first read to the Church in 1995. It came during a time of prolonged controversy in the Church about the family roles of men and women. Many church members still accepted the traditional notion that women were subordinate in marriage and subject to their husband’s decision-making authority. Many faithful Saints struggled with the discordance of this idea with other gospel doctrines and ideals, and some left the Church because they thought it had not stated clearly enough the fundamental equality of women and men before God. One of President Hinckley’s strongest, most consistent messages to the Church was that men and women were equal partners in marriage.

The Proclamation does not explicitly refer to Jesus’ teaching about oneness in marriage: “... from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; And they twain shall be one flesh; so then they are no more twain, but one flesh” (Mark 10:6–9). Oneness is implied, however, in “equal partnership” and is crucial to a full understanding of the meaning of marriage.

From the Creation, God knew that it is “not good that man should be alone” (Moses 3:18). The divine purpose of marriage is for two individuals to become as one, the complete opposite of “alone.” The commandment to become one as wife and husband may be the highest manifestation of the general commandment: “I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27). To become like our Heavenly Parents is to grow from two individuals into one united entity that will become eternally more than the sum

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of its individual parts. To us, this revolutionary Restoration doctrine means that it is the weaving together of gender—the integration of two genders into one eternal unit—that should be highlighted even more than the distinctiveness of maleness and femaleness.

the meaning of marriage.



Two hands, two threads, one fabric—woven together in unity.

Permanent Bond

The Proclamation does not say directly that marriage is meant to be eternal. However, Jesus Christ declared, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mark 10:9). Moreover, the Proclamation implies the permanence of marriage when it affirms the eternal potential of the marital union: “Sacred ordinances available in holy temples make it possible for ... families to be united eternally.”

Modern prophets have acknowledged that divorce can be acceptable, even though “from the beginning of the creation,” marriage was divinely designed to be an unbreakable bond (Mark 10:5–6). President James E. Faust affirmed the permanent quality of marriage while also recognizing that there are justifiable reasons for divorce. He **taught**: “What, then, might be ‘just cause’ for breaking the covenants of marriage? ... I confess I do not claim the wisdom nor authority to definitively state what is ‘just cause.’ ... In my opinion, ‘just cause’ should be nothing less serious than a prolonged and apparently

irredeemable relationship which is destructive of a person's dignity as a human being." In such cases, divorce may be necessary.

Nevertheless, marriage should be entered with a complete commitment to working through all challenges. As one contemporary columnist, [David Brooks](#) put it: "Marriage is the sort of thing where it's safer to go all in, and it's dangerous to go in half-hearted. At the far end, when done well, you see people enjoying the deepest steady joy you can find on this earth."

Of course, we are commanded not to judge—and in the case of divorce, we are seldom in a position to understand, let alone effectively evaluate, another person's difficult decision (or a decision that was imposed on them). We are grateful for a religion that accepts the reality that some marriages may necessarily end, but that extols the permanent commitment of marriage as an attainable ideal.

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Loving and Caring

Finally and crucially, the Proclamation clarifies the quality of marriage. Central to the meaning of marriage is the vow that "Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other" The Proclamation also teaches that "successful marriages ... are established and maintained on principles of ... respect, love, [and] compassion." Moreover, "Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded on the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ." [President Russell M. Nelson](#) teaches that marriage deserves our best efforts. For instance, he counseled priesthood holders: "Brethren, your first and foremost duty as a bearer of the priesthood is to love and care for your wife. ... Make it easy for her to want to be yours. No other interest in life should take priority over building an eternal relationship with her."

Abuse of any kind in marriage is the antithesis of love and care and is strictly condemned. Over the past several decades, society has become more aware of and sensitive to the awful reality of domestic violence and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The Proclamation reinforces this: "We warn that individuals ... who abuse spouse or offspring ... will one day stand accountable before God." Church leaders have taught

this consistently during our lifetimes. For instance, [President Hinckley](#) boldly taught priesthood holders in 2002: “How tragic and utterly disgusting a phenomenon is wife abuse. Any man in this Church who abuses his wife, who demeans her, who insults her, who exercises unrighteous dominion over her is unworthy to hold the priesthood. ... Any man who engages in this practice is unworthy to hold a temple recommend.” In this same bold sermon, President Hinckley preached: “I am confident that when we stand before the bar of God, there will be ... searching questions concerning our domestic relations. And I am convinced that only those who have walked through life with love and respect and appreciation for their companions and children will receive from our eternal judge the words, ‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant: ... enter thou into the joy of thy lord’ (Matt. 25:21).”

The Proclamation states, “Marriage between man and woman is essential to [God’s] eternal plan.” This relationship, with its necessary virtues and sacrifices, is part of a divine plan of eternal growth and progression. Marriage is ordained of God because it prepares us for the eternal life that our Heavenly Parents live. The loving and caring, committing and enduring, sexual fidelity and bonding, nurturing of children, and striving toward oneness yield sweet fruit over the years, such that [President Russell M. Nelson](#) says: “Marriage brings greater possibilities for happiness than does any other human relationship.” We shouldn’t be surprised that secular [researchers](#), too, are finding that the earthly [benefits of marriage](#)—to adults, children, and communities—are significant. A healthy marriage is the strongest predictor of human happiness that we know. While there is nothing novel in the Proclamation’s teachings about the divine meaning of marriage, to us, they are timely in a society that struggles to accept our Heavenly Parents’ wisdom and will about the great plan of happiness for Their children.

About the authors

[Alan J. Hawkins](#)

Alan J. Hawkins is manager of the Utah Marriage Commission and an emeritus professor in the Brigham Young University School of Family Life. His work focuses on educational interventions and public policies to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and stronger relationships, and prevent unnecessary divorce.

Lisa Bolin Hawkins

Lisa Bolin Hawkins is an editor, writer, family historian, and retired lawyer. She previously taught in the Brigham Young University School of Family Life, the Honors Program, and at the J. Reuben Clark Law School. She has a JD from BYU Law.