



WHAT GOD HATH JOINED

A Public Square Anthology
on The Family: A Proclamation to the World



COMPILED BY

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Thirty years ago, prophets and apostles issued a bold declaration: “***The Family: A Proclamation to the World.***” At the heart of the Proclamation is the truth 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.”

This anthology brings together voices from *Public Square Magazine* to reflect on the meaning and importance of each paragraph of the Proclamation. With clarity and compassion, these essays explore what it means to be children of heavenly parents, stewards of divine roles, and builders of eternal families. In a world of shifting definitions, these truths belong in the public square.

Acknowledgements

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We also honor the thoughtful contributions of our authors. Together they form a chorus of testimony on the divine design of marriage and family.

Finally, we offer our deepest thanks to you, our readers. Your willingness to reflect, wrestle, and rejoice with us in these truths gives purpose to every word. It is our hope that the essays gathered here will strengthen your families and your faith in the eternal plan of God.

With gratitude, we acknowledge the contributors whose voices have united to create this volume:

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Paragraph 1

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.

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

by Alan J. Hawkins, Lisa Bolin Hawkins



March 21, 2025



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.

The most widely disregarded and challenged aspect of the meaning of marriage in contemporary society.

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.

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.

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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.

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 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.



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.”

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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.

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.

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Prophets, the Proclamation, and the “Arena of Warring Gods”

by Loren Marks



May 20, 2024



This is adapted from an episode of “The Raising Family Podcast” S1E10 Solemly Proclaim, Reverence and False Idols. Sociologist Roger Friedman recently wrote that we live in a world that is “an arena of warring gods.” From a social science perspective, those gods include the economic and political gods of money, fame, and power.

Other “gods” include consumerism, pop icons, and football. Super Bowl Sunday features this trifecta in living color via a billion-dollar arena filled with worshippers of the church of the oval brown ball, with a rock and roll deity making an appearance at half time, while the television audience is regaled with multi-million dollar commercials urging us to give our cash offerings to a variety of companies. Indeed, in the words of Dave Ramsey, “We spend money we don’t have, on things we don’t need, to impress people we don’t like.”

In overview then, we have frequently elevated mundane hobbies, diversions, or purchases to serve as our ultimate concerns. It seems that we may have co-created “an arena of warring gods,” where God with a capital ‘G’ tends to be cordially dis-invited from the party—even if the party is on His day.

Regrettably, I have spent far too much of my own time, energy, money, and “worship” in the arena of the lesser warring gods, but every now and then, a prophetic voice will call me to waken from my thoughtless stupor. One of the most potent of those voices was the soft, raspy one of President Spencer W. Kimball.

On the occasion of the United States bicentennial, President Kimball delivered a jolting address entitled “The False Gods that We Worship,” in which he pleaded with the citizens of this nation and members of the church he served to stop worshiping idols of money, power, and the profane.

For many of our wisest cultural critics, whether they are religious prophets or careful, insightful social scientists, a primary concern is that our deepest passions are profoundly misplaced. We have too often chased shiny but inert decoys and become passionately religious about things that “have no life” and hold no ultimate meaning.

Another prophetic voice—or, more accurately, 15 unified voices—redirect us to honor what is truly sacred and holy. In *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, 15 prophets and apostles urge us to seek the sacred and holy things that matter most: eternal concerns on which we can center our lives. They testify that God is our Creator and “Eternal Father” with a plan for us. They “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.” The prophets’ message is that God loves us and has a plan for His children—a plan that involves Godly marriage and a “sacred duty” to our families based on principles of “faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities.”

Guideline or Doctrine?

In discussing *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, we generally do not think about the carefully chosen words used to convey the messages contained within the document. I do not profess to know what was on the minds of the apostles and prophets when this document was written. However, we can recognize and study the particular language used to try to further understand the nature of the proclamation. Again, the beginning of the proclamation says,

*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 and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children. [emphasis added]*

Let us draw particular attention to these words: “solemnly proclaim.” We do not hear that phrase much anymore. In doing a little dictionary work, some synonyms that arise include ‘dignified’ and ‘serious.’ Additionally, the antonyms or opposites for this word include humorous, lighthearted, or trivial. Essentially, what the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles were indicating to us through their words is that these doctrines matter deeply. When I was doing a deeper dive into the word “solemn,” I encountered a related phrase that struck me more than any other: “a matter of life and death.”

A matter of life and death.

If we take notice of the word “proclaim,” some phrases that are similar are ‘to announce’ or ‘declare’ in an official or formal manner. The opposite of ‘proclaim’ is to keep ‘secret.’ If we consider the ancient Hebraic tradition of a prophet speaking from the top of the watchtower or from the city wall, there is a very public kind of urgency to the message. If we put the words together—to “solemnly proclaim”—we can assume there is some matter of life and death being publicly proclaimed. In fact, it’s being shouted from the roof tops. This seems to be the intent of the Proclamation. There have been very few formal proclamations in the history of the Church. They are very rare and very serious. Indeed, the Proclamation on the Family talks about central doctrines which pertain to matters of life and death.



Taking time for what matters most.

Regarding the serious and rare nature of such a proclamation, I believe that the words used are very intentional. If we take notice, there are differences in verbiage between (a) guidelines and (b) laws or commandments. In reading through the Proclamation on the Family, there are several delineated principles. However, in the majority of the Proclamation's nine paragraphs, the carefully selected verbiage includes phrases like "we declare," "God's commandment," "God has commanded," "a solemn responsibility," "sacred duty," "commandments of God," and even more specifically, "we will one day stand accountable before God."

Let us return to the phrase "solemnly proclaimed." Whether we are in ancient Israel, in the early Christian church with Peter and Paul as apostles, or in present times, statements like this go far beyond a guideline or suggestion. The sacred mission of the prophet and apostles is to teach eternal truths and call us to repent. For me, my repentance has often included "awakening" from squandering myself in the arena of warring but meaningless gods. The prophets' mission is to deliver messages of life and death import; messages with both temporal and eternal consequences physically, spiritually, and relationally.

Family is the central meaning and the purpose of the entire play.

If we take the Proclamation seriously, it is far more than a guideline or a set of good ideas; it is a document centered on commandments and covenants. The proclamation calls us to center our lives on our family relationships and on eternal matters. These foci can help turn us from "the false gods we worship" and ennoble us to rise up to our divine inheritance as sons and daughters of God.

Over the last two and a half decades, David Dollahite and I have had the unique opportunity to interview exemplary families from a variety of different faiths. We found that Orthodox Christians believe in a way quite similar to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that marriages and families can be eternal. Additionally, there are those within a variety of faith traditions, including Islam and certain strains of Judaism, who hold similar beliefs.

Further, we have found that many people of various religious backgrounds resonate with the concept of eternal family relationships and have for as long as they can remember. While we believe that marital and family relationships can literally be eternal, it is not a concept that solely belongs to members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Even so, the doctrine is of particular interest to us, and those who study us. Douglas Davies, a careful and thorough scholar of the Church of Jesus Christ from outside the LDS faith, has commented that our doctrine involves a "veritable theology of the family," a theology that presents a three-act play. It is Latter-day Saint doctrine that in Act 1, the family existed before we came to Earth. Further, as the Proclamation outlines, we are children of a Heavenly Father with whom we lived before our present, mortal life.

In Act 2, we come to Earth and experience life and learning in a mortal family. However, in this act, we also learn and are schooled in a mortal family. As Act 2 proceeds, we may have the opportunity to make covenants to God to honor an eternal companion of our own, and to welcome children into our lives.

As we contemplate Act 3, we believe that if we keep certain sacred covenants and promises to God, our family will remain central to our life after death. Accordingly, the family is not merely the scenic, colorful contextual backdrop in these three acts. Rather, family is the core meaning and the purpose of the entire play. We certainly worship God vertically, but He also asks us to express our love and our devotion to Him by creating, deepening, and profoundly investing horizontally in family relationships.

Again, loving family is not just the context for God's plan. It is the plan. It is central.

One Latter-day Saint husband I interviewed had been married for over four decades. He had recorded in a book for his own children, "I love my wife so deeply that there could be no heaven for me without her, and with her, even hell would be tolerable." There are many people across diverse faiths who feel a similar depth of emotion for their families. This is the depth that the Family Proclamation urges us to reach for: the hunger for eternal love, for everlasting love.

Let us close with a statement from the remarkable mind of the Sufi mystic Rumi, who observed, "Maybe you are searching among the branches for what only appears in the roots." The prophets similarly invite us to leave the superfluous for the deep. Like President Kimball, they invite and teach us to love and serve the true God whose plan invites us to place eternal familial love at the center of all we do.

Loren Marks

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Paragraph 2

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

The Givenness of Divine Gender Identity

by Brianna Holmes, Samuel Major



June 21, 2024



Is identity subjective or divine?

Ancient philosophy and modern debates converge to redefine gender perceptions.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, quoting Austin Farrer, used [this quote](#) in asserting the importance of intelligently defending the Restored Gospel,

Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.

These words have provided a foundation for the way in which we want to approach a Latter-day Saint understanding of gender identity and, ultimately, eternal identity. We feel a keen desire to provide ‘reasonable evidence’ for our perspective because, too often in contemporary society, gospel-informed views are dismissed as mystical, unscientific, and insensitive simply because they are also founded in religious teachings.

Therefore, to begin our article, we must first outline five simple propositions that will help guide us through a comprehensive investigation of gender identity.

1. When we engage in conversations about human experiences, we're not merely listing objective observations; we're also offering interpretations based on our implicit or unstated understanding of reality. Put simply, every observation of human life is intertwined with our beliefs about the nature of reality.

2. Second, with this being the case, there are many ways in which one **could** explain various human experiences. Each explanation would be grounded in its own understanding of the nature of the universe and personhood.

3. Third, because there are many different perspectives, they cannot all be true because many are antithetical to one another. For example, it cannot be true that people are both agentic and devoid of free will. Additionally, many of the esteemed and touted ideas of our society face overwhelming criticism based on scientific, historical, philosophical, phenomenological, and spiritual evidence. However, all people are susceptible to false ideas masquerading as truth, even 'scientific' ones.

4. Fourth, all explanations carry assumptions that shape our understanding of personhood, with potential unintended consequences in how people see themselves and structure their lives. This is particularly worrisome for members of the Church of Jesus Christ, as divergent beliefs may steer them away from the teachings of the Restored Gospel. However, these negative outcomes are not always immediately evident, and seemingly innocuous ideas can subtly influence our identities, behaviors, and testimonies.

5. Fifth, because of the worrisome possibility that divergent beliefs about personhood may steer people away from the gospel, particularly those masquerading as truth, it is of utmost importance that members of the Church can discern clearly between the philosophies of men and the doctrines found in scripture and those revealed through living prophets. That way, as Elder Bednar stated, they can learn to "press on [and] hold fast" to the doctrines of the Restored Gospel and "heed not" the philosophies of men.

The topic of human identity, and by extension, gender identity, is no exception to these propositions. Many members of the Church struggle to understand their identity. Additionally, in trying to understand, question, or explore this identity, some have had negative experiences themselves or know those who have had negative experiences due to the insensitivity and misunderstandings of others within the Church. The personal wrestle to know of one's individual place in God's plan in the context of the very real, lived experience of gender dysphoria can be a challenging journey. The difficulty and heartache of this wrestle are not ones we wish to make light of. Our intention is not to dismiss the reality of individual experience with gender dysphoria and the pain a person can experience in trying to navigate and understand themselves. Leaders of the Church have often addressed these experiences as being real and in need of compassionate understanding; we echo those statements most ardently.

In line with the 5 propositions previously mentioned, our aim is to help people see that there are different ways that we can understand mortal experiences with sexuality, including feelings of attraction, dysphoria, or even the expression of one's sexuality. We will address two salient ways of understanding our gender identities:

1. Contemporary gender identity (CGI): Gender identity is found within us; its reality is based upon our sense or feelings about ourselves and is not necessarily related to our physical body/presentation or our biological sex. This way of understanding human sexuality is far newer in the history of ideas.

2. Divine gender identity (DGI): Human sexuality goes beyond the modern conceptualization of 'gender identity' and presumes that **moral sexual embodiment**, in which gender and sex are unified, has a divine intent and purpose bound within eternal families and exaltation.

To accomplish our aim, we wish to provide a simple yet clear descriptive comparative analysis between these two understandings of gender identity in order to clarify their differences and alleviate some of the confusion people experience when trying to understand their experiences with gender. While many of the topics we discuss can apply to a broad application of human sexuality, this article seeks only to address gender identity. We explore the ideas behind gender identity by (1) naming the assumptions about personhood undergirding those ideas that are taken as fundamental realities, (2) linking some of the main claims of each understanding of gender identity to each assumption articulated, and (3) summarizing the assumptions of the two views to show their differences, and concluding with some remarks.

Contemporary Gender Identity

Regarding sexuality and personhood, the contemporary approach to gender identity asserts at least three key claims wherein its fundamental assumptions are clearly established and through which a clear contrast between CGI and DGI can be demonstrated. Additionally, we feel it important to note that our understanding of CGI has been greatly influenced by the various works of Carl Trueman on the subject, who has provided an extensive analysis of the history of the ideas underlying CGI, pointing to the various philosophers and psychologists we will mention here.

To begin to understand the basic concepts of 'identity' and 'self,' we must explore Cartesian dualism. To put it simply, Cartesian dualism is a philosophical position that maintains that the world, and more particularly, human nature, is fundamentally composed of two separate, distinct realities: an internal subjective reality and an external objective reality.

Accordingly, persons are described as 'subjective selves,' whose essential characteristics are internal to them (i.e., their personality or identity) and, thus, distinct and separate from the external world of objects. In this framework, all thoughts, desires, and claims regarding what kind of person one is, or self-understandings, are necessary products of a person's subjective reality. Thus, their

“real self” is the inner self. A person’s body, on the other hand, is taken to be an object of the external world that is separate from (but can be manipulated by) a person’s subjective, inner mind. In other words, in Cartesian dualism, persons’ bodies are likened to a puppet (i.e., an external object) that is manipulated by a puppeteer (i.e., the inner, subjective, “real” person) exerting the force of its will upon the body.

In short, CGI, based on Cartesian dualism, asserts that gender identity and associated behaviors stem from the unique inner feelings and desires of individual persons. In other words, gender identity is a subjective reality and, therefore, the truth about who each person is will be found in reference to that inner reality, which is taken as being completely different than the external reality, not in reference to the physical body that houses that subjective reality (e.g., “I am a man trapped in a woman’s body” or “I feel like a woman”). Additionally, the concept of ‘authenticity’ comes from outwardly living one’s internal reality, or more simply, ‘being true to how we feel on the inside.’ We find the root claims of these statements and ideas not in the 21st century but in Cartesian dualism, an idea that came about hundreds of years ago in the philosophies of Rene Descartes.

Assumption #2: Radical Subjectivism

Understanding the concept of radical subjectivism, particularly illustrated in the ideas of Sigmund Freud, is crucial in understanding CGI. Essentially, radical subjectivism is the idea that the truth about the self is entirely constituted and determined by one’s individual, inner emotional experience, “feelings,” and thus can only truly be known to the individual themselves. As discussed in the previous point, because of the assumption of Cartesian dualism, CGI presumes that gender identity is inside each human being and is distinct from the body. When this is combined with the assumption of radical subjectivism wherein one’s internal emotional experience is the sole arbiter of truth, then there is no apparent or easily distinguishable external characteristic by which individuals or those around them can determine their gender. Accordingly, external genitalia or chromosomes are considered unimportant in determining gender identity because gender, like all other aspects of human identity, is ultimately manifested internally in one’s **subjective feelings**. Such feelings are taken to be the highest authority on an individual’s gender identity such that no one else is allowed to comment on the person’s lived experience. “My feelings are fact” is the heart of radical subjectivism. Therefore, within CGI, “my feelings about my gender are the facts about my gender” is the sentiment.

Feelings are taken to be the highest authority on an individual’s gender identity. Radical subjectivism, then, is the very reason why ardent proponents of contemporary notions of gender and sexuality encourage, even insist, that people be allowed to listen to and explore any and every **gender-related feeling or activity** until it “resonates” with them.

The feelings that “resonate” are interpreted as being in line with the person’s inner gender identity. The emphasis on subjective feelings as indicators of identity is a critical point of difference between how CGI and DGI state persons should understand their gender identity; CGI assumes the superiority of subjective feelings in determining gender, while DGI does not. Many of us have been exposed to the radical subjectivism of CGI as we’ve encountered advertisements like the following that clearly presume that one’s sexuality isn’t obvious.



Contemporary notions of gender identity exploration

Assumption #3: Sexual Moral Relativism

Building upon the idea of radical subjectivism, moral relativism is the notion that moral claims can only be determined true or false depending on an individual’s viewpoint or preference. In other words, moral relativism claims that morality ultimately depends on the perspective of the individual. Given the claim that gender is a fundamentally subjective and internal reality, known only to the individual person through their individual feelings, CGI makes a third **moral** claim about gender identity: there is no right or wrong way to identify, so all persons should pursue any desires, labels, and expressions as they personally see fit to do so in accordance with their subjective sense of their sexuality. In fact, to do so is the ultimately moral thing to do, the highest form of human living. This is what is typically referred to as “living authentically,” as mentioned previously.

Gender identity is considered an eternal and essential part of a person’s identity.

Ultimately, again, the source for any valid **moral** claims about one's gender identity is the individual themselves. Therefore, any moral claims made about a person's gender that come from another source (e.g., social mores, God, church leaders, parents, etc.) are taken to be invalid at best and harmful at worst. It is apparent, then, that the CGI entails **sexual** moral relativism because it is assumed that all questions of what is moral (e.g., what is bad, good, better, or best) when it comes to human sexuality and its expression, including gender identity, depends entirely upon the preferences of the individual. Similar to the first two assumptions of CGI, these ideas also have historical roots in the philosophies of particular men such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the contemporary psychology of authenticity and unconditional positive regard advocated by Carl Rogers.

Summary of CGI

In summary, CGI asserts a conception of personhood in which gender is taken to be subjective and separate from the body (i.e., Cartesian dualism). The truth about gender identity is known only to individuals through their inner subjective emotional experiences (i.e., radical subjectivism), and individuals are morally accountable only to themselves such that they are and must be free to pursue whatever gender identity they wish (i.e., sexual moral relativism). CGI is not some idea that is without consequence—It is founded upon philosophical principles that were thought of long before our time and implicate a great many things, things that we might not want to believe, about who we are as human beings.

Divine Gender Identity

President Nelson articulated that there are [three identities](#) that we should put before all other identities: (1) children of God, (2) children of the covenant, and (3) disciples of Christ. All the principles of divine gender identity (DGI) ultimately point to and support these essential identities. We will discuss at least three key claims wherein DGI supports a gospel understanding of who we are as human beings and what our ultimate purpose is here on Earth.

Assumption #1: Moral Gendered Embodiment

DGI starts from the simple and fundamental claim made in the [Family Proclamation](#) that gender identity is considered an eternal and essential part of a person's identity. Leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ further clarify that gender refers to a person's biological sex and biological sex is patterned relationally (i.e., male bodies in complement to female bodies). In other words, according to DGI, gender is (1) inseparable from how a person's body is **sexed** (i.e., gender is embodied; sex and gender cannot be fully separated), a claim that is a clear contrast to the Cartesian dualism of DGI, and (2), with [very rare](#) and notable exceptions ([which the Church has provided counsel on](#)) bodies are sexed in two complementary ways.

Therefore, **moral gendered embodiment** is the assumption that the truth about a person's gender is, in part, to be found in reference to a person's sexed body and how its complementarity relates to the opposite sex. That is, the truth about one's gender is inseparable from one's sex, and that fact is evidenced in that (1) male bodies differ from female bodies and (2) both are essential in order to bring to pass the unity of husbands and wives required for God's eternal purposes for the family -

—“Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.” While it may be beyond the scope of this article, we wanted to provide another resource that discusses eternal identity in the context of human sexuality beyond the discussion of gender (you can find it [here](#)).

We must have Christ-like patience, long-suffering, and compassion for those navigating such an experience.

Assumption #2: Revelation and Faith

Revelation is a **long-established order** by which the Lord helps us to know and understand both temporal and eternal truths. As such, this is the method for obtaining knowledge assumed by DGI. In other words, revelation is the way by which we ought to seek to know and understand our divine **identity** and purpose, especially in terms of our moral sexual embodiment. For DGI, then, the words of prophets, seers, and revelators, both ancient and modern, teach individuals the divine truths about their identity. Through divine revelation, we have been taught that we are eternally sexed (gendered) as men and women, that sexuality is meant to be expressed in marriage between a man and a woman, and that flourishing eternal gender identity is fully realized in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage found only in temples.



We can be compassionate to those who experience identity questions.

DGI further acknowledges that we will often have experiences that seem to pull us in directions that oppose divine revelation. There are all kinds of ideas and feelings related to moral gender embodiment, many of which are confusing and difficult to understand in light of revealed doctrines about sexuality. For example, the idea of discouraging affirmative care seems cruel if we assume a contemporary understanding of identity. Some may argue that the gospel teaches us to be kind, not cruel, so it would seem the gospel would support the idea of affirmative care/practices. However, we would identify these ideas as mingling scripture and incompatible philosophies. We must exercise caution and be sure that we are starting on the proper premises taught by the gospel in order to find genuine, consistent, and sensible answers. Additionally, given the way that DGI understands gender identity, we must have Christ-like patience, long-suffering, and compassion for those navigating such an experience. However, love and compassion do not necessitate assuming a CGI perspective wherein feelings alone are taken as the authority on one's identity and destiny, especially when they have clear ties to worldly philosophies that have become mingled with scripture. We are meant to overcome the world through Christ, not capitulate to it. As President Nelson conveyed to us in a recent conference address,

What does it mean to overcome the world? It means overcoming the temptation to care more about the things of this world than the things of God. It means trusting the doctrine of Christ more than the philosophies of men.

Revealed doctrines, scriptures, covenants, and the ongoing revelation of prophets, seers, and revelators are the source of knowledge for who we are, including our gender identity. This goes beyond the radical subjectivism of CGI. Perhaps this is why church leaders continually point people to the Family Proclamation and why President Nelson encouraged members to put their identity as children of God, disciples of Christ, and children of the covenant **before** all other identities.

Assumption #3: Covenant Purpose & Divine Destiny

Furthermore, in DGI, moral gender embodiment is taken as a gift from God, a gift given for a divine purpose. Accordingly, gender plays a critical and eternal part in that divine purpose. DGI asserts that sexual powers are complimentary sexed (gendered), given for the purpose of creating families and unifying men and women as husbands and wives in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage. Accordingly, [the law of chastity](#) is the higher moral standard which represents that divine purpose. In other words, God has revealed clear moral standards concerning moral-gendered embodiment.

Moral gender embodiment is taken as a gift from God.

Often, in dialogue about gender and sexual identity, we hear phrases like “God would never expect me to be anything other than what I am,” “God made me this way,” or “God would never expect me to give up my gender identity.” Coming to know who we really are as children of God is, of course, an essential component of the gospel. However, in order to truly fulfill the measure of our creation, we must strive to emulate Christ. In order to become the best of who we were created to be, we must undergo significant change.

Or, put another way, it is in turning to Christ and aiming to become like Him that we, in essence, put off the natural man and return to who we have always been, to our true divine nature, such that we can grow to fulfill our ultimate eternal potential. This implies that there are going to be mortal experiences and temptations on many fronts, some directly related to gender, that try to steer us away from that divine destiny and God's moral standards for gendered embodiment. Indeed, we make covenants in the temple in order to set ourselves apart from worldly understandings about our identity and to pursue becoming who we are meant to become. As Mosiah succinctly [puts it](#):

Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, **changed** from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters. And thus **they become new creatures**; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. [emphasis added]

This is not to say, however, that every mortal experience with gender identity, or even every feeling associated with moral gendered embodiment, can and should be categorized as a temptation or as being depraved. ***We do not wish readers to come away from this using other persons' emotional experiences related to gender as weapons against them.***

That being said, neither is every experience and feeling associated with moral gendered embodiment an unequivocally pure indicator that one's gender is in opposition to one's divine destiny to be sealed in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage. It is because it takes time to understand such a divine destiny that we are repeatedly invited to pray, study scripture, and participate in ordinances that remind us of our covenants on a regular basis that remind us that men and women are meant to be sealed together for time and eternity.

Ty Mansfield, a well-known scholar who has done a lot of work on the intersection of faith and LGBT+ issues, has [said](#) this concerning how such a process takes time in order to realize the truth about gender and sexuality:

... this journey demands greater patience, time, and a readiness to place our trust in God and the expansive cosmic design—requirements that often exceed the patience of prevailing cultural narratives about gender and sexuality.

As we attempt to make sense of the idea of gender as faithful latter-day saints, we ought to exercise our embodied gender in accordance with God's divine purposes. Indeed, we will be held morally accountable for how we teach and live these divine laws. Ultimately, DGI asserts a conception of personhood in which all persons are relationally gendered, can know that truth through faith and revelation, and whose sexual behavior and identity are morally dependent upon God and others as taught and ensured in divine covenants.

Conclusion

Put side by side, we can see a clear difference between the assumptions of a contemporary understanding of gender identity and a divine understanding of gender identity. It is important that we are not deceived by the compelling narratives solely based on the feelings of the individual. Just as our religious ideas are grounded in a specific worldview, so too are those secular perspectives. Simply put, the assumptions of Cartesian dualism, radical subjectivism, and sexual moral relativism are not the same as the assumptions underlying the doctrines of the gospel. Therefore, we must be careful not to adopt these worldly perspectives on ‘identity’ because they contain falsities about who we are, why we are here, and how we should live our lives.

The voices of CGI convey that the gospel is too hard, too unloving, and too intolerant to remain committed to the gospel. Covenants, from this perspective, are a burden that makes life harder. However, as President Nelson has [conveyed](#), “making and keeping covenants actually makes life easier!” While life may be **easier** on the covenant path, that does not mean that life will be **easy**.

President Nelson [promises](#) us that “As we strive to live the higher laws of Jesus Christ, our hearts and our very natures begin to change. The Savior **lifts** us above the pull of this fallen world by blessing us with greater charity, humility, generosity, kindness, self-discipline, peace, and **rest**.” Life is going to be hard, none of us are exempt from that reality. But, life on the covenant path, consistent with our moral gendered embodiment, is better and entails more blessings and peace than we can imagine.

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Paragraph 3

In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshipped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life. The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally.

In the Image of God:

What Our Bodies Reveal About Divine Design

by Rebecca Taylor

February 3, 2025



The Family Proclamation affirms the sacredness of the body and the divine design and purpose of gender.

Years ago, I visited my friend Becky—an occupational therapy student at the time—in the anatomy lab where she was studying. Because I had expressed interest in what she was learning, she offered to show me the cadaver that she and her peers had been working with. Becky spent almost an hour showing me different parts of the body and describing how everything was intricately interconnected, with secondary systems that kicked in when primary systems failed and with separate parts of the body created to work in harmony with one another. As I gazed at that rather smelly, dried-out cadaver, which had been poked and prodded by students for the better part of a year, I was suddenly overwhelmed by how beautiful it was. It seemed as if I were looking at a visual symphony. I found myself blinking back tears, hoping Becky wouldn't notice and think I was a little nuts. But every part of that body seemed to sing of a divine Creator.

The Sacredness of the Body

God, who formed the heavens and the earth, the planets and the galaxies, considers us, His children, to be His crowning creation. He designed our bodies with divine intention: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion ... over all the earth. ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” ([Genesis 1: 26-27](#)).

Every part of that body seemed to sing of a divine Creator.

As Latter-day Saints, we know that the experience of inhabiting a physical body is central to the plan of salvation. The [Proclamation on the Family](#) states, “In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters ... accepted [God’s] plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life.” The body is the vehicle that enables us to carry out our individual missions in mortality.

Christian doctrines are replete with references to the sacredness of the human body. Our bodies, with all their imperfections, are temples for the Holy Ghost (see [1 Corinthians 6:19](#)). In contrast with the popular assertion “My body, my choice,” we do not own our bodies; we are stewards, tasked with caring for them until our mortal journey is through (see [1 Corinthians 6:19-20](#)). Latter-day Saint doctrine further tells us that God created our bodies “in the likeness of our spirits” ([Doctrine and Covenants 77:2](#)) and that the body and the spirit together form the soul (see [Doctrine and Covenants 88:15](#)). Thus, modifying core features of our body might constitute a futile attempt to modify the very soul.

Gender and Sex

Our physical bodies reflect our [innate, eternal gender](#), which is a core part of our identity as children of God. The Family Proclamation states, “Each [of us] is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”

While not all has been revealed to us, we know that our gender, or biological sex, has a fundamental purpose: facilitating reproduction and parenthood. God’s most important role is that of parent, making possible the “immortality and eternal life” of His children (see [Moses 1:39](#)). Our own purpose is to become more like Him. And as joint heirs of Christ (see [Romans 8:17](#)), our opportunities to do so, including through parenthood, stretch into the eternities.

*In contrast with the popular assertion “My body, my choice,”
we do not own our bodies; we are stewards.*

Our gender informs us which of the two parental roles we will have, whether in this life or the next. We ourselves, without exception, each came into being through the union of two biological parents, one male and one female. Because there are only two reproductive roles, there are [only two sexes](#). While one's appearance may be altered, one's sex cannot be changed; it pervades [every cell of the body](#).

Mortality: One Part of an Eternal Plan

An understanding of gender and the function of biological sex is required for parenthood and for building families—the basic building block of society. Stable societies are founded upon stable, loving families. And [research shows](#) that children fare best when they are raised by their biological parents, male and female, who are united in a low-conflict marriage. The Family Proclamation affirms this truth. Yet in this mortal world, for myriad reasons, not all will have the opportunity to be a parent and have a family. And some will experience confusion and distress related to their gender. There may be great pain in recognizing the gulf that lies between one's present circumstances and the ideal. Personally, while I don't experience gender distress, I do know the pain of yearning to have a family of my own but not having the opportunity and thus feeling far from the ideal at times.

There may be great pain in recognizing the gulf that lies between one's present circumstances and the ideal.

I remind myself that mortality, with all its opportunities, sorrows, and joys, was never intended to satisfy all our righteous desires. What matters most in this life is not our family status but the status of our hearts and whether we are trying to follow God's will for our lives. Are we emulating the Savior's expression, "Not my will, but thine, be done"? For some of us, could our individual Abrahamic tests—those tests that "[wrench \[our\] very heart strings](#)"—be to temporarily sacrifice our righteous desires for purposes we cannot fully see? Could some of us be called to learn and grow in ways other than marriage and parenting, at least for a time, and to contribute in ways not available to those with families? Regardless, mortality is not merely [something to endure](#) before "real life" begins after we die. Meaning, purpose, and our part in God's beautiful plan are to be found **now**.

Subjecting Our Will to God's

Our modern secular culture does not encourage us to consider questions and concepts like these or to prioritize God's will for our lives. Indeed, we are often told that we can essentially become our own gods—the clay attempting to become the potter (see [Jeremiah 18:6](#)).

Bryan Johnson—a tech entrepreneur who is engaged in a public effort to reverse aging and avoid death (and who, incidentally, is a former Latter-day Saint)—captured the zeitgeist in a [recent interview](#): "The irony is that we told stories of God creating us. ... I think the irony is that the human storytelling got it exactly in the reverse, that we are the creators of God, and that we will create God in our own image."

Our gendered bodies reflect our eternal identities and are part of His plan, which is both majestic and intimate.

We are told we can have what we want when we want it: we can make profound changes to our bodies and our core identities, have sexual relationships and children outside of marriage, terminate pregnancies at will, choose when to exit our lives through euthanasia, or define marriage in multiple ways. We are repeatedly told to be our “authentic selves,” meaning to follow the lead of our feelings and align with “our truth” rather than “the truth.” Indeed, the very concept of truth is becoming increasingly confused, with objective feelings prioritized over material reality.

But it is only through subjecting our will to God’s and following [His design](#) for our lives, including His design for our gender, that we can reach our full eternal potential and thereby achieve lasting joy.

Love Grounded in Truth

None of us has a life that aligns perfectly with the ideals described in the Proclamation. But as with all scripture and doctrines, what shall we strive for if we do not have ideals? “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp,” wrote the poet Robert Browning, “or what’s a heaven for?” As disciples of Christ with imperfect lives, we are called to respond with love and compassion to our brothers and sisters who have their own struggles. And we are called to do so while remaining grounded in truth.

The truth is that God, who numbers the stars, knows each one of us and created us individually for a divine, unique purpose. Our gendered bodies reflect our eternal identities and are part of His plan, which is both majestic and intimate. As the Psalmist declared, “Thou hast created my inward parts: thou hast formed me in my mother’s womb” ([Psalm 139:13](#); see footnotes). Indeed, we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (v. 14) in God’s image, male and female, with the capacity to inherit all He has. Our greatest fulfillment and meaning can be found when we align ourselves with His eternal design for us.

[Rebecca Taylor](#)

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Where do we come from? According to LDS teachings, humans existed as spirit children with God before physical birth.

One of the most distinctive of all teachings in the restored gospel is the bold but comforting perspective that men and women did not suddenly flare into existence at the time of their physical birth; rather, we have always lived. Indeed, there was never a time when we did not exist. This precious truth began to be revealed as early as 1830 as the Prophet Joseph Smith was engaged in his inspired [translation](#) of the Bible. Later, in a revelation given to the Church in May of 1833, the Lord [declared](#) that “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.”

We lived with our Heavenly Parents in a family setting before we came into this life.

Some years later, it was during Brother Joseph’s [translation of the Egyptian papyri](#) that he learned of our “first estate”—the premortal existence—and about the foreordination of many of the noble and great spirits who would come to earth and serve as leaders in God’s kingdom. In November of 1843, the Prophet [declared](#) that “Every [person] who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was.” Only a matter of weeks before his death, the Prophet Joseph [stated](#):

We say that God himself is a self-existent being. Who told you so? It is correct enough; but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles. . . . ***The intelligence of spirits had no beginning, neither will it have an end.*** That which has a beginning may have an end (emphasis added).

This was a consistent and persistent theme in the teachings of President Lorenzo Snow, the fifth President of the Church. “I believe that we are the sons and daughters of God,” he observed, “and that He has bestowed upon us the capacity for infinite wisdom and knowledge, because He has given us a portion of Himself. We are told that we were made in His own image, and we find that there is a character of immortality in the soul of man.” “We have divinity within ourselves,” he stated on another occasion; “we have immortality within ourselves; our spiritual organism is immortal; . . . [W]e will live from all eternity to all eternity.”

Latter-day prophets have taught that we lived with our Heavenly Parents in a family setting before we came into this life. We were taught and schooled by Them, instructed and prepared to come to earth and take a physical body. President Joseph Fielding Smith explained:

When the time arrived for us to be advanced in the scale of our existence and pass through this [mortal] probation, councils were held, and the spirit children were instructed in matters pertaining to conditions of mortal life, and the reason for such an existence.

The Father’s plan of salvation was presented to us, and we must have had extended conversations about such matters as what earth life would be like, the importance of a physical body, the reality and evil intent of Lucifer and his diabolical hosts, and what would be required of us in terms of receiving and accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ, with its accompanying covenants and ordinances.

Today, we find ourselves on earth, seeing, as the Apostle Paul wrote, “through a glass darkly,” or, as the Revised English Bible renders it, “we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror.” The memories of our first estate and our premortal family relationships are blocked temporarily from our conscious minds. But we **were** once a part of the immediate family of God and **were** taught and nurtured in a family setting for what may have been eons of time.

The Family: A Proclamation to the World teaches: “In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshipped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life.” Consequently, each of us comes to earth with yearnings for closeness, for belonging, for tenderness and affection, for love and happiness; all of these were an integral part of our lives as premortal spirits.

We have been taught by latter-day prophets that the family is the most important unit in time or eternity. It is in the family that loving relationships are formed, personalities are shaped,

values are established, consciences are awakened, Christian qualities and attributes are developed, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His gospel are planted in the human heart. And it is in the family that the greatest fulfillment in this life is to be found.

It is so easy in this busy and exceedingly complex world to be distracted, to begin to focus on means rather than ends, to labor in secondary rather than primary causes. To the extent that we, as members of the Lord's Restored Church, continually strive to maintain the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, we will be led to focus more and more on those matters that are eternally relevant.

President M. Russell Ballard **declared**:

In my ministry, I have learned what matters most is our relationships with Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son, our families, and our neighbors, and allowing the Spirit of the Lord to guide us in those relationships so we can testify of the things that matter most and last longest.

President Joseph F. Smith **taught** that

Our knowledge of persons and things before we came here, combined with the divinity awakened in our souls through obedience to the gospel, powerfully affects, in my pinion, all our likes and dislikes and guides our preferences in the course of this life, provided we give careful heed to the admonitions of the Spirit. ***All those salient truths, which come so forcibly to the head and heart seem but the awakening of the memories of the spirit*** (emphasis added).

A classic example of these "spirit memories" is the kind of vague homesickness we occasionally feel, a longing for another time and place. "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy," C. S. Lewis **stated**, "the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. . . . I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same."

Our souls pine for our eternal home.

Although he may not have understood it fully, Lewis was speaking of our longing for heaven and for heavenly things, an existence we have left behind and long for. Latter-day Saints identify with this sentiment because we have, like others, felt the same longings or homesickness for a time in the distant past wherein we were well acquainted with God and our heavenly family. Our souls pine for our eternal home, for sacred matters and precious episodes that are just beyond the reach of our conscious memory.

President Russell M. Nelson [taught](#) that what we refer to as “the spirit of Elijah” is no more nor less than “the Holy Ghost bearing testimony of the divine nature of the family.” The closer we draw to that Holy Spirit and the more we strive to keep it with us at all times, the clearer will be our views on life here and the sharper will be our focus on things hereafter. As we go into the House of the Lord and are endowed with power from on high, then as we enter into the highest and holiest of all priesthood ordinances in the temple—the new and everlasting covenant of marriage—we begin the formation of an eternal family, a union that transcends time and brings us even closer to that eternal family we left behind when we came into mortality. Moses [wrote](#) that the same Priesthood that was in the beginning—a family order of priesthood government—“shall be in the end of the world also.” And as it is with the Holy Priesthood, so it will be with the eternal family unit, for “[the course of the Lord is one eternal round.](#)”

[Robert L. Millet](#)

Robert L. Millet is a Professor Emeritus and Former Dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University.

Paragraph 4

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. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

A Tale of Two Ecologies: What Environmentalism Overlooks

by Jeff Bennion

December 20, 2024

PS



What is the real ecological crisis? Family and fertility decline threaten human and societal sustainability.

As a child of the 70s and 80s, I vividly remember the fears and controversies roiling the United States and Western Europe. Two dangers dominated the airwaves, one more dramatic than the other, but both equally dire in their fatal finality. The first was the total destruction of advanced civilization via nuclear war. Those lucky enough to survive the initial conflagration were doomed to a slow death and deprivation of “nuclear winter” and a return to the [stone age](#). The second was less dramatic, but considered even more inevitable: unchecked population growth was leading to natural resource constraints that could only be delayed but not solved by human ingenuity, most vividly argued by Paul Ehrlich in his explosive book ***The Population Bomb***, first published in 1968. Evidence of this impending scarcity blanketed the airwaves with vivid images of starving children in Africa and long gas lines at home. If these two scenarios weren’t cheery enough for a “sober child” such as myself, many believed that overpopulation would create competition over access to those shrinking resources, inevitably leading to nuclear war, leading to **both** fears coming to pass. As we studied in my High School English class, the poet Robert Frost [wondered](#) whether the world would end in fire or ice. Many confident authorities I watched and read assured my young impressionable mind that we were sure to experience **both** ends to the world.

Secular versus Religious Solutions to Civilizational Threats

While these concerns consumed cultural attention, closer to home, several unfortunate consequences of the sexual revolution were affecting friends and family all around me. While the radio and TV celebrated premarital and extramarital sex, even then depicting those opposed to these practices as narrow-minded and hateful, closer to home, I had doubts that sexual license was as consequence-free as it was depicted at the movies, on TV, and on the radio. Divorce was seen not just as a last resort to escape an unavoidably abusive and dangerous marriage but increasingly as a means to obtain greater personal satisfaction and fulfillment.

We might refer to these two developments as a tale of two ecologies. One was concerned with the health and sustainability of the planet. The other was concerned with the health and sustainability of the family as a means to nurture, inculcate, and transmit to future generations healthy moral and civilization-preserving values. While secular attitudes about each of these developments were very different, and most secular commenters did not connect the two, some perceptive religious commenters **did** connect them. And the solutions they offered were quite different from the secular solutions proposed, such as a “nuclear freeze” or “population control.” In a [prescient speech](#) given at BYU Provo on February 23, 1970, Neal A Maxwell said:

We hear a lot today about ecology in the world of biological and physical things. We're learning that its laws are inexorable; that when we violate them, we pay a penalty, and we pay a price. I would submit to you, brothers and sisters, that there is an ecology and a world of law that pertain to spiritual things, which, when we violate them, has a series of consequences just as inexorable and just as automatic as the ecology that's born of the world of law and nature; that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a collection of principles weaved together in the fabric of immutable law. [There is no official transcript for this talk, so any errors in transcription or punctuation are mine.]

Just a year later, he published his book [Deposition of a Disciple](#), where he wrote:

There are no victimless crimes, no private wrongs. For every wrong act, there is at least one victim, the doer, and secondary impacts that we just don't have the sophistication to measure. We can't have it both ways: extolling and exhorting over the interrelatedness of things in nature (with which we must truly be more concerned as stewards of this planet) while, at the same time, denying the ecology in human nature.

The connection of ecology with the family is not incidental. A perceptive secular cultural commentator, Neil Postman, [observed](#) that the first use of the word **ecology** was in Greek by Aristotle, coming from the Greek word **ecos** for “household.” Postman encouraged people to be just as discerning and cautious about the kinds of media they let into their homes as the EPA should be about discharges of toxic waste into fragile ecosystems. He died before handheld devices and social media gained currency, but his cautions surely are even more warranted with devices that follow us around everywhere. In 1993 Elder Maxwell riffed on environmental impact studies in the interest of environmental protection by [observing](#):

Even with its flaws, the family is basic, and since no other institution can compensate fully for failure in the family, why, then, instead of enhancing the family, the desperate search for substitutes? Why not require family impact studies before proceeding with this program or that remedy, since of all environmental concerns, the family should be first? Hundreds of governmental departments and programs protect various interests, but which one protects the family?

Elder Maxwell's contemporary, Elder Packer, described himself as an "environmentalist" during a 1992 General Conference talk. [He said](#), "My message is not on the physical but on the moral and spiritual environment in which we must raise our families. As we test the moral environment, we find the pollution index is spiraling upward."

Time Vindicates the Prophets

While I was growing up in the 70s and 80s, it was an open and controversial question whether divorce was healthy or unhealthy for children. In the popular discourse, many people argued that children would do better if they were not subjected to marital conflict, even if it meant they were raised by a single parent or with a non-biological parent.

Solid answers always arrive much more slowly than cultural change.

Social scientists began studying the question, but solid answers always arrive much more slowly than cultural change. Researchers examined things like the effect of divorce on children or the effects of different family structures like blended families, single parents, out-of-wedlock births, and so forth. Over the ensuing decades, we now have tens of thousands of studies on [family structure](#), and they present a [clear](#) and [consistent](#) picture: (1) divorce is almost universally [devastating](#) to children of any age, even into adulthood, and (2) children [do best](#) when raised by their biological parents who themselves are married to each other.

The benefits to being married, both to men and women, especially when marriage happens without previously cohabitating, are also [pretty clear](#). This has been measured with all kinds of endpoints, from [lower divorce rates](#) and higher self-reported life satisfaction. Biological children of married parents [have](#) better academic performance, economic security, health, and lifespan, and less incidence of crime, poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, early death, suicide, and mental illness. While the large body of these studies was amassed before newer [non-traditional family structures](#) like same-sex couples and polycules (polyamorous individuals in relationships to each other), there is little reason to think children raised in these could beat or even equal the outcomes of children raised by their biological parents. While the American Psychological Association claimed that there was "no difference" in outcomes for children raised in same-sex couples, they deliberately overlooked contradictory studies, as [Loren Marks pointed out](#). [Mark Regnerus](#) and [Paul Sullins'](#) more well-sampled studies (while far from definitive) suggest uniformly negative outcomes compared to children raised by their married biological parents. Similar outcomes would likely apply to other non-biologically-based father-mother family structures like egg/sperm donation or polyamorous relationships where non-kin caregivers are in the home, though these have not been extensively studied.



Stewardship for the earth and family unity

Prophets of God versus False Prophets of Scarcity

So while time has [vindicated the prophets](#) who in all dispensations have extolled this family structure and now are distilled for us in the Family Proclamation, how have the world's predictions and prescriptions fared? The record there is mixed. In the positive column is the greater care for our stewardship of the earth, which itself is aligned with ancient and modern revelation, as we see in [Genesis 1:28](#) and [2:15](#), [Moses 2:28](#) and [D&C 59:18-19](#), and [D&C 104:13-14](#).

Time has vindicated the prophets.

Increased economic growth in a post-industrial society, along with greater awareness through books like Rachel Carson's ***Silent Spring*** and events like Earth Day, mean that our air, water, and land are cleaner than they have been in two hundred years. The discovery of fossil fuels as a denser form of energy to wood, peat, and dung saved untold forests from being cut down and whales from being slaughtered (whale oil was a preferred lighting source before kerosene and natural gas). Not only were wood, peat, and dung more polluting than fossil fuels, but other forms of energy, such as nuclear and hydropower, were even less polluting. Once the problem of energy storage is solved, solar energy and some geothermal projects show promise as well. Greater economic prosperity and scientific innovation combined with greater awareness of humanity's effect on the planet have reinvigorated the ancient command for humans to be wise stewards of the earth, [which was created for humans to inhabit and possess](#).

Nuclear war remains a grave threat, with nuclear weapons proliferating to rogue states like North Korea and Pakistan, and very possibly soon (if not already) Iran. The Ukraine war presents a profound dilemma because, at the same time, civilian casualties are mounting on an ever greater scale in Europe since World War II. It is also a place where weapons and troops from five nuclear-armed countries are battling each other: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia,

and North Korea. While perhaps not as world-annihilating as the specter of countries aiming thousands of warheads on a hair trigger at each other from the 60s through the 80s, the likelihood of some kind of nuclear exchange seems greater than ever.

Less noted but, perhaps, even worse than the current conflict in Ukraine and the threat of nuclear war is the mass death and sterilization (often involuntarily) due to what is euphemistically called “population control.” When it comes to Paul Ehrlich and his “Population Bomb,” never has an academic been more wrong with a more devastating effect, with the possible exception of Karl Marx. Ehrlich’s dire yet spectacularly wrong predictions led to untold millions of women being [involuntarily sterilized](#) in [China](#), [India](#), [Africa](#), and elsewhere. Despite the ready availability of birth control, abortion and out-of-wedlock [births](#) are far more [widespread](#) than when birth control was not yet available. The World Health Organization [estimates](#) that 73 million abortions are conducted annually worldwide—almost half of which are considered unsafe—and it is likely not all of those are voluntary. The annual deaths due to abortion exceed the sum total of [any armed conflict anywhere in the world at any time in recorded history](#). Only the great Communist and Fascist villains of the 20th century can rival this [magnitude of mass slaughter](#), and those projects of genocide and mass murder were conducted over several years.

This fertility collapse portends a host of dire consequences.

Ehrlich and his sympathizers, like the Club of Rome, succeeded all too well. Most countries are now facing precipitous declines in fertility, and with the [possible exception](#) of Hungary, [no country](#) has succeeded in reversing these declines. This fertility collapse portends a host of dire (though gradual) consequences, [most obviously](#) our ability to provide for the elderly who can no longer work or care for themselves.

Inexcusably, most countries [continued](#) their anti-natalist policies long after the scarcity predictions had been soundly refuted. The economist Julian Simon [argued](#) starting in the 70s that a growing population would lead to greater prosperity and cheaper goods, exactly the opposite of what Ehrlich and others argued. Ehrlich has been so wrong about so many things and yet still enjoys such great influence that I think of him as the anti-Cassandra. Unlike the prophetess of that name who was cursed by Apollo to be always accurate and yet never be believed, Ehrlich is always believed but [never accurate](#): He predicted in 1970 that before the end of the decade, 100 to 200 million people would be starving, and this would worsen in the 80s when over 4 billion people would perish in “a great die-off.” He claimed 200,000 Americans would die of smog pollution in 1973 alone and that due to DDT overuse, Americans’ life expectancy would decline to 42 years by the 80s. He predicted mass extinction due to nine-tenths of rainforests being removed within 30 years. He predicted that England would cease to exist by 2000. And when confronted by these failures, he doubled down, claiming as late as 2009 that the most [serious flaw](#) in his book was that it was “too optimistic about the future.”

Julian Simon had confidence in human ingenuity's ability to accommodate greater populations with decreasing negative impact on the environment, echoing the scripture in [D&C 104:17](#), which reads, "For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare." Simon famously made a [bet](#) with Ehrlich in the early 80s with uncommonly generous terms: he allowed Ehrlich to pick any number of raw materials a year or more in the future that he believed would increase in price, and if they actually did, Simon would pay Ehrlich the difference in price. Ehrlich and those he consulted with chose five metals whose prices were then tracked from 1980 to 1990. Even though the world population increased by over 900 million people during this time, the greatest population increase in human history, all five metals Ehrlich selected had declined in price during that decade.

This is not to say that the Lord endorses market economics, including all its manifest downsides. Only that time vindicates the prophets of all ages who promised prosperity to the faithful—and not merely or even primarily in the material sense. The Lord's prophets have remained steadfast in their counsel: the greatest joys in life are found in strengthening and growing families. "The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve" to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force and has not been revoked by the false prophets of scarcity and doom. As [Psalm 127](#) proclaims, "Children are an heritage of the Lord ... happy is the man whose quiver is full of them."

Additional Resources

Cato Institute, "[Julian Simon Was Right: A Half-Century of Population Growth, Increasing Prosperity, and Falling Commodity Prices.](#)"

Ana Samuel, "[The Kids Aren't All Right: New Family Structures and the 'No Differences' Claim.](#)"

Paul Sullins, "[The Case for Mom and Dad.](#)"

Brad Wilcox, [Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization](#) (forthcoming).

Bjorn Lomborg, [The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World](#)

[Them Before Us](#): An organization devoted to prioritizing children's needs above adult desires. They have collected [stories](#) of children from surrogates, same-sex couples, etc., yearning for connection to their biological parents.

Jeff Bennion

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Paragraph 5

We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed.
We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God's eternal plan.

Why Marriage, Sex, and Family Are Keys to Sanctification

by Chelom Leavitt

January 6, 2025



How does intimacy sanctify?

By aligning marriage, sex, and family with God's divine plan for holiness.

While the fifth paragraph of ***The Family: A Proclamation to the World*** may be the shortest paragraph in the proclamation, its meaning is profound for marriage, sex, and family. It [reads](#), “We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed. We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God’s eternal plan.”

How the Proclamation references sex reflects a most sacred and special union, which is “the means by which mortal life is created.” Additionally, sex is **appointed**, which indicates that it was decided as a means beforehand. In other words, sex is an act of sharing bodies within a covenant relationship which is divinely appointed or specified by God. This is important to His plan.

God has appointed this powerful act to be used only in the most nurturing and safe environment—a loving, fully committed marriage.

Within its intended use, sex is powerful, nourishing, and loving. As a sex researcher, I'm aware of the [evidence](#) on how sex can strengthen marriages and, at times, bring a child into the loving bonds of that family. However, when sex is misused, it also has a powerful negative effect which is likely more self-focused, does not nourish both man and woman, and can be used as a means of control, manipulation, and possibly [violence](#). Additionally, when sex is misused, it can bring a child into an environment that does not benefit from a [loving two-parent marriage](#).

God has appointed this powerful act to be used only in the most nurturing and safe environment—a loving, fully committed marriage. Ideally, this is a place where both man and woman have promised to use their time, energy, and resources to serve one another and direct their efforts toward serving God. This environment has been shown to produce greater [life satisfaction](#) and improve [sexual well-being](#).

God originally [counseled](#) Adam and Eve to “be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth.” Being **fruitful** can [mean](#) bearing offspring, but it can also be a [means](#) to produce good or helpful results. Further, the command to replenish the Earth does mean to fill the earth, but replenishing also begins with our own souls and relationships. As Elder Patrick Kearon [testified](#), God’s divinely inspired plan is to bring us peace and joy and to help us learn to be whole and complete. It is no surprise, then, when [research](#) confirms that meaningful, other-focused sexual relationships add to an individual’s physical and mental well-being. These carefully curated boundaries around sexual intimacy reflect God’s purpose in bringing us joy by walking the divine path to learn how to become holy through marriage, sex, and family.

The Tuition of Intuition for God’s Divinely Appointed Plan

However, God’s divine path of marriage naturally takes some learning, as with most things in life. We must gain some experience or education on how to be successful in marriage and the associated sexual relationship. Like all things, though, education comes at a cost. While most people must labor to learn, sometimes we can intuitively know the answers to the questions that we have. Intuition may seem to come without a price, but research indicates that intuition comes from being focused or attentive to the nuances around us—absorbing information from less obvious sources.

*It can be difficult and uncomfortable to see which parts of yourself
are out of alignment and need work.*

The tuition of intuition can be paid as we obey God’s greatest commandment in learning to love Him. More particularly, by loving God, we can learn about the divine nature of God’s children, including us and our spouses. When applied to sex specifically, we can learn to value our own and our partner’s experience, and that creates energy, acceptance, and vitality for the individual and the marriage and can create a child. President Jeffery Holland [put it this way](#),

Such an act of love between a man and a woman is—or certainly was ordained to be—a symbol of total union: union of their hearts, their hopes, their lives, their love, their family, their future, their everything. It is a symbol that we try to suggest in the temple with a word like seal.

To love God, yourself, and your spouse requires frequent self-checks. Marriage is hard at times; the trials and annoyances of life that come daily give us the opportunity to attune to or turn away from Christ. When faced with difficulties, we can try to be aware of how we can change before placing blame on our spouse or God. When we place blame, we are often engaging in avoidant behaviors. To be fair, it can be difficult and uncomfortable to see which parts of yourself are out of alignment and need work. However, we can resist the urge and find ways to take personal accountability for our own behaviors and attitudes before we turn the blame on others.

Sometimes, though, we can be anxious and take blame for problems that are not ours in trying to dodge a sense of abandonment or insecurity. But God asks us to shun both these tendencies toward avoidance and anxiety. Instead, He asks us to anchor any spousal or self-evaluations in humble holiness. This will allow God to show you who you are—warts, flaws, pride, strengths, and potential glory. Additionally, by engaging in this type of self-reflection, spouses are invited to do the same. When this magic happens, and both parties are participating in the process, God helps us pay the tuition and gain intuition for how to be both holy and happy.

In his book, Pastor Timothy Keller [observed](#),

To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.

This intimate relational and physical knowing of one another that occurs in marriage and sex expands our ability to be humbly holy.

To accomplish this unity, particularly sexual unity, is rarely simple. It will likely require some personal gut checks and intense growth. Finding harmony in our sexual relationship helps us to be holy because we are working to understand and gain a deeper emotional connection. Struggles to understand one another can be seen as opportunities to know our spouse more intimately. You can talk about the differences in desire, the meaning of sex, and the creativity you each desire, and listen to understand each other's heart. This takes time, practice, and consistent sensitivity to one another's emotions and thoughts.

Being Gentle

You may feel that you have not met the mark or that it is too late. However, we believe in a Christ who helps us develop amidst conflict, even within a sexual relationship. With Christ, nothing is too

late, and your sexual relationship does matter. More than likely, God would begin by asking us to be gentler and more compassionate toward our spouse and allow His love to fill us up. While grit is essential in our striving to follow Heavenly Father's plan, He did factor in our 'humanness' despite the high expectations we may feel are there. The Atonement of Jesus Christ allows us to be gentle and work toward humble holiness bit by bit.

*We believe in a Christ who helps us develop amidst conflict,
even within a sexual relationship.*

The divinely appointed plan works in our lives to squeeze out the nonsense and pride of the human experience. Elder Neal Maxwell [said](#), "Trials and tribulations tend to squeeze the artificiality out of us, leaving the essence of what we really are and clarifying what we really yearn for."

So if you are struggling with intimacy in your relationship, how can we reflect on what we are truly yearning for in having a healthier sex life? Are you yearning for a celestial marriage? If your sexual relationship is struggling, slow down and ask each other to authentically talk about expectations and realities. There may be unresolved hurts or fears. Invite the Spirit to tutor you both in communicating with more love and acceptance. If you feel like this challenge is beyond your natural capacity to work through, then ask for God to help you learn about what you lack—ask Him to help increase your grit and compassion. Ask for His gentleness with your shortcomings, and ask for gentleness with your spouse's shortcomings.



A quiet moment of honest connection

Marriage, Sex, and Family Help Us Look Where We Least Want to Look

In marriage, we may face differing sexual desires, differing levels of sexual comfort, and even differing meanings of sex, but this process helps us to better know and understand each other with humble holiness. *In sterquiliniis invenitur* is a Latin phrase meaning *in filth it can be found*. Loving Heavenly Parents knew we may not willingly dig into our own fallibility —our self-deceit or weakness—and in Their wisdom, they created the holy order of marriage and included sex as a method to draw a couple together and to illuminate the need to change.

Often, individuals want to keep parts of themselves hidden, but marriage can make hiding such flaws almost impossible. If we take the opportunity and work to be humbly holy in marriage and our sexual relationship, life-altering change can come. Psychologist [Carl Jung](#) explained that often what we want most in our life will be found in the places we least want to look. Heavenly Parents also knew these unexamined corners are best faced with a loving spouse. Additionally, they encourage us in cultivating courage to look at the unexamined corners of who we are and gently face those unpleasant realities.

Because sex is an area where unhealthy attitudes and behaviors can emerge, it is often fraught with anxiety and judgment. We tell ourselves to “hurry up”—get aroused, perform, look, or act a certain way. [Women](#) tend to condemn their bodies, their performance, or their desirability, and men have similar challenges and can feel stress about performance. These difficulties can provide the opportunity to be kinder and more compassionate to yourself and your partner. Furthermore, [research indicates](#) that couples who have sex about once a week are reporting the most satisfaction. These results indicate that focus on the quality of the interaction is more important than the quantity. High-quality sexual relationships are cultivated with time and commitment to truly know one another.

If we take the opportunity and work to be humbly holy in marriage and our sexual relationship, life-altering change can come.

Happy sexual relationships can look like refocusing intimacy on the quality of the feelings of love, connection, and tenderness felt with one another rather than focusing solely on orgasms or frequency. Creating a more holistic sexual relationship can also look like observing how sharing your body with your partner can be transformative both emotionally, spiritually, and relationally. Additionally, it can be found in recognizing the divine purpose in blessing marriages with the powerful gift of sex. Together, be curious about how attuned you are with one another. It is a gentle approach that Heavenly Parents have admonished us to use to find solutions and connect emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Engaging in Sex to Create Children

While sex is intended to bond and replenish a couple, it is also intended to bring a child into a loving, committed family. When a child is created in this divine environment, the love of two individuals combines with a host of biological systems to create a body in which one of our Heavenly Parents’ spirits can be housed and developed.

Some of the same hormones that bond the couple now [protect a pregnancy](#) and allow an embryo to develop into a viable infant. One of the beauties of this divine process, when used correctly, is that couple unity contributes to better co-parenting. Heavenly Parents are the source of love and teach us through our own parenting the depths and breadth of pure love. Our efforts to be more humbly holy are critical as we iteratively learn to parent an infant, a toddler, an adolescent, a teenager, and finally, an adult.

Our Heavenly Parents' divinely appointed plan for marriage, sex, and family is simple but will challenge us to look at the unpleasant realities in life. But these challenges provide us with an opportunity to practice being gentle with ourselves and curious about needed changes. These holy changes bring us closer to Christ and are the essence of God's divinely appointed purpose in marriage, sex, and family. Developing a meaningful sexual relationship in marriage can be a challenge, but it helps us rely on the gentle promptings of the Spirit—here is where the Atonement of Jesus Christ heals, informs, and changes us. In marriage, we acknowledge chaos, flaws, or weaknesses but employ humble holiness to authentic intimacy that leads to unity.

[Chelom Leavitt](#)

Chelom Leavitt is an assistant professor at Brigham Young University. She studies healthy sexuality in committed relationships. Her recent publications include cross-cultural work on sexual mindfulness and women's sexual response cycles. She has a J.D from BYU and a Ph.D. from Penn State.

Paragraph 6

Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. “Children are an heritage of the Lord” (Psalm 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, and to teach them to love and serve one another, observe the commandments of God, and be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations.

The Allure of Automation: AI's Intrusion on Parental and Family Agency

by Delisa Bushman Hargrove

February 28, 2025

PS



Does AI undermine parental agency?

It shifts reliance onto digital tools that erode genuine family bonds.

I'm still startled by an electronically declared "Hello, Master" whenever I turn on my truck. The artificial intelligence sweeping our society impacts me daily with a casual, "Hey, let me do that for you" or "I've got this" availability when I pick up my mobile device or log online. While technology connects us in infinite ways, the physical and psychological effects of [reduced](#) in-person, one-on-one relationships loom large, potentially impacting individuals, families, and the broader society.

The prospect of singularity caused me to consider artificial intelligence's potential impact on parental relationships and the doctrinal verities of agency and truth.

Approaching Singularity

AI advances will offer even more opportunities to intertwine self and technology. Artificial intelligence is defined as "the [simulation of human intelligence processes](#) by machines, especially computer systems" or "automation based on [associations](#)." Those simulations and associations are astonishing.

The more far-reaching, socially-shifting aspects of AI may require increased engagement by involved parents.

Artificial intelligence's rapid advancement causes most technology [experts](#) to predict that singularity will happen in the [near future](#) as AI's capacities surpass human cognitive capabilities enabling its autonomous function. For now, technology right out of the movies to real life materialized in the form of [brain-computer interfaces](#) which enable a neurally-linked brain implant to translate a person's neural signals into computer [commands](#).

In 1999, technological prophet [Ray Kurzweil](#) predicted AI would impersonate human beings by 2029, asserting that [Artificial General Intelligence](#), or AI with the [ability to reason](#), will soon be a reality and promising that by 2029 "AI will be '[better than all humans](#),' in 'every skill possessed by any human.'" Noting humans' propensity for failure and weakness, Kurzweil optimistically looks forward to AI-enhanced and linked minds and bodies. "If we can meet the scientific, ethical, social and political challenges posed by these advances, we will transform life on earth profoundly for the better. ... [Humans] are far from optimal, especially with regard to thinking." Kurzweil advocates for [transhumanism](#) "where we are partly organic tissue and partly mechanical parts, the natural progression will be toward greater and greater dependence on ever more rapid computer-augmented thinking and consciousness." For Kurzweil, transhumanism enables immortality.

Singularity and Parenting

As AI advances forward, a flurry of articles and books about its foreseen impact on parenting emerge. "The rapid acceleration of AI capabilities signals a paradigm shift where traditional models of parental engagement may no longer suffice." A paradigm shift isn't necessarily negative. Certainly, every generation experiencing technological advances adjusts its parenting styles.

Parents embracing AI find [tools](#) to more effectively manage time, automate repetitive tasks, monitor and enhance their family's health and safety, and receive recommendations specific to their particular family's circumstances. And while incredibly convenient apps exist to streamline the everyday household's functionality, the more far-reaching, socially-shifting aspects of AI may require increased engagement by involved parents. In studying the family response to interactive AI, Druga, Christoph, and Ko suggest eight [roles parents](#) play as they navigate AI with their children: cheerleader, mediator, mentor, student, teacher, observer, tinkerer, and collaborator.

Some not-too-far-in-the-future hypothetical scenarios parents may face could include these proposed by Murchú:

- **Emotional Synchronisation:** Parents could experience their child's emotional state during learning in real-time through neural feedback loops. For instance, a parent might directly sense their child's frustration with a mathematical concept, allowing for immediate intervention.

- **Thought-Based Tutoring:** Parents could engage in direct thought-to-thought tutoring sessions where complex concepts are shared through neural visualization. Example: A parent explaining photosynthesis by sharing their mental model directly into their child's cognitive space, enhanced by AI-generated interactive molecular visualizations.
- **Decision Impact Visualisation:** Real-time modeling of how parental decisions affect cognitive development. For instance, an AI might show parents a neural network visualization of how choosing between coding classes or music lessons would differently shape their child's synaptic development.
- **Manage Cognitive Enhancement Choices:** Parents could face decisions about implementing various cognitive enhancements for their children.
- **Emotional Intelligence Programming:** Parents could help children develop enhanced emotional capabilities through AI-mediated emotional training.
- **Bio-Digital Balance:** As children integrate more deeply with technology, parents would need to guide the harmony between biological and digital aspects of their children's development.

While many parents will step up to the role of shepherding their children through increased technological influence, after a long day at work, other parents may prefer to let their kids navigate AI themselves in an increasingly leveled-up version of screen time. Murchú posits that “While the transformative potential of AI in parental engagement is undeniable, the risks of dependency and societal inequity cannot be overlooked. Over-reliance on AI could erode critical parental skills, reduce human autonomy, and create disparities between technologically advanced and underserved communities. ... Failure to address these challenges risks undermining the fundamental human aspects of parenting and education. As we approach technological singularity, maintaining a balance between leveraging AI capabilities and preserving human agency will be critical.”

Considering Singularity within the Doctrines of Agency and Truth

The Father's plan of happiness and Jesus Christ's atonement champion human agency. Lehi taught his children that God “created all things ... things to act and things to be acted upon. And to bring about his eternal purposes ... the Lord God gave unto man that he should [act for himself](#).”

The principle of agency will help parents navigate AI with their children.

[The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#) is a divinely directed, prophetic guideline that combats technologically-induced decreased parental interactions by explaining our renewable relationship with Heavenly Parents and the relationships that should flourish in mortality as we “act for [ourselves].”

Parents have a **sacred duty** to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their **physical** and **spiritual needs**, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God, and to be **law-abiding citizens** wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the **discharge** of these obligations.

Elder David A. Bednar reiterated that the principle of agency will help parents navigate AI with their children. “God’s creations include both ‘things to act and things to be acted upon.’ And, importantly, moral agency is the divinely designed ‘power of independent action’ that empowers us as God’s children to become **agents to act** and not simply objects to be acted upon. ... Because AI is cloaked in the credibility and promises of scientific progress, we might naively be seduced into surrendering our precious moral agency to a technology that can only think telestial. By so doing, we may gradually be transformed from agents who can act into objects that are only acted upon.”

*Parents bombarded with options and gadgets
can still turn to an ever-reliable source of truth.*

Becoming agents to act stimulates the creative prowess within. According to Brigham Young, “Every discovery in science and art that is really true and useful to mankind has been given by direct revelation from God. It has been given with a view to prepare the way for the ultimate triumph of truth, and the redemption of the earth from the power of sin and Satan. We should take advantage of all these great discoveries ... and give to our children the benefit of every branch of useful knowledge, to prepare them to step forward and efficiently do their part in the great work” (**Deseret News**, 22 Oct. 1862, 129).

Though creations and discoveries are neither intrinsically good nor evil, they can become tools for both good and evil. From his prophetic watchtower, David O. McKay aptly described our day: “Discoveries latent with such potent power, either for the blessing or the destruction of human beings, as to make men’s responsibility in controlling them the most gigantic ever placed in human hands. This age is fraught with limitless perils as well as untold possibilities” (David O. McKay, in Conference Report, Oct. 1966, 4).

While an incredibly useful component of society, in this stage of its development, this simulation or associative intelligence is still artificial, and humans create its data stores with inherent biases and predispositions. However, parents bombarded with options and gadgets can still turn to an ever-reliable source of truth. The Lord declared, “I am the way, **the truth**, and the life,” and that true intelligence is “the **glory of God** ... or, in other words, light and truth,” and while it cannot be **created or made**, it is the **power** by which everything in our universe is made. God’s “**work and glory** to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” relies on parents’ knowing truth about eternal identities and then conveying that truth within eternal relationships.

Artificial intelligence can be a powerfully supportive or destructive tool for parents trying to fulfill this “sacred duty.”

AI “has the potential to obscure our true identity as sons and daughters of a loving Heavenly Father, distract us from the eternal truths and righteous work necessary for spiritual growth, engender pride and a diminished acknowledgment of our dependence upon God, and distort or replace meaningful human interaction,” [Elder David A. Bednar](#) warned. “Truth is knowledge of things as they really are. Artificial intelligence cannot simulate, imitate, or replace the influence of the Holy Ghost in our lives. No matter how sophisticated and elegant AI technology ultimately may become, it simply can never bear witness of the Father and the Son, reveal the truth of all things, or sanctify those who have repented and been baptized.”

The opportunity to raise children “in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens” is an incredible trust given by God to parents. Artificial intelligence can be a powerfully supportive or destructive tool for parents trying to fulfill this “sacred duty.” While AI prophet Ray Kurzweil’s general assessment that humans are “far from optimal” may be realistic, our Heavenly Father, the divine source of real truth, compensates for the natural man’s failings by underpinning His parent-child relationship with us by providing a Savior whose atoning grace enables us to navigate parental roles amidst technology’s singularity with agency and truth.

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Paragraph 7

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. 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. Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities. By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. Disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation. Extended families should lend support when needed.

Preside, Provide, Protect, and Partner: Fathers and the Family Proclamation by Loren Marks, David Dollahite



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What defines fatherhood?

Fathers preside with love, provide for needs, and protect their families faithfully.

This is the first of a three-part series on paragraph 7 in The Family: A Proclamation to the World. This one is on Fathers, the second is on Mothers, and the third is on Equal Partnership. Although we address each of these three in detail in separate essays, of course, fathering, mothering, and equal partnership are intricately interwoven in actual practice. For example, in preparing to discuss the divine call to fathers to “preside, provide, and protect,” we quote from the sixth paragraph, “Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to care for each other and for their children. ... Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness.” These two sentences call for couples to work closely together as spouses and parents.

The seventh paragraph of the Family Proclamation covers several important issues and is the longest (it is about twice as long as the next longest paragraph). We have been asked to focus on certain issues in the second half of the paragraph. Before we address those in detail (in this essay and the other two), we wish to make a couple of brief comments on ideas in the first half of the paragraph.

The Family Proclamation teems with words and phrases like “[solemn](#) responsibility” and “sacred duty” and “accountable (twice)” and “responsible” and “sacred responsibilities” and “obligated,” whereas the only time a word like “entitled” is used is in the statement, “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.” In other words, the Family Proclamation is not about privileges or perks but about responsibly caring for others. The fact that adults are charged to provide children with a lasting two-parent marriage characterized by “complete fidelity” speaks to the importance of such relationships to the most vulnerable among us, our children, whom Jesus said to care for (see Matthew 25:40 on “the least of these”).

We wish we had space to more fully address the two sentences. “Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities.” We point the reader to [this document](#), which includes links to more than 200 articles and chapters for scholarly and general audiences that we have written that deal with many aspects of the Family Proclamation, including these nine important principles.

It also includes lists of podcasts, videos, and other media on Proclamation-related matters created by the American Families of Faith Project. A portion of the charge to fathers reads: “By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families.”

We will address three paternal callings—to Preside, to Provide, and to Protect. A fourth charge, equal partnership, will be addressed at length in the third of three pieces in this series.

The Call to Preside: Presiding with “Gentleness, Meekness, and Love Unfeigned”

We begin with the following point of emphasis from President Boyd K. Packer: “However much priesthood power [a man] ... may possess ... [n]o man achieves the supernal exalting status of worthy fatherhood except as a gift from his wife.”(1) Four years earlier, President Howard W. Hunter taught that “one of the greatest things a father can do for his children is to love their mother.”(2)

Elder L. Tom Perry taught, “Fathers, by divine decree, you are to preside over your family. ... You preside at the meal table, at family prayer. You preside at family [study]; and as guided by the Spirit of the Lord, you see that your children are taught correct principles.”(3)

But what does preside mean (and **not** mean) in a Proclamation context?

President Boyd K. Packer taught, “In the Church, ... [w]e serve where called by those who preside over us,” but in contrast, “In the home it is a **partnership** with husband and wife **equally yoked together, sharing** in decisions, always working **together**.”(4)

President Marion G. Romney taught that wives and husbands “should be one in harmony, respect, and mutual consideration. Neither should plan or follow an independent course of action. They should consult, pray, and decide together. In the management of their homes and families, husbands and wives should counsel with each other in kindness, love, patience, and understanding.”(5)

BYU professor emeritus Jeff Hill summarized,

The process of becoming a faithful father is, in essence, the process of becoming like God. It is an apprenticeship. As a man seeks God’s help to **preside**, **provide**, **protect**, and **partner** in righteousness, he receives divine direction. Just as an apprentice learns line upon line from his master, so faithful fathers can look to God for guidance, and they too will learn.(6)

Alan Hawkins, former Director of BYU’s School of Family Life, stated in a Proclamation-based chapter(7), “Family stewardships should be understood in terms of their responsibilities—obligations **to** one’s spouse, not power **over** one’s spouse.” Hawkins also referenced “pointed instruction” from President Packer to a newly called stake president that “when there is a [family] decision to be made that affects everyone, you and your wife together will seek whatever counsel you might need, and together you will prayerfully come to a unified decision. If you ever pull priesthood rank on her, you will have failed.”(8)

Two definitions of “preside” from the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) include: “To exercise authority or control over” or “To act as ... president.” These are often the presumed meanings outside of the Church of Jesus Christ. However, as repeatedly emphasized by church leaders, these are expressly **not** the meaning of **preside** in the Family Proclamation. Elder Perry clarified, “There is not a president or a vice president in a family. The couple works together eternally for the good of the family. ... They are on equal footing.”(9) Indeed, being the domineering “boss” or “the final word” is not Proclamation-based presiding, it is the antithesis.

The Oxford Dictionary does offer a far more fitting definition of preside: “To officiate at a religious ceremony” or ordinance. As Hawkins and colleagues have explained,

Through Eve and her daughters, we enter mortal life, a necessary step in the plan of salvation, and are nurtured in light and truth. Through Adam and his sons, we may receive the saving ordinances of the priesthood that help us return to our heavenly home and gain eternal life. ... Stewardship over priesthood allows a father to open home doors to spiritual progression for his family, just as stewardship over nurturing life allows a mother to open some doors to spiritual progression for her family.(10)

President Ezra Taft Benson, who served in the U.S. President's Cabinet as Secretary of Agriculture, directed men not to follow the world's approach to presiding but to look to a different exemplar: "Brethren, I say to you with all soberness, [Jesus] is the model we must follow as we take the spiritual lead in our families. Particularly, is this true in your relationship with your wife."(11)

President Russell M. Nelson has similarly taught, "[B]rethren, your foremost priesthood duty is to nurture your marriage—to care for, respect, honor, and love your wife. Be a blessing to her and your children."(12)

Combining directives from Presidents Packer, Romney, Benson, and Nelson, along with additional insights from Hawkins and the Oxford dictionary, a Christ-like "presider" and "spiritual lead[er]" in the home will diligently strive to "be a blessing" to his wife and children. He will keep his covenants so that he will remain in the position to literally bless his wife and perform priesthood ordinances for his children that will lift them, encourage them, and help them return to our heavenly home. **How** a father uses his priesthood and honors the call to preside matters profoundly. As we are taught in holy places, **presiding is the sacred accountability to lead and bless through gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned.** And now a note on leading.

Presiding as Shared Leadership

President Howard W. Hunter wrote, "Presiding in righteousness necessitates a **shared responsibility** between husband and wife; **together** you act with knowledge and participation in all family matters"(13) (emphasis added).

Presiding may best be thought of as "shared leadership" in the home. The word *preside* includes "side," and it may be helpful to think of presiding in love and righteousness as being **present at the side** of one's equal partner in leading the family in gospel ways.

In a chapter on shared leadership (14), BYU family researchers Dollahite and Hill suggested that,

Successful shared leadership in the home means living by these principles: 1. Become of "one heart" through unfeigned love and friendship, 2. Put the marriage and family first, 3. Counsel together to envision and plan, 4. Work together to accomplish a family vision, 5. Celebrate differences by valuing each other's gifts, 6. Make all important decisions together in humility, and (8) Support each other in the varied tasks of life (p. 141).

They also said,

Ideally, parents share leadership responsibilities and develop deep friendships with their children as well as with each other. In the premortal life, our children were equals with us, and in the eternal worlds they will have their own spouses. We are eternal equals, brothers, sisters, and friends with our children, parents, siblings, and so forth. Although we should not turn into "buddies" who fail to discipline our children, as parents, we should work toward an eternal friendship with them (p. 149).

Doctrine & Covenants (D&C) Section 121 teaches the following about priesthood leadership:

That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness.

That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, ***in any degree of unrighteousness***, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man (D&C 121:36-37; emphasis added).

The call to preside is a sacred responsibility, not a privilege, position, or perk. In sharp contrast with unrighteous dominion, [Elder Neal A. Maxwell](#) emphasized,

I, along with my brethren of the priesthood, express undying gratitude to our eternal partners. We know that we can go no place that matters without you, nor would we have it otherwise. When we kneel to pray, we kneel together. When we kneel at the altar of the holy temple, we kneel together. When we approach the final gate where Jesus Himself is the gatekeeper, we will, if faithful, pass through that gate together.(15)

Ultimately, our greatest exemplar in righteous leadership is the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the same that leadeth men to all good” (Ether 4:12). The Savior led by example in many contexts, but the overarching leadership principle the Savior exemplified was service sacrifice for those whom He led.

The Call to Provide and Protect

Having explored the prophetic, Proclamation-based call to fathers to righteously preside, we turn to the sacred call to “provide and protect.” The Proclamation addresses providing the “necessities of life,” but what else is entailed in this charge? Hand-in-hand with the charge to preside through offering ordinances, righteous fathers are also to ***provide*** Gospel teaching, learning, and example—all of which work together to ***protect*** children from the destructive dangers that abound today.

One remarkable father we have interviewed in the [American Families of Faith](#) project worked in a maximum-security prison that often seemed to him to be saturated with “pure evil.” Consistent with the Proclamation charge of fathers to protect, he emphasized,

There is enough bad influence out there in the world. There are plenty of people and media and whatever that can lead our children astray— can lead them to a place that we don’t want them to go. And there is enough of that out there that we don’t need to have it in here in our home, within the walls of our home. The walls of our home should be a sanctuary.(16)

So how did this father try to provide Gospel teaching and establish a “sanctuary”—or as he called it, “a rock”?

Family prayer [and] the study of the scriptures ... it always comes back to **this is what we believe**. ... [I]t’s a rock we all can hold on to. It’s always gonna be there, it’s never changing, it’s there to comfort us. And the teachings that we [learn] through the scriptures ... these are things that I as a parent ... need to take into my own life, and in turn lead my family ... by teaching those things, by living those things, [by] being an example. ... [I] feel a very strong responsibility to live up [to] that. (17)

President Howard W. Hunter taught, “A man who holds the priesthood leads his family in Church participation so they will know the gospel and be under the **protection** of the covenants and ordinances.”(18) The walls of a home fortified by such protection are not impermeable, but they are protective. This may add meaning to why President Harold B. Lee emphasized that “the most important of the Lord’s work you and I will ever do will be within the walls of our own homes.”(19) Such protection is not simply home-bound, however.

President Hunter further taught, “A righteous father protects his children with his time and presence in [all] their social, educational, and spiritual activities and responsibilities.”(20)

In our more than 25 years of interviewing strong families, a memorable and remarkable father “provided” by repeatedly taking one of his children with special needs to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for specialized care. Instead of complaining about the significant costs of time and money involved in providing such care for his son, he instead framed his efforts this way:

Fatherhood is really, perhaps, the greatest thing that I could attain to. If I’m president of the United States, if I’m a C.E.O. of a major corporation, or if I receive recognition in any particular endeavor, no matter what it may be, that will end. The time would come and I would be voted out of office, or I would resign or retire, or I would lose my position or whatever it may be . . . and yet I will **always** be the father of my children. ... I remember when I (first got married) experiencing the joy of marriage, married life, and thinking, “Ah, this is real life. This is what it was all about.” ... But I remember after we had a child ... looking back at everything before and saying, “No, no, no, marriage isn’t the end of the road here. Having a child,” I thought, “**This is what life is really all about. This is the great experience in life.**”(21)

The Proclamation calls men to preside, provide, and protect—but the prophets who “**solemnly proclaimed**” these things have also emphasized again and again that these things must be done in the Lord’s way. We draw inspiration from fathers like our living prophet, President Russell M. Nelson who are quietly doing their best. Such efforts and examples rekindle a desire in us to do likewise. May we always remember President Ezra Taft Benson’s teaching that “Father[ing] ... is an eternal calling from which you are never released. ... A father’s calling is eternal, and its importance transcends time.”(22)

Five Research Findings Regarding What Good Dads Add:

A May 2024 report(23) from Jenet Jacob Erickson and Jason S. Carroll of the Wheatley Institute summarizes:

1. “The father-child bond tends to be more stimulatory, playful, and open, compared to the mother’s security-oriented bond.” (p. 2)
2. “Fathers tend to focus on fostering independence, which is key to a child’s ability to take initiative and develop skills.” (p. 2)
3. “Evidence suggests that fathers help give their children a sense of authority and boundary because they confront their children and enforce discipline. This shapes children’s sense of stability, order, confidence, and later self-governance.” (p. 2)
4. “An involved father has been identified as the strongest predictor of college graduation.” (p. 3)
5. “Father involvement has also been proven to be a strong protection against delinquent and criminal behaviors in their children’s lives that continue into adulthood.” (p. 3)

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When Mothering Is a Sacrifice: Feminism and the Lost Art of Consecration

by Jenet Erickson, Loren Marks

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How does motherhood enrich life?

In a world where pleasure-seeking rules, its deep joy and purpose shine through.

Mothers are not as appreciated as they should be. Not yours, not ours. One low point of ingratitude that many readers will recall is the melodic line from *Saturday's Warrior* that intones, "Zero population is the answer, my friend."

However, we first-world nations are getting a rude wake-up call. A primary and ever- worsening concern in most developed countries is "below-replacement level" population rates low enough to weaken the base of the population pyramid in nations like the United States. Harvard-trained economist Catherine Pakaluk recently summarized in her book-length study *Hannah's Children*:

The political and economic consequences of these trends cannot be overstated. Below-replacement fertility in the United States imperils every New Deal-era entitlement program, every state pension program, and the future of economic prosperity as workers become scarce.(1)

So, given that zero population growth is not the answer but the problem, what *is* the answer? Pakaluk demonstrates that social policy has little power to push the fertility needle upward and posits that significant commitment to “religion [is] the only effective family policy”(2) that can promote measurable change in some families. Indeed, social science has repeatedly found that religiously involved women are more likely to remain married, to become married mothers, and to have more children.(3) Perhaps we should go back to the beginning—Genesis, to be precise.

At the Beginning: Eve as the Mother of All Living

In connection with God’s command to “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” ([Genesis 1:28](#)), President Dallin H. Oaks has taught that Eve’s act was “a glorious necessity to open the doorway toward eternal life” and that we are to “celebrate Eve’s act and honor her wisdom and courage in the great episode called the Fall.”(4)

Former counselor in the General Relief Society Presidency, Sheri Dew, observed, “Of all the words they could have chosen to define her role and her essence, both God the Father and Adam called Eve ‘the mother of all living,’ and they did so *before* she ever bore a child. ... Motherhood is more than bearing children. ... It is the essence of who we are as women.”(5)

Writing about Eve and her decision to partake of the fruit, Professor Valerie Hudson said, “Only a daughter of God could open the door to mortal life for God’s children. ... Eve was perhaps the most courageous and wise of all God’s daughters”(6) Hudson also posited that as one “who would bear the responsibility of bringing all of the children through the doorway, and risk [her] life in this task, [she] had the right to make that decision.”(7) How grateful we are for our own mothers who made “that decision” in their own time and welcomed us into mortal family life with courage and at a sacrifice beyond price.

Motherhood is “Too Expensive”: A Cultural View

Motherhood involves significant time, effort, and forgoing of various personal freedoms. It is perhaps the most profound expression of personal sacrifice for another. In a world in which autonomous pleasure-seeking is considered “the good life,” motherhood can appear far too expensive. Given this considerable, perhaps inestimable, expense, many wrestle with the Proclamation’s statement: “Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” (para. 7).

Feminism in the United States and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have an intriguing history. The roots of the women's suffrage movement are a rich starting point. Lisa Reeves, currently doing graduate work at Harvard, recently "verified with the church history department that on her death bed [Susan B. Anthony](#) took off her ring and instructed for it to be sent to her dear friend, fellow suffragette, and General Relief Society President Emmeline Wells."⁽⁸⁾ It is important to note that significantly preceding the 19th Amendment in 1920, the [first four states to grant women the right to vote](#) were Wyoming and Utah (1869-70), then Colorado (1893) and Idaho (1896). Each of these states had relatively heavy Latter-day Saint populations and influence.

However, as feminism broke into additional "waves" (in the 1960s and 1990s), the distance between first- and second-wave feminism and the Church began to grow over core issues, including motherhood, marriage, and family.

For many first-wave feminists, the needed push for greater equality between men and women meant that motherhood itself compromised the progress of women. The work of caring for another dependent soul meant that women had to "subordinate their personal objectives" in doing the non-prestigious work of feeding, clothing, and cleaning another dependent life again and again and again. Such work was clearly not a path to power and success. So why should women have to do it? ⁽⁹⁾ Caregiving labor became identified with women's oppression. Children came to be viewed as a liability—expensive, inconvenient, and an encroachment on personal fulfillment. In the eyes of some, fairness seemed to demand her liberation from such work and the family responsibilities associated with it.

But rather than challenge the attitudes that had devalued women and call men into greater participation in this most important work of nurturing life, the new woman advocated for by radical feminists ironically looked more like "the old man" they had criticized.⁽¹⁰⁾ By crossing the line into contempt for motherhood, feminist ideas that had intended to elevate women became self-defeating. The "new woman" meant embracing a view of life that rejected the world of the traditionally feminine. Only achievements measured by public recognition, financial remuneration, and prestige (those markers that had defined success in a "man's world") had meaning. Caring for the vulnerable, including children, was viewed as a transition of loss for women.

Certainly, women have benefitted from feminist efforts to secure educational, professional, and political opportunities. But an honest look at the increased feminization of poverty, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and decreased happiness among women also reflects the challenges resulting from dismantling the protections of the institutions of marriage and family that had been identified as women's "enemy."⁽¹¹⁾

In the decades since, with a world awash in an epidemic of loneliness and a crisis in meaning, identity, and purpose, we witness why the core relationships of life that we call family are not the enemy, nor is it merely the "backdrop" for the Plan. The family *is* the Plan—for women as well as men.

Motherhood is So Expensive It Requires Consecration: A Gospel View

Former Relief Society General President Sister Julie B. Beck taught that “without the family, there is no [eternal] plan; there is no reason for mortal life.”(12) In the Proclamation, prophets testify of all three elements Sister Beck outlined: 1. the Family, 2. “the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children,” and 3. the “sanctity of life and of its importance in God’s eternal plan” (para. 5).

If life matters, then a mother matters, for without her, there is no life. If eternal life matters, then a mother matters eternally, for without her, there is no eternal life. Giving mortal life, however, is profoundly expensive—so expensive that it is not merely a sacrifice but something more. Elder David A. Bednar affirmed: “The word consecrate means to develop and to ‘dedicate to a sacred purpose.’ ...The best application of the principle of consecration that I can think of, being developed and dedicated to a sacred purpose, is motherhood.”(13)

In Latter-day scripture, the relationship between “light” and “life” is especially close—with Jesus being called “the light and the life of the world; yea, a light that is endless, that can never be darkened” ([Mosiah 16:9](#)).⁽¹⁴⁾ It is therefore both fitting and beautiful that “the Spanish phrase for giving birth, *dar la luz* [means] ‘to give the light’” (Hudson & Miller, 2012, p. 39). This may also add greater insight into the divine calling of a mother when Jesus Himself says, “And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me,” the light of the world ([Matthew 18:5](#)). Again, how grateful we are for the mothers who “received” us and gave us light and life.

A Social Science Look: Righteous Mothers Not Only Give Life, They Make It Better

A 1942 First Presidency statement proclaimed, “Motherhood is near to divinity. It is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by mankind. It places her who honors its holy calling and service next to the angels.”⁽¹⁵⁾ President David O. McKay declared: “Motherhood is the greatest potential influence either for good or ill in human life. The mother’s image is the first that stamps itself on the unwritten page of the young child’s mind. It is her caress that first awakens a sense of security, her kiss, the first realization of affection; her sympathy and tenderness, the first assurance that there is love in the world.”⁽¹⁶⁾

These gifts of a first “sense of security,” first kiss, first touch, and “first assurance that there is love in the world” referenced by President McKay were later packaged into the phrase “maternal sensitivity” by attachment theorist and psychologist Mary Ainsworth. Ainsworth and colleagues found that this essential “maternal sensitivity” and mother- child attachment mattered well beyond infancy.⁽¹⁷⁾ One leading family therapist and researcher summarily emphasized that “The first six years of life are when the template for later life is set down.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Even so, potent influences and connections are also evident during the teenage years:

Studies consistently indicate that adolescents who report telling their mothers where they are going and what they will be doing after school and on weekends also report lower rates of alcohol misuse, drug use, sexual activity, and delinquency. Children's academic success and healthy behaviors have also been tied to their mothers' involvement in talking with them, listening to them, and answering their questions.(19)

A recent Wheatley Institute Brief Report(20) further highlights the following four social science findings regarding mothers' influence not only in childhood but "throughout life":

- 1 – "Maternal sensitivity to their infants has been identified as the strongest, most consistent predictor of a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development" (p. 2).
- 2 – "Mothers are the foundational influence on children's emotional capacity, and typically the preferred source of comfort in times of stress" (p. 2).
- 3 – "[M]others draw on their emotional connections to their children as the source of their authority, using more reasoning and flexibility in carrying out discipline" (p. 3).
- 4 – "A mother's early attachment to a child through responsive, consistent bonding has been repeatedly shown to shape personality development, behavior, and social capacity, including the ability to form healthy attachments with others throughout life" (p. 3).

"Circumstances May Require Individual Adaptation"

With respect to various work arrangements and life challenges that mothers face, former counselor in the General Relief Society Presidency, Sister Cheiko Okazaki, urged and encouraged the "women of the Church to be supportive and sharing, to refrain from judging one another, and to remember that circumstances often constrain choices."(21)

President M. Russell Ballard similarly emphasized,

Each of you must come to know what the Lord wants for you individually, given the choices before you. Once you know the Lord's will, you can then move forward in faith to fulfill your individual purpose. One sister may be inspired to continue her education and attend medical school. For another sister, inspiration may lead her to forego a scholarship to a prestigious institution and instead begin a family much earlier than has become common in this generation.

Is it possible for two similarly faithful women to receive such different responses to the same basic questions? Absolutely. What's right for one woman may not be right for another. That's why it is so important that we should not question each other's choices or the inspiration behind them.(22)

Mothers, “This is Your Great Day”

Whatever our context, Sister Marjorie P. Hinckley has reminded mothers to “have joy in your mothering ... don't wish away your days of caring for ... children. This is your great day.”(23)

We conclude this article with the following thoughts of the first author, who is a mother herself:

Who could measure the privilege of creating within one's own body the body of another? Where in all the world can there be greater power than this? I recently sat beside a new mother. Her infant, just 6 weeks old, was still struggling to nurse and bottle feed. His utter dependence struck me. He gazed directly into his mother's face, locking his eyes on hers. In spite of having no real capacities, it was clear that he recognized her. I could see in his eyes that she was his entire world. For a second, his mouth broke into a smile, and I watched her exhaustion give way to radiance. Can we possibly measure what it means to the expansion of our own purpose, meaning and identity, to bring another life into being and to be their entire world? To quite literally enter eternity, becoming part of the past and the future forever? To have the privilege of knowing and witnessing the divinity of another and to make possible their eternal life? This is what motherhood means.

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Equal Partnership: The Celestial Model of Marriage in the Proclamation

by Loren Marks, Ashley Larsen Gibby, Jordan G. Gibby



March 28, 2025



What defines equal partnership in marriage?

It is mutual respect, shared leadership, and making decisions together in unity.

One heartbreaking summary of gender inequality in the world today was offered by Barber B. Conable, former president of the World Bank, who noted that “while women comprise half the [global] population, they perform two-thirds of the world’s work, receive one-tenth of the world’s wages, and own one-hundredth of the world’s property.”(1)

Such inequality and mistreatment of women must be heartrending to our Heavenly Parents, whose daughters each of the world’s women are.

In this context, the words of the Savior in [Doctrine and Covenants 78:6-7](#) are haunting, “[I]f ye are not equal in earthly things ye cannot be equal in heavenly things. For if you will that I give unto you a place in the celestial world, you must prepare yourselves by doing the things which I have commanded you and required of you.”

One such command or love-based counsel in our time was offered by 15 united prophets in *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, wherein these prophets stated, “In [their] sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as **equal partners**” (para. 7). In the ideal of equal partnership lies a beautiful hope that sharply contrasts with the “**savage inequalities**” that persist across gender (and racial) lines. What does the Gospel offer us instead?

The Doctrine and Theology of the Family: A Source of Eternal Striving and Hope

The renowned Anglican scholar of Mormonism, [Douglas Davies](#), has observed that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has not only emphasized family but also holds and honors a “**veritable theology of family**.” The truth of Davies’ statement is seen by turning to the teachings of the current First Presidency:

In the words of [President Nelson](#), “In God’s eternal plan, salvation is an individual matter; exaltation is a family matter.”

Second, as President [Dallin H. Oaks](#) said, “Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them.”

Third, [President Henry B. Eyring](#), while discussing the precise Proclamation phrase “Fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners,” continued on and taught that “*men and women cannot be exalted alone.*”

In brief summary, we have three potent, prophetic witnesses that our greatest hope and potential is actualized only when women and men truly unite in Christ.(2)

For several of our BYU students, a highlight of the semester is a (freely and generously given) guest lecture from Sister Melinda Wheelwright Brown regarding her book-length study entitled *Eve and Adam: Discovering the Beautiful Balance*. Brown has written,

As Eve and Adam exemplify ... working interdependently to lead a family toward exaltation is the purpose of marriage. It was never intended to be a solo effort; it wasn’t done alone in the premortal realm; it isn’t meant to be done alone here on earth (though sometimes, of necessity, it is), and it won’t be done alone in the eternities.(3)

However, this labor of “working interdependently” is far from easy. It tends to be forged under tremendous heat. As the Lord said to Israel through the prophet Isaiah in [Isaiah 48:10](#) (and through Nephi in [1 Nephi 20:10](#)), “Behold, I have refined thee ... I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction.” Brown similarly observed in *Eve and Adam*, “The secret of [marital] success seems to lie in the struggle—more precisely, in the way in which we approach and respond to the struggle.”(4)

Over the past 25 years, the [American Families of Faith](#) project has interviewed “exemplary” marriage partners from a variety of races, religions, and regions. One faithfully devoted father named Earl explained, “[In strong marriages], the troubles will help them grow close. We had a few crises [but] we just pulled together, and we got through it, and it drew us closer together as a unit.”

The insights of Isaiah, Brown’s *Eve and Adam*, and Earl all seem to relate to the observation of the late psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1984), who wrote in *Man’s Search for Meaning*:

If architects want to strengthen a decrepit arch, they *increase* the load which is laid upon it, for thereby, the parts are joined *more firmly together*.... What [a person or a marriage] actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task (p. 127, emphasis added).

One marital research team has noted that “it might be proposed that one key difference between weak or failed marriages and strong, enduring marriages is that in the latter, the wife and husband ‘join more firmly together’ when the loads of life come, instead of moving away from one another.”(5)

Latter-day Saint professor Valerie Hudson (Cassler) has observed in connection with equal partnership, the idea of women and men unifying (even “forging”) as follows:

We were meant to win *together*. As the two halves of humanity forge a truly *equal* partnership at all levels of society, female contributions will not only be valued *equally* with men’s but will be honored as the necessary counterpart to men’s thinking without distorting that which is unique to each.(6)

Some Brief Notes on What Equal Partnership Is ... and Is Not

Equal partnership can be enacted in a variety of ways. Some find it meaningful to have both partners participate fully in each domain of life (e.g., housework, childcare, and paid employment), and there are associated benefits to this approach.(7) However, this “sameness” approach is not always achievable or preferable. Whether these domains are shared or equally divided, certain underlying principles are important, such as ensuring that each partner has an equal voice and shares power (as opposed to exerting coercive control) in the relationship. Former General Relief Society President [Jean B. Bingham](#) warned,

During the time between that marvelous beginning in the Garden of Eden and now, the adversary has been quite successful in his goal to divide men and women in his attempts to conquer our souls. ... Satan incites comparison as a tool to create feelings of being superior or inferior, hiding the eternal truth that men’s and women’s innate differences are God-given and equally valued (p. 61).

Continuing, Sister Bingham taught,

Unity [between women and men] is essential to the divine work we are privileged and called to do, but it doesn't just happen. It takes effort and time to really counsel together—to listen to one another, understand others' viewpoints, and share experiences—but the process results in more inspired decisions.

So, competition and devaluing ... no. Discussion, dialogue, and mutual empowerment ... yes.

As we have observed elsewhere, “[I]nequality in marriage has been defined as one spouse having dominance in decision-making processes or, even further, demonstrating a lack of respect for the other partners’ autonomy or input.”(8) It is important to remember that “When partners engage in power struggles and start trying to win power and control in the relationship, they often are acting from their own insecure views of self and of their partner.”(9) Thus, when we find ourselves falling short and engaging in such power struggles, we can benefit by self-reflecting, taking responsibility for our own insecurities, and remembering to view our spouse as a partner rather than an adversary—someone to have power with rather than power over. (10) With time and trust, such episodes can diminish and open the door for partnered and collaborative work.

Professor Hudson and former Director of the BYU School of Family Life, Rick Miller, explained that “In an equal partnership, spouses continue to discuss the issue and negotiate until they agree on a decision.”(11)

Who “Wins” in Equal Partnership?

In exploring the question of who “wins” in equal partnership, the voices of the prophets and the best social science align. This dialogic and respectful approach yields better decisions where every family member wins. First, President [Russell M. Nelson](#) taught:

The heavens are just as open to *women* who are endowed with God’s power flowing from their priesthood covenants as they are to men who bear the priesthood. ... I praise that man who deeply respects his wife’s ability to receive revelation and treasures her as an equal partner in their marriage (emphasis in original).

Given the approach of husband and wife “counsel[ing] together in love and righteousness,” the pattern of dialoging together (often at length and over time) and seeking the guidance of the Lord along the way yields far better and more unified decisions.

Elder [L. Whitney Clayton](#) reflected, “I have observed that in wonderful, happy marriages, husbands and wives treat each other as equal partners.” From a social science perspective, we add a harmonizing note. Across the many interviews in the *[American Families of Faith](#)* project, there is an evident equality as one glances at most of the transcripts. These imperfect but exemplary partners take turns responding to questions, and they very rarely interrupt each other. Their responses to questions regarding their strong (on average, 20-year) marriages tend towards equality, without the dominance of either wife or husband. They seem to sing a duet and resist the urge to be “diva soloists.” This grace has benefitted not only their marriages but their children.

As Professors Hudson and Miller (2012) summarize, “Equal partners are generally better parents. Parents with less relationship equality are less likely to work together as a team in parenting their children.”(12) Indeed, “recent social science research findings confirm that better physical and emotional health, better marital relationships, and better parenting and outcomes for children are the fruits of equal partnership in marriage.”(13) (Also see Gibby & Gibby, 2024, for a recent review).(14)

In short, everyone wins when the prophetic, “equal partnership” counsel of the Proclamation is followed. Indeed, [President Eyring](#), like the Proclamation, took the benefits of righteously unified marriage further than the home. Speaking to international leaders in Rome, he taught that “a man and a woman, united in marriage, have a transcendent power to create happiness for themselves, for their family, and for the people around them.”

[President Nelson](#) has similarly taught, “Marriage brings greater possibilities for happiness than does any other human relationship.”

One of the fathers interviewed for the *[American Families of Faith](#)* project shared a note that he had written to his eight children regarding their mother—his devoted partner of more than 40 years. It read,

What is eternal marriage, after all? I only know that if our marriage cannot exist eternally, I don’t care if I do or not. I can imagine no heaven without it; [and] with it, even Hell would be tolerable.

We close with an apostolic promise from Elder Ulisses Soares in his address entitled “[In Partnership with the Lord](#),” who said to the women and men of the Church of Jesus Christ:

I testify to you that as we—women and men—work together in a true and equal partnership, we will enjoy the unity taught by the Savior as we fulfill the divine responsibilities in our marriage relationships. I promise you, in the name of Christ, that hearts will be “knit together in unity and in love one towards another,” we will find more joy in our journey to eternal life, and our capacity to serve one another and with one another will multiply significantly.

May we unite with both the Lord and with our covenanted partner and claim these promised blessings.

Three Brief Marital Insights from President Nelson

In a 2006 General Conference address entitled “Nurturing Marriage,” President Russell M. Nelson offered three brief, practical suggestions to wives and husbands. He taught, “My suggestions use three action verbs: to *appreciate*, to *communicate*, and to *contemplate*.”

1. To *appreciate*—to say “I love you” and “thank you.”
2. [T]o *communicate* well with your spouse. Couples need private time to observe, to talk, and really listen to each other. They need to cooperate—helping each other as equal partners.
3. My third suggestion is to *contemplate*. This word has deep meaning. It comes from Latin roots: *con*, meaning “with,” and *templum*, meaning “a space or place to meditate.” It is the root from which the word *temple* comes. If couples contemplate often—with each other in the temple—sacred covenants will be better remembered and kept.”

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Paragraph 8

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.

A Voice of Warning: Prophets and Proclamations

by Charolette Winder

May 27, 2025



*What happens when prophets are ignored?
Calamity follows in the form of broken homes and shrinking nations.*

Most members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints know that President Hinckley first announced and read “The Family, A Proclamation to the World” at the September 1995 General Relief Society meeting. Few, however, are aware that President Gordon B. Hinckley read the Proclamation in the Oval Office to then-President Bill Clinton only one month later. In *Presidents and Prophets*, Michael Winder records that Clinton had heard about the landmark document and invited President Hinckley to discuss it at the White House on November 13, 1995. Accompanied by Elder Neal A. Maxwell, President Hinckley discussed the Proclamation with President Clinton, and according to President Hinckley, “We had a very delightful visit.” Before leaving, President Hinckley was invited by a White House aide to offer a prayer, as was customary. President Clinton agreed, and the men stood in a circle. President Hinckley later recorded, “I thought it was a rather wonderful thing, to pray for the President of the United States in his office.”

But what makes this visit so remarkable is that earlier on the same day, Monica Lewinsky started her job as a paid intern in the White House, and only two days later, President Clinton began his controversial relationship with her. The timing is uncanny. The adulterous relationship that led to the first impeachment of a president of the United States in over 100 years and stained Clinton's political career forever afterward could have been avoided had he heeded the warning contained in the Proclamation and read to him personally by a prophet of God.

Although often difficult, it is a prophet's duty to warn. [Elder M. Russell Ballard](#) has said, "Through the centuries, prophets have fulfilled their duty when they have warned people of the dangers before them. The Lord's Apostles are duty-bound to watch, (and) warn ..." President [Russell M. Nelson](#) said on another occasion, "Sometimes we as leaders of the Church are criticized for holding firm to the laws of God, defending the Savior's doctrine, and resisting the social pressures of our day.... In doing so, sometimes we are accused of being uncaring ... But wouldn't it be far more uncaring for us *not* to tell the truth? ... Prophets are rarely popular. But we will *always* teach the truth!"

Indeed, the Family Proclamation has become increasingly controversial and less popular as social trends and philosophies surrounding the family, marriage, and gender have shifted dramatically in the last thirty years. However, the warnings in the Proclamation are more relevant and visible now than ever before and deserve closer consideration.

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The Proclamation states, "We warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets." [Elder Ballard](#) said the Proclamation is "a stern warning in a world where declining values and misplaced priorities threaten to destroy society by undermining its basic unit." It has been thirty years since this "clarion call" was given, and the devastating effects of family disintegration on both a micro and macro scale are undeniable.

When people hear the word "calamities," they often think of large-scale natural disasters, such as earthquakes, famines, or floods. But overwhelming social data is revealing the startling truth that it is easier to rebuild physical homes than a family devastated by divorce, abuse, infidelity, or childlessness.

If we look just at divorce, one of the most common "calamities" affecting families, the justification for the strong prophetic warning is clear. Social science research consistently reveals that divorce has significant and complex effects on families, particularly on children, impacting their emotional, social, and academic well-being, as well as their future relationships. These impacts are measurable for generations. Following decades of data, the [National Institute of Health](#) concluded that "divorce has been shown to diminish a child's future competence in all areas of life, including family relationships, education, emotional well-being, and future earning power."

The American College of Pediatrics similarly concluded: “There are clearly negative long-term consequences of divorce—children, parents, and society all suffer. ... [And] ... long-term studies show that many children never have full ‘recovery.’” Another study even advocated for governments to “create a public health campaign to inform Americans of the health and other risks associated with divorce,” warning that “If nothing is done, America will continue the downward spiral into social decay.” This same study advocated prohibiting “no-fault divorce” for couples with children under the age of 18 living in the home. Except for cases of physical or sexual abuse, more and more data suggest that divorce does more harm than good, especially for children. As evidenced in the summary of the study:

American society may have erased the stigma that once accompanied divorce, but it can no longer ignore its massive effects. As social scientists track successive generations of American children whose parents have ended their marriages, the data are leading even some of the once-staunchest supporters of divorce to conclude that divorce is hurting American society and devastating the lives of children. Its effects are obvious in family life, educational attainment, job stability, income potential, physical and emotional health, drug use, and crime.”

Social science and religious leaders have dovetailed on this issue. Strong, lasting marriages are more crucial to society than ever before. Pope Francis powerfully stated:

Every threat to the family is a threat to society itself. The future of humanity ... passes through the family. So protect your families!”

On a macro level, the literal “disintegration of the family” is projected to not only bring nations dire calamities but also to threaten their very existence. For the past seven decades, fertility rates have steadily dropped, and childlessness has increased. A total fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman is needed to sustain long-term population replacement. Most developed countries of the world, including Japan, Germany, Russia, and most of Europe, are already experiencing the effects of depopulation as they have been below the birth replacement rate for many decades now. And the trend is spreading.

Overwhelming social data is revealing the startling truth that it is easier to rebuild physical homes than a family devastated by divorce, abuse, infidelity, or childlessness.

A 2024 comprehensive study published in the *Lancet*, one of the world’s leading medical journals, reported: “By 2100, more than 97% of countries and territories will have fertility rates below what is necessary to sustain population size.” The authors went on to “warn that national governments must plan for emerging threats to economies, food security, health, the environment, and geopolitical security brought on by these demographic changes that are set to transform the way we live.”

Surprisingly, most are unaware of the dramatic decline in global fertility rates. Documentaries like *Birthgap: Childless World* (2022) and *Demographic Winter: The Decline of the Human Family* (2008) have sought to draw attention to the crisis, but these documentaries and their authors have been largely dismissed by many as fear-mongering or conservative ideological propaganda. However, many countries can no longer ignore the threat, and their leaders are beginning to speak up and take action.

In her 2019 [New Year's broadcast](#), Norway's Prime Minister Erna Solberg was the first world leader to publicly encourage her citizens to "have more children." Countries like [Denmark](#) are employing new "sexy" media campaigns, such as "Do it for Denmark" and "Do it for Mom," to incentivize and persuade their citizens to have children. And Denmark is not alone. Other countries, including Thailand, Russia, China, and

Hungary, among others, have all tried various kinds of tactics to incentivize and even bribe people to have more babies. A 2024 [Vox article](#) entitled "You Can't Even Pay People to Have More Kids," discussed the failure of many of these direct payment incentives. "Russia began offering a one-time sum of about \$7,000 to families with more than two kids, while Italy and Greece have experimented with per-child 'baby bonuses.' In 2019, Hungary introduced a loan of around \$30,000 to newlyweds. If they have three children, the loan is forgiven." These and other countries have also tried implementing more pro-family policies, including increased tax benefits, free childcare and education, and extended maternity leave (up to 2.5 years in Australia).

Notwithstanding, the incentives have yielded few results. One possible reason is that as education and economic productivity have increased, the "opportunity cost" of having children has also grown. ["People, especially women, have more lucrative things to do."](#) Many worry it is too late and too difficult to change deep-seated attitudes and prejudices against prioritizing having children over individual career goals or autonomy. In addition, the psychological, existential threat of climate change has led many young people to question the morality of bringing children into a doomed world.

Regardless of the reasons, countries all over the world are dealing with the realities of a shrinking population.

Regardless of the reasons, countries all over the world are dealing with the realities of a shrinking population where the number of deaths outnumbers the number of live births, undoubtedly leading to a smaller workforce, increased tax burden, and societal upheaval. When [only 26 countries are still projected to be growing in population in 2100](#), the once commonly touted threat of "overpopulation" and the fiercely defended belief that ["conceiving and raising children is immoral"](#) seems to have had a dramatic turn on its head. [Psalm 7](#) feels more relevant now than ever: "He made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made."

As [Michael Novak](#) has powerfully said, “Throughout history, nations have been able to survive a multiplicity of disasters—invasions, famines, earthquakes, epidemics, depressions—but they have never been able to survive the disintegration of the family.”

The Family Proclamation is, as [Elder M. Russell Ballard](#) said, “a clarion call to protect and strengthen families and a stern warning [to the] world.” Implementing the truths and principles of the Proclamation will be the greatest and most challenging work of a lifetime, but ignoring or violating its teachings will bring “calamities” to the souls of individuals and nations alike.

The burden of issuing this warning is heavy. [President Nelson](#) has said, “Think of this, my dear young brothers and sisters, right now I am preparing for the day when I will be required to give an accounting ... ultimately to the Lord—about my stewardship as God’s prophet upon the earth today.” Likewise, the Proclamation warns that each one of us is preparing for the day when we will be required to give an accounting to God about how we fulfilled our family responsibilities. If we have violated God’s laws of chastity, abused spouses or children, or failed in these sacred stewardships, we will also “one day stand accountable before God.”

Standing before God can feel overwhelming, especially when no family is perfect. However, there is always hope. When Enoch saw the wickedness of his generation and the Flood that would come as a consequence, he was filled with “[bitterness of soul ... wept ... and refused to be comforted](#)”. In this state of despair, God told him to “lift up his heart and be glad; and look.” Enoch looked and saw the coming of Jesus Christ, and “his soul rejoiced.” Likewise, looking to Christ when our own families do not ideally apply the principles of the Proclamation can also bring us comfort. [Christ can make beauty from the ashes](#) of abuse, divorce, or infidelity. He is “[The repairer of the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell in.](#)”

*Prophets warn to persuade people
to make good choices.*

Prophets warn to persuade people to make good choices. Still, when bad decisions are made, especially within the sacred relationships found in families and between spouses, prophets also declare that hope is found in Jesus Christ. Elder Dale G. Renlund powerfully [taught](#): “Jesus Christ loves to restore what we cannot restore, heal wounds we cannot heal, (and) fix what is irreparably broken.” This is especially true regarding the family.

Families are sacred, complicated, and messy. Yet, Christ has proven He is “[mighty to save.](#)” He can and will mend broken families, repair any breach, and restore the path that lead families back to Him.

Charolette Winder

Charolette Winder has a degree in English Teaching from BYU and is working on a Master's in Creative Writing from Harvard Extension School. She has taught seminary and institute and enjoys spending time with her family, reading, and gardening.

Paragraph 9

We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.

The New Front Line in the Fight for the Family

by Kelsey Smith Gillespie, Gale Boyd

June 27, 2025



*Can modern policies support families?
Structural change and spiritual values both prove essential.*

In 2023, the Utah Legislature expanded access to full-day kindergarten in Utah by passing HB 477. Kelsey, a mother of four whose two older children had already completed half-day kindergarten, didn't initially think this amendment was necessary or important. Half-day kindergarten had worked just fine for Kelsey, who only works part-time and lives close to her children's school. She enjoyed the extra time with her kids and had honestly felt a bit self-righteous about her willingness to absorb the minor inconveniences of half-day kindergarten. However, after talking with her daughter's kindergarten teacher and some friends, she realized that full-day kindergarten was extremely beneficial for many families.

In 2024, [BYU completed a study](#) specifically focusing on full-day kindergarten in Utah and discovered that while full-day kindergarten slightly reduced the time parents spent with their children, it also significantly decreased the burden on mothers needing “to provide transportation in the middle of the day” and gave them additional time to pursue professional work or other family responsibilities. Many families, including those headed by single mothers, parents who both work full-time, and those who live far from their schools or with younger children at home, all benefited from a full-time kindergarten option. For parents who wanted and were able for their children to attend kindergarten half-day, HB 477 requires full-day kindergarten programs to give parents the option to pick up their children after lunch.

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In *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, church leaders have asked members and “**responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society**” (*Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102). Kelsey’s experience with HB 477 was a turning point for her with regard to what constitutes good policy. She realized that her personal experiences may not always be reliable metrics for what will help families and societies, and the best measures we can support are often those that broadly strengthen families while also allowing for individual preferences and circumstances. Our shared values as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, particularly those outlined in the Family Proclamation, are also vital in our quest to understand and support good family policy.

As Latter-day Saint values and behaviors have become outliers in Western culture, Latter-day Saints’ views on the family and the standards that protect it are increasingly held in derision. As a result, people with power seek to change laws and cultural norms to favor policies that harm rather than help the traditional family. In general, the press holds the same liberal views. Recent articles about Utah’s employment pattern bemoan the fact that so many Utah women work part-time compared to women in other states— with [36.4% of Utah women working part-time](#), compared to 28.7% nationally—and ignore the possibility that women with families might desire part-time work. Many “progressive” policies actively demean wifehood, motherhood, “old-fashioned” sexual standards, and even the value of men and fatherhood.

Conservative policies not based on science or common sense also endanger women and families. Immigration policies that separate parents and children create both immediate and generational family trauma. Conflating contraception access with abortion or morality can restrict healthy family planning and ignores evidence that when contraception is widely available, elective abortions decrease. An ectopic pregnancy is a death sentence for both the mother and child—a [medical emergency which many emergency doctors are concerned about treating in states with radically conservative abortion laws](#). Additionally, portraying the demise of the family as simply the result of a failing culture or poor individual choices ignores the economic difficulties that contribute to familial instability.

In her book *The Two-Parent Privilege*, Melissa Kearney demonstrates that “marriage is the most reliable institution for delivering a high level of resources and long-term stability for children.” Yet 40% of American children currently do not live with married parents and are part of a demographic shift that primarily affects the most economically disadvantaged Americans. Marriage is now an economic metric in the United States, and college education has become one of the biggest precursors for marriage. While Kearney argues that marriage is vital to the stability and success of children, she also notes that “helping children [in America] will require ... addressing the widespread economic and social challenges that hold back millions of adults—challenges including joblessness, mass incarceration, untreated mental illness, and the opioid epidemic, among others.”

Housing, health care, child care, and basic necessities have also become so expensive in America that families can rarely escape the grinding stress of financial need. While marriage is a vital part of providing stable, resource-filled homes for children, the institution of marriage is often ignored or dismissed in secular conversations of larger societal ills. Yet it is equally unhelpful to ignore that the rising cost of education and growing economic disparity also threaten marriage.

The institution of marriage is often ignored or dismissed in secular conversations of larger societal ills.

Add to this the increasing pressure on youth, as Gen Z is more [depressed than any generation before them](#). This is not only due to social media. The liberal sexual agenda pursued in Western countries introduces the idea that children deserve and can manage sexual autonomy, while children are also increasingly exposed to pornography. Currently, the [UN is considering](#) a treaty to combat cybercrimes that would actually allow child pornography if it is created by AI (though this would still be considered illegal in the US). This shocking allowance and unwillingness of the global community to fight or condemn porn is terrifying.

Additionally, according to Stanford sociology professor Michael Rosenfeld in [Bloomberg](#), many young adults in the U.S. have given up on marriage and family, and have become even slower to develop “the ability to form and sustain romantic relationships.” These shifts—paired with dissatisfaction with dating apps, now one of the most common ways to meet someone—have disrupted the world of dating. As [Pew Research Center](#) found in 2020, “Fully half of single adults say they are not currently looking for a relationship or dates,” which creates an opportunity for companies like Replika, which offers lonely adults a relationship with an “AI companion who cares.”

Failing Societies Fail Families

While families in the United States face significant cultural and economic struggles, family disintegration is a global concern. Families from war-torn or economically struggling countries face particularly overwhelming challenges. Kelsey’s friend Luz* is a member of the Church from Honduras, [a country where almost 80% of the population lives in extreme poverty and where gang violence and government corruption are rampant](#). Luz never knew her birth father, and after her stepfather abandoned her mother and her three younger half-brothers, Luz had to provide for her family as her mother slipped deeper into alcoholism and other destructive behaviors. Luz became a mother herself in her early twenties, feeling that it was the “only way to leave home and have a better future.” Her then-partner had completed his bachelor’s degree, something “that amazed me because I thought it was something very distant for me to achieve ... [so] I felt that I had to settle for giving someone children who had achieved what I hadn’t.” Unfortunately, Luz’s relationship turned abusive, and while her ex still provides occasional child support, Luz is now a single mother.

Luz’s situation is not unique in Honduras. In Adrienne Pine’s book, *Working Hard, Drinking Hard*, she explores the high violence and poverty rates in Honduras. She notes that in recent decades, “Honduran women are increasingly taking on the role of primary wage earners of the household, yet they are still expected to fulfill ‘traditional roles, including child-rearing. In the face of a very changed family ... [this] has led many Hondurans to argue that the ‘breakdown’ of the family, rather than the social and economic forces behind this transformation, is responsible for the growth of gangs” (33).

Pine’s conclusion demonstrates what we are missing as a global community when we dismiss the importance of the family to society. While Pine rightfully acknowledges the complex social and economic factors that Honduran families face, both things can be true: there are social and economic forces driving the destabilization of families, and the breakdown of the family also contributes to this societal instability. We do ourselves no favors by overlooking the family’s importance in society or when we oversimplify complex problems by ignoring the social and economic concerns that affect families. As Luz thoughtfully observes,

... [the suffering in Honduras] is heartbreaking to witness, and there's a deep sense of impotence in seeing people—especially children—suffer the consequences of something they had no control over. When the family unit weakens, people look for belonging and security elsewhere. While there are many factors contributing to societal unrest, I personally believe that strong, stable families provide a foundation that can prevent a lot of these issues ... [and] strengthening families requires both structural changes and individual commitments.

A Spiritual Problem

So, what are the structural changes and individual commitments we should support? What measures and policies effectively strengthen families? Currently, all OECD countries except Israel face population implosion because of declining childbirth. Many of these countries have been trying to pay women to have more babies, but even the most generous policies are not working. In Catherine Ruth Pakaluk's book, *Hannah's Children: The Women Quietly Defying the Birth Dearth*, she examines why children are undervalued or not prioritized even in countries with welcoming family and childcare policies. She demonstrates that, despite popular notions that favorable government policies can bring about increased births, births and child-rearing need to be informed by beliefs that bearing children has greater purpose or worth: "Cash incentives and tax relief won't persuade people to give up their lives [to have children]. People will do that for God, for their families, and for their future children." While government policies supporting families are positive, people will only have children if they believe children and life are worthwhile—even divinely sanctioned. To enact policies that support the family, hearts must change to see the ultimate, shining value of families as the anchor of society.

The gospel changes and heals broken families: Gale's mother had Narcissistic Personality Disorder and was a wrecking ball within the walls of their home instead of an anchor of support. After years of turmoil and contention, Gale's parents divorced when she and her siblings were teenagers. Gale joined the Church when she was 16 and found that trying to keep the commandments protected her from the temptations of her parents' generation. She married in the temple and raised six children in an LDS home without any experience of that herself. The results have been somewhat glorious, the chain of discord and narcissism broken.

Members of the Church would do well to bravely (it will take bravery!) lift the Proclamation as a standard for the world. At the very least, we can become involved in community efforts to strengthen the family with the Proclamation as our guiding light. We can help support church initiatives that strengthen families within the Church, as well as the Church's global initiatives that look at broader economic challenges families face. We should also look for ways to research and support measures proffered by other governments and organizations.

As [Elder Oaks has reminded us](#), “Despite all that our Church does directly, most humanitarian service to the children of God worldwide is carried out by persons and organizations having no formal connection with our Church. And as [Orson F. Whitney observed](#): “God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of his great and marvelous work. ... It is too vast, too arduous, for any one people. As members of the restored Church, we need to be more aware and more appreciative of the service of others.” We also need to motivate ourselves and others in the Church to participate broadly in the community and be open to dialogue and problem-solving that transcend differences in religion, political party, and even personal family circumstances.

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Kelsey and her husband are monthly donors to [The Fistula Foundation](#), an organization that helps women in the poorest areas of the world recover from devastating childbirth injuries that leave women incontinent, isolated, and sometimes infertile. Gale has taken many young adults into her home over the years as they have gone through rough patches, helping them mature into potential responsible spouses and parents themselves. As her family lived abroad for years, they encountered people who cited them as the only happy family they had ever met. These are small things, but they are still lights in a world where the family is struggling. What can you do?

In Doctrine and Covenants, [Section 101:42–63](#), the Lord presents us with a parable, wherein the Lord of the vineyard instructs his workers to build a tower and set a watchman in place to protect the vineyard. Since it’s a time of peace, the workers never get around to finishing the tower, and the enemy breaks through the hedge and destroys the vineyard. Bemoaning the situation, the Lord of the vineyard says, “... the watchman upon the tower would have seen the enemy while he was **yet afar off**; and then ye could have made ready and kept the enemy from breaking down the hedge thereof, and saved my vineyard from the hands of the destroyer.”

As Latter-day Saints, we have a vineyard, a hedge, a tower, and a watchman, while the world is becoming increasingly self-involved and blind. The world is inviting the destroyer into our countries, our states, our communities, our homes, and our families. The enemy is no longer afar off but is breaching the wall. Our personal abilities or means may be small, but we can all find ways to support measures and policies that strengthen the family.

Kelsey Smith Gillespie

Kelsey Smith is an adjunct faculty member of BYU's English Department. She and her husband have four children.

Gale Boyd

Gale Boyd has been a teacher, poet, author, and editor and is currently the copy editor for Public Square Magazine. Born in D.C. and raised in L.A., she joined the Church at age 16, converting from Science, which was the religion in her home. She discovered her true heritage a few years later and began her deep dive into Judaism at that point. Fifteen years into her temple marriage, her then family of seven began their 14-year adventure in international living by moving to Israel, where they lived for 8 years, adding one more child and changing the trajectory of eight lives.

Voices of Reflection

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Why are Some Latter-day Saints Hesitant to Talk about The Family Proclamation?

by Jacob Z. Hess

October 2, 2024



The Family Proclamation is beloved by members around the world.

So why are some afraid to talk about it?

This article was originally published on [Publish Peace](#).

My mother “didn’t grow up in an ideal family situation,” social media influencer [Sara Phelps](#) says, but when she began attending The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with a neighbor friend, “these pure and simple truths changed her life.”

“Because of what she learned at Church,” Phelps recalls, her mom “felt a hope for the future that things could change for her, and that one day she could have a temple marriage and an eternal family like so many of the happy families she witnessed around her attending church every week.”

And she did. Phelps was raised by her mom and dad to relish these same truths, which guide her own growing family today. Yet this young mother wonders whether some members of the Church today would be “too afraid” to teach a young girl from a different background about God’s plan for families.

Scared to Share

There was a time when Phelps herself felt hesitant to broach this same subject since the church's "[Family Proclamation](#)" was becoming, in her words, a "very controversial topic" — with prominent voices in the larger culture increasingly "loud" and leaving members feeling like they are "hateful and mean for supporting that."

This is certainly not the only topic that's become fraught in modern America, reflected in the [common fear](#) among people (on [both sides of the political spectrum](#)) when it comes to sharing openly what they think and believe about many important questions. That includes other Christians who [admit](#) fear can stop them from sharing their faith.

Of course, many other people of faith raise their voices freely and warmly for anyone who will listen. And Latter-day Saints around the world share truths about families and the Savior Jesus Christ widely, even if they're not always sure of the best way to do that.

"I knew what was right in my heart," Phelps says, "but I didn't know how to articulate it." While remarking on some poor examples of overly forceful family advocacy in the past, she says "the pendulum has swung completely in the opposite direction," where some people "won't really even talk about it at all." When others see the proclamation brought up, they say something like, "Wait, are you still even teaching about that? It's not even relevant anymore."

Repeated Prophetic Emphasis

Since the beginning of the restoration, leaders of The Church of Jesus of Latter-day Saints have emphasized the importance of marriage, children, and family. But a potent re-emphasis came on Sept. 23, 1995, when President Gordon B. Hinckley stood before the general Relief Society meeting and [stated](#) that in a world of so much sophistry, deception, and allurements, "we have felt to warn and forewarn."

"In furtherance of this, we of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles now issue a proclamation to the Church and to the world as a declaration and reaffirmation of standards, doctrines, and practices relative to the family which the prophets, seers, and revelators of this church have repeatedly stated throughout its history."

Since the historic announcement of "[The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#)," men and women leading the Church have continued speaking repeatedly and emphatically about marriage being "ordained of God" and the "sacred duty" of parents to raise their children "in love and righteousness." In the last 5 years alone, this proclamation has been mentioned multiple times in [conference](#) by [multiple apostles](#) and [prophets](#). Three different times since [2017](#), now-President Dallin H. Oaks, in the First Presidency, has specifically [affirmed](#) the unique value of the truths in this proclamation to help people prepare for "exaltation" or "eternal life."

“Those who do not fully understand the Father’s loving plan for His children may consider this family proclamation no more than a changeable statement of policy,” President Oaks taught last year. “In contrast, we affirm that the family proclamation, founded on irrevocable doctrine, defines the mortal family relationship where the most important part of our eternal development can occur.”



President Oaks often speaks on the family proclamation.

This is so much more than a document,” says Carol Rice, part of a team that created a [website dedicated to the teachings and supportive research](#) on the Family Proclamation. “It’s not an amicus brief; it is not a memo or letter,” she says about the text. “It is a divinely condensed version of the order of heaven and God’s plan for his children. It is a witness and a warning. He is the author.”

Not Going There as ‘Loving’?

Latter-day Saint writer Cassandra Hedelius has [observed](#) a growing “trend” among online influencers and activists attempting to “persuade members of the Church to keep quiet about the doctrines of chastity and marriage.”

Jelaire Richardson, a Latter-day Saint mother living overseas, described “dozens” of times when she’s mentioned the Family Proclamation to someone—suggesting it may be good to bring up in a class lesson, for instance—but hearing something like, “Well, I’m not sure how my Sunday School class feels about the Family Proclamation, so I’d rather not bring it up in case it leads to contention.” Or “Well, some of the kids in my Young Women’s class come from a home with divorced parents, so I want to be sensitive to that.”

Phelps readily admits that discussing family and marriage “does require sensitivity” depending on the audience, given the wide variety of family living situations that depart from the aspirations outlined in the proclamation (marriage between a man and a woman who find happiness together, bring

children into the world, and seek to follow Christ together). When it comes to people who have never married or divorced—or experienced unhappy marriages, infertility, struggling children, or abuse in any form—the argument goes, “Why would you bring up ideals these people haven’t been able to experience yet? Don’t you realize this will make them feel bad?”

“Who is suffering because we won’t talk about this?”

And so some people stop talking about the family proclamation altogether. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve heard it mentioned at church,” writes Latter-day Saint therapist Rebecca Taylor. In some cases, this has created an atmosphere where speaking openly about these family truths feels exceptional. Attorney Brent Andrews recollects his daughter and her husband speaking about the proclamation in their ward four years ago and being told by several members afterward “how brave” they were—with another ward member mailing them a personal note thanking the family for their “boldness” and courage.

The Greater Danger

A lot obviously depends on how these truths are presented, Phelps hints, pointing out the obvious: that getting in people’s faces is helpful to no one. “I think we all know that, right?” But some today have concluded, Phelps adds, “that in order to show sensitivity and compassion, we need to avoid, tip-toe around, downplay or even denounce the Family Proclamation.”

The seeming takeaway, Richardson says, is that even a mention (or glimpse) of the proclamation is somehow inherently “contentious” or insensitive—an argument she rejects. Leaders of the Church “constantly show us how to chart a loving course that welcomes all and forthrightly teaches all our doctrine,” Hedelius adds—without, again, denying some, especially online, who may still, unfortunately, use doctrine to “ostracize.”

Members of a lay-run church also acknowledge “varying amounts of good-intentioned clumsiness” occasionally present in a lesson, alongside a collective need to keep improving our ability to teach skillfully with true charity and love. But it’s not just the sharer and teacher who need encouragement. Richardson also calls attention to the importance of listeners needing encouragement to receive teachings “with soft hearts and gratitude ... gratitude that this doctrine even exists at all.”

After acknowledging some possible stumbles culturally, Hedelius argues that “the far greater danger in many congregations is opposition to any teaching about marriage and chastity at all.” While some insist family doctrine is “already well known,” Hedelius says, others “claim lessons or talks about marriage and chastity just drive people away, so they’re not worth it.”

Not Going There Actually Hurts People

There are consequences for this kind of subtle, indirect silencing, according to these women. “I’m afraid that there are generations of people and kids right now that aren’t realizing how important these truths about the family are,” Phelps says, “that aren’t realizing that the most chance you have for success and happiness in your home is two parents, a mom and a dad married in the temple, raising their children in the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“There are a lot of people right now that don’t really realize that, or that aren’t being taught that,” she says, “and I feel that I owe a lot of my happiness in life to those principles, and so I feel a responsibility to share those things.” In her [2023 book](#), “[The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind](#),” Melissa Kearney, an economist at the University of Maryland, discusses the economic impact of declining marriage rates and the increase in children raised in single-parent households. BYU’s Jenet Erickson has [explored](#) how much babies and children specifically need a mother and a father. “I did not have a good home environment growing up. I had no idea what healthy families looked like,” a new convert to the Church shared on Facebook. “The only place I ever got good advice and modeling of good parenting was class comments during Relief Society lessons (for Latter-day Saint women).”

“If it weren’t for sisters sharing their insights and recommendations here and there on Sundays, I never would have learned how to do things like discipline my kids well,” she continued. “Motherhood would have been overwhelming if it hadn’t been for ladies sharing in church about their childrearing insights.”

Phelps speaks of feeling especially encouraged by teachings from President Russell M. Nelson, including from a [2014 BYU speech](#) in which he said, “Wherever we go, you and I, as disciples of the Lord, bear a solemn responsibility to proclaim the will of God to all people. And one of the more demanding opportunities of our time is to stand up for the truth regarding the sacred nature of marriage.”

“I love this quote,” Phelps says, “because I’ve found a lot of people think we don’t really have a responsibility to share the truth. They’ll say loving others is our only job,” she says, pointing out how the prophets teach something else. “As disciples of Christ, we must love all men and proclaim the truth—a delicate and tricky balance, especially in today’s climate. We cannot have one without the other and I’m continually working on how to best strike that balance myself.”

“Who is suffering because we won’t talk about this?” Phelps asks.

Tired of Being Silent

Although Phelps has always believed and supported these teachings, she says she didn't realize how "vital" it was to share this with her own children until a recent eureka moment. "Whoa. What's in this document is powerful,"—prompting her to feel especially sad that its teachings are sometimes "getting ignored" because "we don't want to hurt people's feelings."

So, Phelps decided to start sharing some [proclamation-specific messages](#) on [her Instagram](#), explaining in one of her messages, "I won't downplay it, I won't ignore it, and I won't act as if somehow because times have changed, it's now irrelevant or too hurtful and insensitive." Carol Rice has observed a "rise" on social media of "faith content creators discussing the proclamation"—telling me, "I feel I am witnessing ... the new generation rediscovering the wisdom of this proclamation."

Opposition In All Things

Although receiving many messages of support, Phelps acknowledges a degree of "backlash" that can come when someone is willing to speak openly about the "Family Proclamation." "I understand why people are afraid, but I again think we are doing a massive disservice to those around us when we are too afraid to speak up, and we don't teach this. Not enough people know how important these truths about the family really are." "You will likely encounter increasing debate about the definition of marriage," President Nelson later [acknowledges](#), adding, "Many of your neighbors, colleagues, and friends will have never heard logical and inspired truths about the importance of marriage as God Himself defined it."

"Activism is increasing the social and emotional cost of teaching and testifying," Hedelius writes, inducing those who are committed to the gospel to "fearfully introspect: Am I failing to be gentle and Christlike? Am I just clinging to hateful, outdated ideas? ... Is it really necessary to teach this when it might cause discomfort? Will my friends and fellow congregants criticize me for being insensitive?" Hedelius summarizes one specific worry many people grapple with: "Straightforwardly teaching and testifying of the doctrine is failing to be gentle and Christlike to people who are struggling with sexuality and identity." It's true, Phelps says, that "some people seem to think that it means that I have no sensitivity towards people who identify as LGBT+"—before highlighting the blessing of personal revelation available to help people in different situations understand how to apply prophetic truths in their lives.

"These doctrines and truths are too powerful and too important not to share," this mother and influencer says, even with the expected push-back—pointing to how many people end up being encouraged when she does so. "For our own personal benefit, our children's benefit, and society's benefit, we need strong families," Phelps says. "I'm convinced it would fix many of the issues plaguing our society today."

Teach The Children Freely

It's not just out of the home where this hesitance can arise. Some parents have even felt hesitant to teach their children about Latter-day Saint doctrine on the family. In recent years, [Cassandra Hedelius](#) and [Meagan Koehler](#) have both pushed back on the tendency to portray religious parents as somehow exclusive in the socialization they try to provide for their children. "Someone whose thirty hours on TikTok has convinced them biological sex is an arbitrary social construct," Hedelius [writes](#), "has been indoctrinated just as surely as someone whose thirty hours in the scriptures (or a biology textbook) has convinced them it's not."

"No matter what," she says, children will be taught and socialized. "The question is, by whom? And with what doctrine? By you? By the Church? By their friends? By the media and social media?" Like [Adam and Eve](#), we need to "[teach these things freely unto your children](#)," she says— appreciating [how](#) the "joy of redemption through Christ is inseparably connected with the joy of marriage and children."

"If activism within a particular congregation succeeds in problematizing the doctrine—making it solely a matter of private study, not to be brought up in Christlike company," Hedelius adds, "that's essentially as effective as a sermon proclaiming it isn't true."

"This will take a particular toll on the youth and new members, who will certainly notice that people shift in their chairs and awkwardly study their toes whenever teachings about family and marriage come up," she says. "They'll be subtly persuaded not to believe the 'controversial' doctrine."



The Family Proclamation teaches truth to everyone.

“My Family Doesn’t Neatly Fit the Standards”

For those who feel like their family doesn’t line up with the “ideal family,” Phelps cautions against discouragement, which she says is “the opposite message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” “There is always hope. All is never lost.” After someone commented critically on one of her online messages about the “Proclamation,” saying “not everyone meets the standard” and “this is offensive,” Phelps’ husband suggested, “Well, if everybody met the standard, then there would be no reason for (the “Proclamation”) in the first place.”

“Would we ever not want to teach the Word of Wisdom if we knew a teenager’s mother smoked?” Richardson asks. “Of course not. Avoiding that teaching would actually be more of a disservice to that person **because** of her situation.” She needs to hear testimony and clarity she may not be getting at home and have a “chance to feel the Spirit so she can develop her own testimony of it.” “As a single person, I sometimes find the family proclamation to be a painful reminder,” writes therapist Rebecca Taylor. “But at the same time, I am immeasurably grateful for it.”

“We can try to be sensitive and mindful of the many (most!) whose lives don’t fit the ideal, but that doesn’t mean we should not talk about it. I see evidence of its importance with my clients all the time.” “If not now, teachers who tend to be avoidant need to ask themselves: When would it be appropriate to bring it up?” Richardson asks. “When will we ever have a class full of students who all live perfect lives, and whose home lives are perfect, and who know and live every single point of doctrine with exactness?”

She then states the obvious: “If we can’t teach truth if anyone in our class struggles with something, or has a family member who struggles with something, we will simply never have the chance to teach truth.”

‘It changed their life (and mine)’

“Every time a bishop shies away from assigning a speaker to preach the doctrine of marriage and chastity, children are deprived of an important spiritual opportunity,” Hedelius [concludes](#). “Every time a Primary teacher shies away from testifying that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God, children are deprived of needed spiritual nourishment.”

At the same time, “Every time a speaker enthusiastically testifies of the doctrine of marriage and chastity, but the tension in the room mounts and members frown at their shoes, children are taught to constrain their faith. Every time a children’s activity leader preaches [that] we must only ‘listen’ and ‘validate’ and ‘hold space for’ (those with doubts) but never stand up for the doctrine of marriage and chastity, children’s light is extinguished.”

Even though her parents would have been the kids where people could have said, “Oh, they’re coming to church; let’s be careful. Let’s not say anything that would hurt feelings,” Phelps describes how grateful she was they grew up in a time where it wasn’t so “politically correct,” and they learned what the truth was. “It was great. It put them on a good path, and it changed their life. And so it changed mine.”

[Jacob Z. Hess](#)

Jacob Hess is a staff writer and Latter-day Saint Voices editor at Deseret News, and publishes longer-form pieces at PublishPeace.net. He co-authored "You're Not as Crazy as I Thought, But You're Still Wrong" and "The Power of Stillness: Mindful Living for Latter-day Saints." He has a Ph.D. in clinical-community psychology from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

The Family in Scripture: A Four-Year Study, One Central Truth

by Carol Rice

September 2, 2025



*What truth about family transcends time?
The doctrine of the family is centered in Christ and consistent in scripture.*

When President Hinckley [announced](#) *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* in 1995, I didn't think much about it. I was in the early stages of raising a young family, and much of the Proclamation felt straightforward. The prophetic warnings didn't seem to apply to the world as I knew it then. I didn't see it for the safety and clarity it would provide. Things have changed. The basic values expressed in the Family Proclamation are not only widely ignored, but they are actively criticized. I have had loved ones leave The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because (in their view) the Church was insufficiently loving or Christian in its teachings about marriage, family, sexuality, and gender.

Several years ago, I desired to better understand how the doctrine and principles of the Family Proclamation fit in with the broader gospel of Jesus Christ. Beginning in 2020, I made a quiet commitment to study family [doctrine](#) through the scriptures. What began as a simple desire for clarity became a four-year journey through all four standard works. What I confirmed is that despite the many cultural, societal, and structural shifts of our time, the doctrine of the family remains constant, woven throughout every generation. It stands at the center of God's eternal plan: for me, for my family, for all of His children.

What the Research Shows

That personal journey became a project called Finding the Family in Come, Follow Me. Each week, I (and sometimes a friend or family member) studied a section of scripture following the study schedule in [Come, Follow Me](#). That section of scripture was searched for mentions of doctrines or [principles also taught](#) in The Family Proclamation. After study, a brief analysis of approximately 400-450 words was written of the correlating doctrines between that week's study of scripture and The Family Proclamation.

During the process, each week's analysis was shared that week on social media and/or on [TheFamilyProclamation.org](#). As mentioned, from time to time, friends, colleagues, and family members would join me in the effort and take a week to share their own reflections. Their insights added richness and variety to the effort. After four years, I gathered the weekly analyses that correlate The Family Proclamation with all four books of Latter-day Saint [scripture](#): the Old Testament, New Testament, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants.

What began as a simple desire for clarity became a four-year journey through all four standard works.

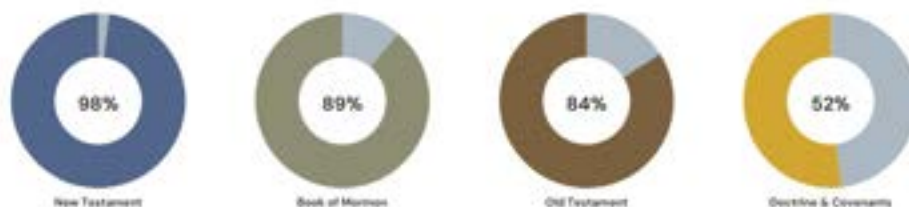
After completing a four-year cycle through the four standard works, I undertook a longitudinal content analysis to identify themes or patterns. By analyzing what was written, additional insights relating doctrines in the Family Proclamation to the rest of the gospel could be found. Critics might claim the results were “gamed” by including certain words or topics in each week's analysis. However, the project was conducted without any agenda beyond trying to understand how the Family Proclamation and the scriptures relate to one another. At its core, **the guiding question was simple: if family is central to God's plan, shouldn't its doctrines be found every week, in every set of scripture?** The results shared here are drawn solely from the Finding the Family in Come, Follow Me project, but the patterns and themes found may be useful to others seeking to better understand the family within the gospel.

What follows is a summary of the patterns discovered: evidence of a living doctrine of the family.

Jesus Christ at the Center

It would be best to start with Jesus. How frequently was Jesus Christ mentioned in *Finding the Family in Come, Follow Me*? Mentions of Jesus Christ include references such as God, Lord, Jesus, Christ, or Savior—across all weekly reflections. The resulting percentage indicates the frequency with which He was named.

How frequently—by percentage—was Jesus Christ mentioned in weekly commentary connecting Come, Follow Me lessons to *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*?



In over half, and in some cases nearly all, of the scriptural connections drawn between the reflections and *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, Jesus Christ appears. One [reflection](#), for example, drew on His tender imagery: “as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings”—pointing out that Christ’s desire is not to leave anyone behind, but to gather all who will come to Him under His protection. In the family, God has given His children a similar pattern for nurturing, protection, and safety.

The doctrine of the family is centered in Christ. *The Living Christ*, issued five years after *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, declares that “He taught the truths of eternity, the reality of our premortal existence, the purpose of our life on earth, and the potential for the sons and daughters of God in the life to come.” His Resurrection and promised eternal life are not only central to His mission, but they are central to the family. Families don’t work without Him. As one [reflection](#) on Moroni’s final invitation expressed, “Not because families are perfect; it’s because families are worth it.” Families are worth it because they are eternal; they are the structure God designed for His children to grow, learn, and prepare for this life and what lies beyond.

Paragraphs That Stood Out Most

Which paragraphs and phrases from *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* were mentioned most often in *Finding the Family in Come, Follow Me*? This question guided the next stage of analysis. When reviewing the data began, it was expected that the most frequently cited parts of *The Proclamation* would be the same paragraphs that draw the most debate in the world today: *those dealing* with procreation, sexual intimacy, and the sanctity of life. Yet in a world so fixated on precisely these issues, they were not most commonly cited. Why?

One possible explanation is that the *doctrine of the family*, along with positive feelings toward *The Proclamation*, are being obscured by distraction. When attention is fixed on the most contested or politicized aspects of family life, the essential truths and beautiful elements that *The Proclamation* affirms risk being overlooked. Public debate and cultural demands speak loudly, but the Spirit points back to what matters most. The strength of *The Proclamation* lies not in controversy but in clarity.

Not because families are perfect; but because they're worth it.

This raised the question: which paragraphs **were** most often mentioned? The findings are presented here in ranked order, with ties indicated.

RANK	PARA. PHRASE	THEME
1	10	OVERALL MENTION OF "FAMILY PROCLAMATION" WITHOUT SPECIFIC PARAGRAPH REFERENCED
2	7.4	FOUNDED ON CHRIST'S TEACHINGS
3	1.1	BY WHAT AUTHORITY
4	7.5	A LIST OR PATTERN TO FOLLOW: "TELL ME EXACTLY HOW IT'S DONE."
5	2.2	BELOVED CHILD OF GOD: OUR IDENTITY
5	3.2	BEYOND THE GRAVE: FAMILIES ARE FOREVER
5	6.2	PARENTS: THIS IS A SACRED DUTY
6	8.1	WARNING: CHASTITY SPECIFIC
7	6.1	PARENT: SOLEMN RESPONSIBILITY
7	9.2	PROMOTE STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY: NOTICE IT DOES NOT SAY DEFEND
8	3.1	PREMORTAL, MORTAL, ETERNAL PROGRESSION
9	1.3	FAMILY IS CENTRAL
9	9.1	WE CALL UPON ALL
10	8.2	DISINTEGRATION OF THE FAMILY BRINGS CALAMITIES: WHAT CALAMITIES?

Several reflections illustrate this point. One drew on [the imagery](#) of the armor of God, noting that protection does not come from a single piece of armor but from the strength of the whole. A family is designed as that natural “whole.” There are principles that help the family and its members to act as such. [Paragraph 7](#) of the proclamation lists principles that safeguard families—faith, service, health, reverence, and wise use of time. Woven together, these elements fortify our homes just as spiritual armor fortifies the soul.

Another reflection considered Proverbs 31 alongside paragraph 7, acknowledging that depictions of women in scripture and the proclamation can sound outdated to modern ears. Yet President Russell M. Nelson [reminded](#) us that women have been given “a unique [moral compass](#) —the ability to distinguish right from wrong.” Rather than a checklist of duties, these passages describe attributes and gifts that are women’s to claim! And the world urgently needs them: discernment, service, stewardship, and the creation of beauty.

*Debate and demands speak loudly,
but the Spirit points to what matters most.*

A third [reflection](#) compared the proclamation to Noah’s ark, given before the storm but containing within it the means of safety. Paragraph by paragraph, it outlines principles —marriage, gender, chastity, children, duty, advocacy—that parallel today’s most pressing issues. God invited Noah and his household into the ark and shut them in for safety. In the same way, Latter-day Saints are invited to live within the principles of *The Proclamation*, finding protection in Christ when the storms of culture rage.

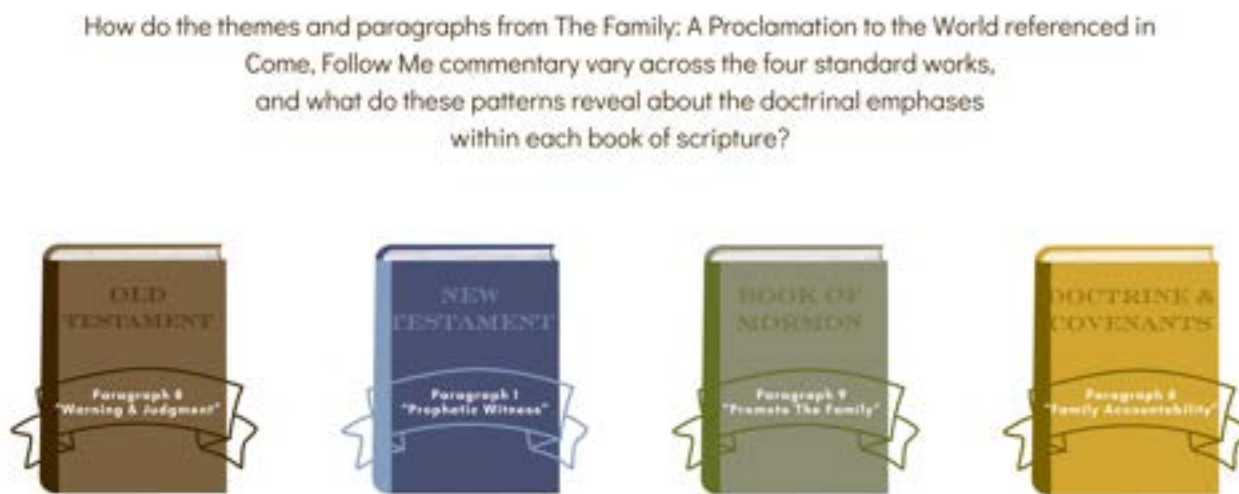
Other reflections focused on the role of prophets as [special witnesses](#). In 1995, fifteen apostles and prophets signed their names to this [united declaration](#). In a day when many marvel at shifting cultural standards, their testimony anchors us to Christ’s doctrine of eternal families. As the Lord Himself declared, “whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same” (D&C 1:38).

Taken together, these reflections show why the most frequently cited paragraphs were not the ones the world debates most. The Spirit directs us away from distraction and back to what matters most: God as [the author](#), the family as eternal, prophets as His witnesses, and the structure and [duty found within the family](#).

There is something deeply moving about seeing a long-held testimony of these truths confirmed in the patterns and evidence. The doctrine is clear. The relationships are real. All mankind is family. There are no misfits. And though unanswered questions linger, the doctrine of [belonging](#) is just as true, fitting beautifully alongside the doctrine of the family.

Themes Across the Scriptures

Which themes and paragraphs from *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* stood out most in the different standard works? Each book of scripture brought its own emphasis, lifting a particular theme into focus. The graphic below shows which paragraphs and themes stood out in each case, setting the stage for a single striking point of unity.



Old Testament – Paragraph 8: “Warning & Judgment”

The most frequently cited paragraph in the Old Testament analysis was [paragraph 8](#) of the Proclamation, which issued a warning of divine accountability for those who violate covenants, abuse family members, or neglect family responsibilities. This theme of “Warning & Judgment” aligns closely with the Old Testament’s prophetic voice, which often calls individuals and nations to repentance and outlines the consequences of disobedience. The Old Testament’s voice of warning aligns closely with *The Proclamation’s* call to moral accountability.

New Testament – Paragraph 1: “Prophetic Witness”

For the New Testament, the most frequently cited portion of *The Proclamation* was its [opening declaration](#): “We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles ...” This phrase serves as a Prophetic Witness—a formal, unified testimony from living apostles. The connection to the New Testament is particularly fitting, as that volume of scripture is centered on the authority, testimony, and teachings of Christ’s mission and His original apostles. Its frequent use in the New Testament analysis underscores that Christ’s authority continues through His latter-day prophets and apostles today.

Book of Mormon – Paragraph 9: “Promote the Family”

The Book of Mormon most frequently relates to [paragraph 9](#), which calls upon citizens and government leaders to uphold and promote the family as the foundational unit of society. The theme “Promote the Family” reflects the Book of Mormon’s strong emphasis on agency, righteous leadership, and covenant community. Just as prophets like King Benjamin and Alma called upon their people to build a society grounded in gospel principles, this paragraph echoes that call to action in a modern civic context. Its prominence emphasizes the covenantal foundation upon which righteous societies and lasting happiness are built.

Doctrine and Covenants – Paragraph 6: “Family Accountability”

The Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) provides a distinctly restored lens. The sacred duty of parents and the promise of eternal family relationships are woven through the Restoration’s most defining revelations. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the most frequently related paragraph was paragraph 6, which outlines the solemn responsibility of husbands and wives to love and care for one another and their children. The theme “Family Accountability” reflects the Restoration’s unique focus on priesthood stewardship, eternal covenants, and divine order regarding the doctrine of the family. The prominence of this paragraph highlights the D&C’s emphasis on spiritual and practical duties that govern the sacred relationships within family life. Accountability before God begins at home.

Together, these patterns testify that the doctrine of the family is not a recent invention nor a narrow teaching. It reiterates and reinforces eternal truths, affirmed by both ancient and modern prophets and apostles. Its resonance across our canon of scripture confirms its doctrinal breadth and enduring relevance.

*Accountability
before God
begins at home.*

The most frequently related phrases from *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, as they appear in the analyses across the four standard works, reveal a clear and complementary harmony in the way family doctrine is reinforced throughout scripture. Taken together, the top ten references show consistent alignment with the core teachings of *The Proclamation*. However, when examined individually, each book of scripture’s analysis tends to emphasize different paragraphs. In fact, some books’ analyses do not reference certain paragraphs at all, while in every case, one paragraph stood out as the most emphasized within that particular volume. This variation suggests that while the doctrine of the family is unified across dispensations, each scriptural book offers a distinct lens highlighting specific aspects of The Proclamation’s message.

Notably, only one striking point of unity comes into focus across the analyses from all four volumes of scripture: the opening line of paragraph one,

**“We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles
of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”**

This could be procedural, even institutional, at first glance, but its widespread presence suggests an alternative conclusion. Of 32 phrases, the prominence of this one as the singular phrase across every scriptural volume is striking. It is not a doctrinal statement per se, but a declaration of prophetic authorship and unified apostolic voice. Across ancient and modern texts, the voice of prophetic authority carries weight. The phrase repetition suggests that *Come, Follow Me* curriculum authors likely recognize the Proclamation’s authority as foundational to the teachings that follow. Prophets define, defend, and declare family doctrine throughout time. Their witness is not confined to one generation or volume of scripture; it is echoed and sustained in every dispensation.

*Prophets define,
defend, and
declare.*

Family Doctrine: Then and Now

This research project coincides with the 30th anniversary of *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*—a milestone that was unplanned for, but has come to be appreciated. The timing caused reflection on the generations surrounding the publication of *The Family Proclamation*. What follows is an examination of compelling aspects of family life, then and now: 30 years before and 30 years since *The Proclamation* was published.

The following table presents a snapshot of nine key family-related indicators across three generational benchmarks: 1965, 1995, and 2025. This 60-year comparison reflects significant shifts in marriage patterns, fertility, religious affiliation, household composition, and parental structure—revealing a society in cultural transition.

Category	1965	1995	2025	1965–1995 Difference	1995–2025 Difference	1965–2025 Overall Difference
Marriage Rate (per 1,000 people)	11.0 (1965)	9.3 (1995)	5.2 (2022)	↓ 1.7	↓ 4.1	↓ 5.8
Divorce Rate (per 1,000 people)	2.0 (1965)	4.4 (1995)	2.3 (2022)	↑ 2.4	↓ 2.1	↑ 0.3
Fertility Rate (births per woman)	3.65 (1965)	2.02 (1995)	1.67 (2023)	↓ 1.63	↓ 0.35	↓ 1.98
Religious Affiliation (self-identified Christian %)	94% (1965)	86% (1996)	63% (2023)	↓ 8%	↓ 23%	↓ 31%
Dual-Income Households (% of married couples)	31% (1965)	59% (1995)	60% (2022)	↑ 28%	↑ 1%	↑ 29%
Two-Parent Households (% of children living with both parents)	73% (1965)	68% (1995)	71% (2023)	↓ 5%	↑ 3%	↓ 2%
Two-Parent Households - Biological Parents	~65% (1965 estimate)	~60% (mid-90s estimate)	55% (2023)	↓ 5%	↓ 5%	↓ 10%
Two-Parent Households - Stepfamilies	~5% (1965 estimate)	~8% (mid-90s estimate)	16% (2023)	↑ 3%	↑ 8%	↑ 11%
Single-Parent Households (% of children living with one parent)	10% (1965)	27% (1995)	25% (2023)	↑ 17%	↓ 2%	↑ 15%

Research shows that the traditional structure of the family has experienced significant strain in recent decades. Marriage rates have declined sharply, with the steepest drop between 1995 and 2025. Divorce more than doubled from 1965 to 1995 before stabilizing. Fertility has fallen steadily, now below the replacement level. Dual-income households more than doubled between 1965 and 1995 and have remained high since, reflecting both economic necessity and shifting gender norms. Two-parent households declined overall, with a small increase between 1995 and 2025. Yet fewer children now live with both biological [parents](#), as stepfamilies and single-parent homes have become more common.

The most dramatic shift has been in religious affiliation. Christianity declined from 94 percent to 63 percent of the population, a major generational change. Although [faith and family](#) are often studied separately, the two are closely connected. Declining religious identity is correlated with rising rates of crime, depression, homelessness, loneliness, and addiction. These are not just statistics but lived realities with far-reaching consequences. They are the very calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.

The Family: Then, Now, and Always

Thirty years ago, *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* entered our collective conversation. Today, its voice feels louder and more urgent. The words have not changed, but the world around them has. What once felt like simple guidance now reads as prophetic vision: it is neither ancillary nor outdated.

In the last four years of study and reflection, I have renewed my witness of the doctrine of the family. My testimony is this: even without the Proclamation, the doctrine of the family stands. It is consistent in the standard works and constant across every dispensation. It is written into covenants, confirmed by prophets, and grounded in Jesus Christ Himself. The Family Proclamation distills what prophets and scripture have always taught. Perhaps this clarity is also why the Proclamation draws criticism, both inside and outside the Church. Truth spoken plainly rarely leaves us neutral, but invites us to choose God's healing power and plan.

If the family is this central to God's plan across all scripture, then it deserves to be this central in our lives. However, in a time when family structures are strained and societal norms shift quickly, few would likely consider their family situation ideal. Because no one individual is perfect, no family can be. But striving for the ideal fixes our desires on eternal hope.

Striving for the ideal fixes our desires on eternal hope.

The invitation might layer immediate pressure to fix everything at once, but if we begin with [desire](#) and let the doctrine of the family settle more deeply into our hearts and habits, the opportunity is to keep learning, to keep returning to scripture, and to trust that God will guide us as we seek to live in harmony with His plan. We can reflect on this deeply personal question:

**What one step can I take to better honor and nurture
the divine design of family in my own life?**

What the Proclamation declared in 1995 remains true today. The family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children. That was true then. It is true now. And it always will be.

Carol Rice

Carol Rice serves as the Director of Communications for Public Square Magazine, a collaborative project of the Elizabeth McCune Foundation. She holds a Master of Arts in Professional Communications and a Bachelor of Arts in Marriage and Family Relations with an emphasis in family advocacy. Carol's work focuses on advancing public discourse around family dynamics, communication, and social issues. She and her husband are parents to five children and reside in Utah.



Photo by George Pagan III on Unsplash

Influential voices tell us that to be yourself, you need to reject external sources of meaning—and follow “your truth.” But detaching authenticity from truth leads to emptiness, not fulfillment.

In a recent [article](#) published in Public Square Magazine, Princeton’s Robert P. George identifies a psychological tension that many Latter-day Saints face today. They wish to be faithful to the teachings of the Church, but they have a hard time squaring the Church’s teachings about marriage and sexuality with the Church’s insistence that we should love everyone. If the Church was serious about loving everyone, wouldn’t it affirm the full range of sexual and gender identities that people identify with?

Of course, we should love everyone. There can be no debate among Christians on that point. But the idea that love demands a certain response to sexual and gender identity puts love in the service of a particular viewpoint of both what it means to be human and the place of sex in human life. This taken-for-granted frame of reference makes several implicit assumptions about human identity, assumptions which “resolve” a host of important and complex philosophical questions before they can be asked. The push to understand identity this way has been so successful that many people do not even see it as a theory. It has receded into the cultural background as an unremarkable and unassailable “fact.”

In this series, I will contrast two broad understandings of human identity and show some implications they have for sex, gender, and sexual morality. In this first essay, I draw on various thinkers to give a brief introduction to an understanding of the self which has great influence today. I will call this self here the “expressive self,” a label that is a shorthand for the expressive-autonomous-unencumbered-individualist self, one which centers around subjective meaning, freedom, and authenticity. In the second part, I will articulate an alternative which I call the “value-responsive self,” a view that emphasizes our capacity to recognize and respond to higher values, especially moral truth. In Parts III and IV, I show how these two accounts of human selfhood are relevant to sex, gender, and sexual morality. Some readers may be skeptical of this whole project. Denial of the consequences of these ideas, however, simply places them beneath our awareness. And uncritical acceptance of the expressive self means we inevitably see everything through its lens – with a host of real-life, practical consequences.

Defining the expressive self. So, what is the “expressive self?” The term “expressive individualism” was coined by [Robert Bellah](#) and co-authors in 1985 to describe a way of thinking which holds that “each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed.” This unique view of the self (as a broad social phenomenon) is relatively recent, and it is anything but “neutral”—it is a historically specific way of understanding human beings with its own conceptual baggage and shortcomings. It sets us up to experience sex and gender in a certain way; it structures the horizons of our understanding. Even if it is true, this should be seen as one theory among many—one possible way of understanding the self, structured by its own presuppositions, commitments, and theory of human well-being.

In contrast with previous historical periods in which one’s “identity” was defined by one’s place in the social or cosmic order, the expressive self, then, is defined by something deep within—a deeply personal and unique way of being not shared by anyone else. From this vantage point, truth comes from within, not from society or nature or God. The philosopher Charles Taylor captures a version of this idea in [The Ethics of Authenticity](#): “There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*” (italics original).

The autonomous self is and should be the author of the norms and values that guide his or her life. If our horizons are structured merely by authenticity and autonomy, the self has no obligations or purposes other than expressing itself and perhaps respecting the expressions of other selves.

Selves understood in this way are strongly drawn to authenticity—with the individuality of the inner self yearning to be expressed (and recognized) in the world. Perhaps the central moral imperative for this modern self is to **express thyself**. The emotional sphere takes on increased importance for the expressive self, and in many ways, desire becomes its own justification. Authenticity is how we live up to our unique inner core of intuition and feeling. Taylor goes so far as to call our age “[The Age of Authenticity](#)” for the central role authenticity increasingly plays in our self-understandings.

As the importance of this inner sense of identity grows, the relevance (and perceived legitimacy) of external sources of meaning and value diminishes. The fact that this deep self is unique and particular suggests that it should be free—free from ascribed categories, external constraints, or unchosen roles or standards. (Michael Sandel coined the term “the unencumbered self” to get at this idea.) Of course, particular selves may not be actually free in all of these ways, but this understanding of selfhood suggests (and demands) that they should be. Perhaps a more accurate term for this kind of freedom is “autonomy,” which comes from Greek roots that mean “self-rule” or “self-law.” The autonomous self *is and should be* the author of the norms and values that guide his or her life.

This sounds like liberation, and often it feels like liberation as well. But it does raise an unsettling question: does anything I do matter in a broader, more universal sense? Notice that if our horizons are structured merely by authenticity and autonomy, the self has no obligations or purposes other than expressing itself and perhaps respecting the expressions of other selves. From this perspective, the self is “buffered” (another insight from Taylor) from external meaning or influences, including anything that might be objectively good or “higher” for human persons. As the unrestricted autonomy of the individual grows, the intrinsic meaning of the world shrinks. In Carl Trueman’s words, the self is plastic, and the world is liquid. Different ways of life come to be understood as “lifestyles”—personal choices which have meaning (or not) depending on private decisions and inclinations of the individual. Fulfillment and happiness are reduced to subjective satisfaction.

The inescapability of moral truth. This leaves the expressive self in a fundamentally ambivalent relationship toward moral truth. Expressive selves might sometimes act morally—and in fact, many do—but it seems that there is something accidental about their moral efforts. That is, expressive selves act morally when they feel like it and when it supports their identity, but that is all—expression is prior to morality. In fact, expressive selves are more likely to perceive the notion of moral truth as a threat—something that would impose norms and values on the self without its consent. Consequently, any moral claim that aspires to “truth,” to be something more than “my truth” or “your truth,” is perceived as an unjust and oppressive burden on the expressive self’s right to self-creation and self-definition. Speaking in a similar vein, David Bentley Hart writes that “We trust . . . that there is no substantial criterion by which to judge our choices that stands higher than the unquestioned good of free choice itself, and that therefore all judgment, divine no less than human, is in some sense an infringement upon our freedom.”

But, strangely enough, the expressive self can’t quite exorcize moral truth. No matter how loudly the idea of moral truth is denounced or deconstructed, it always finds a way to come in the back door. This is because at the heart of the expressive self is the evaluative claim that **freedom, expression, and authenticity are good and ought to be respected**. On this, the expressive self is not neutral, nor could it be. This strikingly absolute moral truth claim grounds the importance of the expressive self, but the commitments of the expressive self are corrosive to the concept of morality in general.

This is why I say the expressive self is fundamentally ambivalent about moral truth—it is incomprehensible without that specific moral claim, but morality becomes optional, the sort of thing you do if it happens to fit your feelings and your identity. Taylor [calls](#) this “the self-defeating move frequently being carried out in our subjectivist civilization.”

What an absolute commitment to authenticity misses. Even authenticity becomes elusive for the expressive self. This is because authenticity requires us to discern which parts of ourselves are *truly* fundamental to who we are and which are not. Some parts of us (for example, gender identity, according to many people today, or moral integrity, as I later argue) are central to our identity, while other parts (the length of our toes, what we did on the 10,000th day of life, or combined significance of every 13th word we say) are not.

Authenticity requires us to live up to the most important and central parts of who we are, not the peripheral or less significant parts. Now, a crucial question: do we get to choose which things are central to our identity? No matter how we answer, the expressive self is in a bind. If we say yes, the concept of identity (and authenticity with it) self-destructs because all choices become equally meaningless. If anything can be made significant simply by saying so or because one *feels* that it is significant, nothing is significant. As Taylor [explains](#), “I couldn’t just **decide** that the most significant action is wiggling my toes in warm mud. Without a special explanation, this is not an intelligible claim.”

On the other hand, if we say that we do not get to choose what is central to our identity, then it appears that the expressive self is “encumbered” by standards and values that it did not choose. The expressive self will be cast within a framework of meaning and value which it did not create and over which it has no control. This, of course, is antithetical to the strong version of autonomy that is a central component of the expressive self.

All this is to say that authenticity cannot be understood as something less than a moral value—something to aspire to, something which it is *good* to be—and therefore, if one accepts the importance of authenticity, one has also accepted an unchosen standard. [Taylor](#): “Even the sense that the significance of my life comes from its being chosen . . . depends on the understanding that **independent of my will**, there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life. There is a picture here of what human beings are like, placed between this option for self-creation, and easier modes of copping out, going with the flow, conforming with the masses, and so on, which picture is seen as true, discovered, not decided.”

The takeaway point here is that it can’t be autonomy and authenticity all the way down. As [Joseph Raz](#) writes, “Autonomy is possible only within a framework of constraints. The completely autonomous person is an impossibility.” Taken to its logical conclusion, the expressive self implodes.

What does any of this have to do with sex or gender? In the third and fourth parts of this series, I'll have much more to say about sex and gender, but for now, I'd like to point out that the expressive conception of the self transforms the meaning of sex and gender in human life in two directions. First, any existing norms around sex (understood biologically as being male or female) and gender come to be seen as threats, as external forces which impose meaning on the self without its permission. In this way, the true self becomes prior to and different from the sexed body and any cultural meanings that may be connected to gender.

Society and nature conspire to constrain, limit, and cabin the expression of the true self, and both on this view are ultimately arbitrary and oppressive. Consequently, when there is a disconnect between the experienced self and gender norms or “sex assigned at birth,” the experienced self should prevail. A vast array of social, psychological, pharmacological, and surgical resources are now deployed to counteract the threat of misaligned gender and sex meanings.

Second, even as norms around gender and sex are seen as potential threats, **one's experience of gender and sex** becomes enormously important to selfhood. According to a prevalent view today, each of us has a **true** gender and sexual identity deep down waiting to be found. This inner identity is near the core of the self, radically original, untainted by culture or other factors—**the real you**. One's true, most authentic gender and sexual identity is unchosen, but at the same time unoppressive and liberating—it is “desire experienced as destiny,” in one author's words.

When people are constantly urged to look inward for meaning and when many traditional sources of identity have lost their relevance, perhaps it should not be surprising that sexual desire and gender identity come to have great importance. Indeed, this helps explain how sexual and gender identity have become so central to the self for so many. As Carl Trueman [writes](#), “sexual desires are among the most powerful inner feelings that most humans experience . . . and when external anchors of identity are weakened or even collapse,” as they have in our time, a variety of influences can combine to make sexual and gender identity central to selfhood. C.S. Lewis was onto a similar point when he [wrote](#), “When all that says ‘it is good’ has been debunked, what says ‘I want’ remains.”

This is, admittedly, a dramatically condensed account. For those interested in a fuller treatment, I recommend Carl Trueman's [The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self](#) and [Strange New World](#) (similar to **Rise and Triumph** but in a shorter and more accessible form), where he traces many of the intellectual origins of the ideas I have been discussing and shows their relevance to contemporary debates about sex and gender identity. Jeffrey Thayne also has some [excellent observations here in Public Square](#) about expressive individualism. In Part II, I explore an alternative to this expressive self, namely, the value-responsive self.

[Daniel Frost](#)

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The Value-Responsive Self: Authenticity as Alignment With Truth

by Daniel Frost

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Photo by Claudio Schwarz on Unsplash

What if we become who we are by aligning ourselves with truth?

In today's article, I sketch an alternative to the expressive self discussed in part one. To give away the ending, what I call the "value-responsive self" seeks to honor and respond affirmatively to moral truth, while the expressive self has an ambivalent (and sometimes antagonistic) relationship to moral truth. The existence of value outside our own thoughts and feelings has immense worth in guiding our lives and shaping our happiness. I make some general points about this conception of the self in view of discussing the connection of these competing identity views to sex, gender, and sexual morality in the next parts of the series.

An alternative to authenticity unhinged. To recap the first essay, the expressive conception of the self claims to be a liberating vision of human existence and potential. In this view, the truth is found deep within, and the point of life is to live authentically in accordance with "your truth." This self is also free and sovereign. It bows to no one and is limited only by the reach of its own ingenuity and imagination.

But, as we saw, the road to authenticity includes several major pitfalls for the expressive self. As Charles Taylor explains in [The Ethics of Authenticity](#), “the contemporary culture of authenticity slides towards soft relativism.” Identifying the truth with one’s feelings and one’s duty with expressing them leads to subjectivism about value, which can ultimately and surprisingly undermine the possibility of being authentic.

So, where else can we turn? Perhaps it would be useful to revisit a central claim of the expressive self—that we should be free from any unchosen norms or values. Why would this be important? Presumably, because freedom has come to mean for many being able to do whatever we want. If there is something constraining, structuring, or restricting us that we did not choose, then we are fundamentally unfree, right?

The self looks inward in order to look upward.

Think again. Because this “freedom” turns to ashes upon inspection. In a universe without any standards or values (or one in which they can be conjured up or banished at will—which amounts to the same thing), one is not free to choose moral truth or have moral integrity—arguably the most important choices a person could make. This is because moral truth, if it exists at all, exists independent of our feelings, perceptions, or choices. It is not dependent on us for its existence or importance. We can choose to respond appropriately (or not) to moral truth, but we cannot will it into or out of existence.

This is why I call the alternative to the expressive self the “value-responsive self.” The value-responsive self recognizes the importance of moral (and other) values and seeks to respond appropriately to them. The value-responsive self does not imagine that it ought to be the author of all the standards and values that apply to it—instead, it humbly accepts the givenness of the moral law and tries to follow it as well as it can. And in doing so, it gains a freedom that the expressive self lacks—the freedom to transcend itself towards moral goodness and truth.

Autonomy and authenticity reimaged. If moral truth—sometimes called “natural law” or “moral law”—is taken as a given, the importance of looking within, autonomy, and authenticity are all cast in a new light. None of them need be discarded, and each is transposed to a higher plane. Inwardness is important because the human mind and soul are structured to perceive and respond to moral truth. And our sincere and sometimes anguished reflections can help us better understand who we are and what we should do. Yet within this broader reframe, the point of such reflections is not merely to sort out one’s feelings or to “feel good” about one’s self, but instead to try to understand what one’s conscience demands—and for religious people, what God has called us to do and be. As in Augustine’s [Confessions](#), the self looks inward in order to look upward.

The value-responsive self also retains a focus on autonomy, though understood differently from the expressive self. Within this conception, we accept the responsibility to live according to our own best understanding of the truth; and we seek to follow moral claims that we understand and can whole-heartedly endorse. In understanding the point and relevance of a moral truth and choosing to follow it, we are not submitting to some foreign influence that is imposing itself upon us.

First, value offers the possibility of transcendence. Imagine witnessing or becoming aware of an act of great courage—for example, Irena Sendler's efforts to save Jewish children in Poland during World War II. Speaking of this kind of experience, Hildebrand writes that such an act “shines forth with the mark of importance, with the mark of something noble and precious. It moves us and engenders our admiration. We are not only aware that this act occurs, but that it is better that it occurs, better that [she] acted in this way rather than another. We are conscious that this act is something that ought to be, something important.” It is ***our own perception and appreciation of the truth*** that drives our commitment and action, and thus, in the most central sense, we are autonomous. As John Crosby writes in his excellent book, The Selfhood of the Human Person, “my action becomes entirely my own only when I ***act on the basis of my own understanding of the point of my action***.” (Crosby explains how this view is compatible with some kinds of authority, but that is a discussion for another day.)

The value-responsive self also retains a focus on authenticity, but again, it is authenticity in a new key. In its pure form, the expressive self is largely indiscriminate about what it expresses—that is, ***whatever*** the self feels deeply and powerfully ought to be expressed. It is not the content but rather the strength of what one feels that determines expression. In contrast, the value-responsive self does not place all of its desires, thoughts, and feelings on an equal footing. It recognizes some as good and uplifting and others as base and degrading—or simply as untrue and misleading. Though all of them may be conceived as being part of the self, the value-responsive self seeks to align its will and character with the best desires, thoughts, and feelings. As Plato taught long ago, we should seek to bring all parts of the self under the rulership of the best part of the self. Authenticity means living in accordance with your best sense of what is good and true (which, to repeat, is ***your*** best sense of what is good and true, not something imposed on you without your understanding).

But why is this self any better than the exciting expressive version? Some readers might wonder why anyone would want to act as a value-responsive self. Perhaps they can't shake the sense that the value-responsive self is a kind of self-righteous slave, acting according to the dictates of some unchosen and arbitrary moral code that makes life a chore and feeds feelings of moral superiority. Why would anyone sign up for this?

At a certain level, value cannot be demonstrated—it has to be experienced or perceived. Dietrich von Hildebrand, whose account of value I draw on heavily in what follows, writes that value belongs “to those ultimate data and notions such as being, truth, and knowledge, which can neither be defined nor denied without tacitly reintroducing them.” In other words, something like the concept of “truth” is a necessary part of any claim about reality, including the claim that there is no truth. Saying “there is no truth” is equivalent to saying “it is true that there is no truth,” which leaves the speaker without a leg to stand on. A similar logic applies to value in the sense used here. Value has to do with things or ideas that are intrinsically important and that merit a certain response from us. Even denying the existence of value presupposes that it is valuable to be aware of the way the world is, to “face the facts” about reality, etc. But this value presumably exists whether we recognize it or not, which means we have only let in the back door what we pushed out the front. But even if value cannot be grounded in something more fundamental, it is still possible to say something about what it is and how we are elevated by it.

First, value offers the possibility of *transcendence*. Imagine witnessing or becoming aware of an act of great courage—for example, Irena Sendler's efforts to save Jewish children in Poland during World War II. Speaking of this kind of experience, Hildebrand writes that such an act “shines forth with the mark of importance, with the mark of something noble and precious. It moves us and engenders our admiration. We are not only aware that this act occurs, but that it is *better* that it occurs, *better* that [she] acted in this way rather than another. We are conscious that this act is something that *ought to be*, something *important*.”

When we encounter value, we have the sense of being in the presence of something higher, something of intrinsic importance. That importance issues a challenge to us: will we honor our own best sense of what this value calls us to do or be? If we answer the call affirmatively and align our hearts, minds, and actions with the value we perceive, we take a step out of the immanent confinement of our limited desires and thoughts and move upwards towards what is truly important and good. This transcendence, of course, does not undermine our deepest identity but instead helps us reach our full potential as moral and spiritual beings.

Second, ***value respects our freedom***. This may come as a surprise, as many people cannot get over the fact that value issues a command. But this experience is far different from the way that other desires and urges impress themselves upon us. Hildebrand uses the term “subjectively satisfying” to refer to things we find pleasurable but which do not have the character of value—having a drink of water when thirsty or playing a trivial game. We may become extremely engrossed in a frivolous game and even take great pleasure in winning, but we certainly do not “owe” the game any positive response, and our pleasure in it often leaves us depleted and unsatisfied. Further, our desire to play it can be incessant and impair our better judgment. It would be hard to describe this distinction better than [Hildebrand's own elaboration](#):

The call of an authentic value for an adequate response addresses itself to us in a sovereign but non-intrusive, sober way. It appeals to our free spiritual center. The attraction of the subjectively satisfying, on the contrary, lulls us into a state where we yield to instinct; it tends to dethrone our free spiritual center. Its appeal is insistent, oftentimes assuming the character of a temptation, trying to sway and silence our conscience, taking hold of us in an obtrusive manner. Far different is the call of values: it has no obtrusive character; it speaks to us from above, and at a sober distance.

Third, value offers recollection. Imagine yourself faced with a situation in which some great injustice is about to be committed, and you feel called by your conscience to do something about it. In such a moment, perceiving the value that is about to be desecrated, one achieves a kind of clarity and self-presence—a proper understanding and orientation towards things and the world, a letting go of that which is trivial and unimportant—something John Crosby and others call “recollection.” This does not mean just remembrance, but “re-collection”—to be collected again, to come to one’s self, to be grounded and actualized as the self one is. Trivial or insignificant things can never offer this sense of grounded self-presence, for they do not engage us at the deepest level of our being. Only a part of us—and sometimes only a very small part—is required to deal with the trivial, but things of true value call to the core of who we are. And in responding to the call, we recover the center of our being.

Of course, recollection need not only occur in dramatic moments. We can live in recollection whenever we are oriented to things of value. The light of value calls us back to our deepest identity.

Fourth, ***everything other than value is ultimately unsatisfying***. Value offers us a qualitatively different kind of joy or happiness than we can otherwise find. Imagine the joy you feel when a friend stops a self-destructive path, when you experience the repairing of a friendship that has soured through misunderstanding, or when you hear of or express sincere gratitude for a beneficial deed. In each case, the joy one feels has reference to a value that was either restored, protected, or instantiated; the light of value permeates the experience. On the other hand, when we buy another trendy outfit or watch another vapid but moderately amusing tv show, we may briefly feel a ping of excitement or pleasure, but it has nothing of the depth and nobility of value. It grows cold even before it is fully consumed, and we are left hungry and anxious, looking soon again for another hit of fleeting pleasure.

The more one makes pleasure a goal, the less pleasure one actually finds.

Thinkers in various disciplines have noted the “[paradox of hedonism](#)”—the fact that the more one makes pleasure a goal, the less pleasure one actually finds. Crosby [writes](#) that if we ignore value and simply focus on what we find pleasurable and agreeable, we will alternate “between the pain of lacking certain satisfactions and the boredom that comes from having them.” Value provides life with meaning, and with it, the possibility for true joy.

Some final clarifications. This, then, is a brief introduction to the value-responsive self. I believe it incorporates everything valuable about the expressive self without falling into its self-contradictions and limitations. But before concluding, a few clarifications are in order: first, the expressive self and the value-responsive self are ideal types, and all of us are a mix of the two. Many people talk as expressive selves but then act as value-responsive selves in many parts of their lives. A concern for social justice, say, or other moral or social issues are incomprehensible without the notion of value. It is probably impossible to be an expressive self “all the way down.” But this is rarely noticed, for noticing it would reveal the limits of the expressive self.

Second, trying to follow value can go tragically wrong. People can be mistaken when they try to respond to value, and the results can be disastrous. But the solution to this problem is not, as some people seem to think, to get rid of the idea of value (John Lennon’s song “[Imagine](#)” comes to mind). This is another self-defeating move—without value, we wouldn’t be able to give an account of what it means for things to go “tragically wrong.” The notion of value is unavoidable, so we may as well own it.

Third, value can be difficult to perceive. Some matters of value are easy for most people to perceive, and others take a good deal of persistence, effort, humility, dedication, or love. It can be tempting to identify value with what we or our “tribe” has always believed, what we have become emotionally attached to, or what makes us feel comfortable. But the beauty and challenge of value are that it

exists independent of our wishes, desires, beliefs, or actions. By existing independently of us, and by existing above us, value gives us something to aspire to.

As with yesterday's essay, this is a vastly condensed account. I would recommend that readers interested in learning more read Hildebrand's *Ethics* and Crosby's *The Selfhood of the Human Person*. In parts III and IV, I'll be exploring what relevance the distinction between the expressive self and the value-response self has for sex, gender, and sexual morality.

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*The “expressive self” tells us that our feelings are the most important part of who we are.
How does this impact our understanding of sex, gender, and marriage?*

In Parts I and II of this series, I described two fundamentally different conceptions of the self: the expressive self, which prioritizes autonomy, authenticity, and expression; and the value-responsive self, which takes moral (and other) truth as given and seeks to respond affirmatively and align one’s life with it. What difference does this identity distinction make in discussions of sex, gender, and sexual morality?

Quite a lot, it turns out. The expressive self tacitly affirms the importance (even the preeminence) of the sexual sphere of life but is unable to give a coherent answer to what sex and gender are about. Instead, the expressive self remains trapped within its own feelings and self-perceptions. The value-responsive self, on the other hand, can approach sex as an aspect of human well-being and fulfillment that honors the full personhood of men and women and which naturally leads to new life. We investigate the first possibility today and the second in Part IV.

Sexuality and gender without mooring. The expressive self faces the same dilemma with respect to sex and gender that it faces in all areas of life: avoiding the slide to relativism that strong subjectivism entails. The expressive self urges us to look deep within for meaning and purpose. It teaches us that our feelings are the most important and foundational part of who we are and that we should be free from any external or unchosen standards or definitions. But the more the expressive self asserts that “my truth” is “true for me,” the more the world is drained of intrinsic meaning or purpose. As we saw in Part I, the expressive self is free, but it’s a freedom in which everything is as meaningful (or meaningless) as anything else.

Where does this leave sex and gender? Without a whole lot to provide grounding or mooring to it. Deferring to the expressive self tends to wear away the meaning of concepts, institutions, and moral norms that could provide such grounding. In this way, as noted in Part I, gender norms and “sex assigned at birth” come to be seen as threats to the individuality and authenticity of the self, as unjust external forces which seek to impose meaning on the self without its consent. [Gender identity](#) —“one’s innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves”—is the trump card that can overrule any alternative claims about identity. Concepts such as “male” or “female” become a matter of self-identification rather than biology.

The expressive self teaches us that our feelings are the most important and foundational part of who we are.

However, it’s no longer clear what someone is saying when they claim to be male or female, a man or a woman (or something else). Making “one’s innermost concept of self” central to identity means there are no other criteria that can be used to determine whether one fits into one of these categories. In addition to presupposing a strong (and problematic) [body-self dualism](#), this raises the question of [how one internally knows](#) that one (really is) a man or a woman, etc. Writing in the **New York Times**, Carol Hay [argues](#) that “Any attempt to catalog the commonalities among women, in other words, has the inescapable result that there is some correct way to be a woman. This will inevitably encourage and legitimize certain experiences of gender and discourage and delegitimize others ... And what’s worse, it will inevitably leave some people out.” In other words, to prevent anyone from being left out, we must have no criteria for who counts as a woman. But if there are no criteria for who count as a woman (or a man), it seems that the concept has become meaningless.

Marriage without meaning. Similarly, the assumptions of the expressive self undermine the meaning of social institutions such as marriage and family. Marriage was once understood as a union of a man and a woman that was by nature oriented towards children, but that definition proved too narrow for a world structured by the expressive self. The political battle for same-sex marriage was won in significant part due to the argument that gays and lesbians had the same right to have their desires recognized and legitimized as straight people had. Love is love; why should the law or society treat homosexual couples any different from heterosexual couples? Again, desire itself is the fact that is decisive.

Unsurprisingly, the reach of these arguments did not stop when same-sex marriage was [legalized](#) by the U.S. Supreme Court. The same arguments have also been used to [justify](#) polyamorous unions, which have now been legally recognized by [multiple](#) jurisdictions in the United States. But the end of this path is not polyamory but instead the withering away of anything that is remotely identifiable as “marriage.” The existence of a legal category such as marriage suggests that this relationship (however it is defined) is in some way different and [special](#)—it is something that the law (and society) approves of and, to some degree, encourages. But the expressive self chafes against unchosen standards for what sexual (or other) relationships should look like. Any expectations about what marriage **should** look like (e.g., that it be limited to two people, permanent, sexual, sexually exclusive, etc.) will inevitably leave some people out. Therefore, in this view, the institution needs to be dismantled.

“Family privilege” is a term used to identify how some family forms (e.g., marriage) are given special status and treatment that are denied to others. The think tank [Family Story](#) is dedicated to dismantling family privilege and seeks to create a world “in which any individuals bonded by love, support, or care for each other, who by choice or circumstance are interdependent, can be recognized as family.” They also [believe](#) that “the legal rights, benefits, and privileges of marriage should be available to unmarried people.” By seeking to widen the circle to include every expression of connection, commitment, and desire, the very concept of marriage dissolves.

There are also more extreme manifestations of the expressive self with respect to marriage. The ***New York Times*** ran a [lengthy article](#) on “fictosexuals,” people who are attracted to and have relationships—including marriages—with fictional characters. The article says this about one man who considers himself married to an anime character: “It was not his first marriage: He had divorced a woman several years earlier. His new relationship was easier, he said, with no demands on his time and no need to cater to someone else’s desires. The love was ‘pure,’ given freely and with no expectation of anything in return.” There is also the rise of [sologamy](#)—the practice of marrying one’s self. These are perhaps not major movements, but the fact that they are movements at all suggests an important shift in the public understanding of marriage that seems to grow more radical by the year. In both of these unusual cases, it is the desires and perceptions of the expressive self, not the existence of another human being, that matters.

Consent isn’t enough. The assumptions of the expressive self also have had a corrosive effect on sexual morality. The expressive self has what might be called a “desires first” approach to sexuality—the point is not so much to connect with another person as it is to satisfy the sexual desires one happens to have. “No desire left behind” seems to be the operational guideline. If those desires include seeing and being emotionally present with another human being and treating them as the unique and precious individual they are, that’s fine—if that’s your thing. But some people may want to have sex in which the parties are essentially anonymous to each other and use one another’s bodies as objects of self-gratification. And so long as everyone consents, what’s the problem?

*To prevent anyone from being left out,
we must have no criteria for who counts as a woman.*

It turns out that there are a great many problems, for consent cannot possibly carry the weight of ensuring that we treat each other morally (or even humanely) in sex. Consent is a necessary condition for sex to be moral, but it is [hardly sufficient](#). Even if we gain the consent of another person, it is still possible to treat them as a mere object for use and consumption. Consent is perfectly compatible with exploitation, hatred, scorn, derision, callousness, indifference, and contempt for the full personhood of one's sexual partner(s). Recent [books and articles](#) chronicle how the current sexual culture leaves a great deal of regret, heartache, pain, and anger in its wake, even when everyone consents.

Further, if consent is the first, last, and only moral boundary in sexual relationships, we shouldn't be surprised if this boundary regularly fails. The expressive self tells us that our sexual desires are at the core of who we are and that we owe it to ourselves to follow our passions. Then it draws a boundary around consent and says, "do not cross this line." How confident are we that the line will hold?

Should we be surprised, for example, to learn that there is a massive online market for "child sexual abuse imagery," formerly known as child pornography? The ***New York Times*** [reports](#) that reports of child sexual abuse imagery grew from 1 million in 2014 to 18.4 million in 2018 and that the growth rate continues to be "exponential." When the news of [Harvey Weinstein's](#) numerous sexual assaults came out, many people acted as if they were shocked, shocked to learn that a man who regularly objectified women in media treated them as objects in real life. (I could go on.) Again, within a society that has left behind virtually any external standard for sexuality, how surprised should we be by any of this?

Following whatever you feel. C.S. Lewis's [insight](#) is worth repeating here: "When all that says 'it is good' has been debunked, what says 'I want' remains." The expressive self gives us little guidance about how we should behave sexually beyond "if it feels good, do it." This has the effect of giving at least a surface legitimacy to our worst desires, obscuring our need for self-discipline and communion with another human being. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that people in the U.S., on average, are having [far less sex](#) than they had in the past. When everyone is focused on getting what they want, and all norms (save consent) have been debunked, perhaps the sex on offer is [not particularly enticing](#).

Which brings us around to the central question: [what is sex about](#)? Is sexual desire primarily a desire for a certain kind of (genital) stimulation or pleasure, one that can be had with or without another person? Do sexual acts have any intrinsic meaning, or can they mean whatever the parties involved want them to mean?

The expressive self has a fundamentally [solipsistic](#) answer to these questions. Sex is about me satisfying my desires. The point of sex is pleasure, and pleasure is whatever I find pleasurable. The value-responsive self takes pleasure into account but is not solely focused on it. Where the expressive self asks, what do I want? the value-responsive self asks, what is good? How can sexual desire be integrated into a life that is in harmony with the value that exists in one's self and in the universe more generally? We turn to these questions in Part IV.

[Daniel Frost](#)

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We are often told that great sex requires us to break boundaries and follow our passions wherever they lead. But what if great sex requires us to take account of the moral value of ourselves and others?

In parts I and II of this series, we considered two fundamentally different conceptions of the self: the expressive self and the value-responsive self. In part III, we discussed the implications of the expressive self for sex and gender. Today we explore the parallel implications of the value-responsive self for sex and sexual morality.

At a fundamental level, the value-responsive self accepts the existence of the moral order and seeks to respond appropriately to it. From this vantage point, moral truth is not an enemy but instead offers the possibility of transcendence, recollection, and true happiness. Humans are not undermined but are uplifted, enriched, and fulfilled by responding to moral truth.

What does this moral order have to say about sexual relationships? The topic is too broad to be treated fully in an article of this length, but hopefully, these cursory remarks (and links) can point to a different way of approaching these topics. I also concede that what I say here is one possible way of fleshing out the value-responsive approach to sex; I would need to write more to defend this view against other criticisms and alternatives.

Why sexual relationships are different. We begin with what everyone knows but what we sometimes like to forget—sex is different. Sex is an area of life that is in some way special and unique—we don't treat sexual relationships the way that we treat other kinds of relationships. Our laws bear witness to this—rape and sexual assault are a unique kind of wrong, one that is not reducible to being physically assaulted in a particularly brutal way. Similarly, workplace policies that prohibit or discourage sexual relationships between coworkers acknowledge that there is something indeed different about sex.

*When we treat others this way, all sex becomes,
essentially, masturbation, for the other person is only incidental.*

What is this difference? In some mysterious way, **the person** seems to be more at stake in sexual relationships than in other areas of life. Sex seems to reach to the core of our being. In opening up sexually, we open a very **deep** part of the self—one that we do not show to everyone and one which (typically) we are very choosy about sharing. Further, sharing this part of the self can be a profound mode of connecting with another person. Because it engages us at a deep level, sex allows us to know another (and be known) deeply. Sexual desire is also inherently individuating—as Roger Scruton has shown, **sexual desire** is not simply a desire for a body or a kind of sensation but is a desire for union with an embodied person—for **this person**, unique and individual.

Not only that, but the kind of embodied union that sex seeks after has the potential to create new life. In sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, new human beings can (and frequently do) come into being, humans who will be in a condition of dependency for many years. Babies do not come into the world anonymously but with specific attachments to parents who are responsible for their existence.

The fact that more of the person is at stake and that more persons are at stake means that sex creates additional opportunities to deeply connect with others—or alternatively, to harm them. As Karol Wojtyla writes, “it would seem that the sexual relationship presents more opportunities than most other activities for treating a person—sometimes without even realizing it—as an object of use.”

Objects of our sexual hunger. *Objectification* is one way of naming the wrongs that we can inflict on people in sexual relationships. Rather than seeing sex as a special way to realize a profound and loving connection with another human person—a union that honors that person as a precious, intentional, and intelligent human being with the capacity to jointly create new human life—it is possible to see other people (and one’s self) as mere things or objects, as instruments of sexual gratification. To use the famous language of [Martin Buber](#), it is possible to take an “I-It” approach to others in sex rather than an “I-Thou” approach which honors their full reality as persons.

To show how we can respond fully to the value of other persons (and ourselves) in sexual relationships, I’d like to talk about four different ways that we can either treat someone as a fully human person or fail to do so. I’ve disaggregated them to show that one could accept some of these arguments without accepting all of them. In several cases, I’ll call the failure to treat someone as a person “objectification,” a term that suggests we treat others as things rather than as persons. The value-responsive self aspires to treat all persons at all times in accordance with their true value.

1. Responding to the value of choice. The first way we can honor the value of a person in sex is by respecting their consent. Thankfully, there is a broad and deep cultural consensus on this point. A crucial part of what defines us as persons is our ability to choose, especially on a topic as sensitive and personal as whether we will have sex with another person. To deny someone the ability to choose is to treat them as a thing, as an inert object that does not deserve any respect for his or her own thoughts or choices. Forcing someone into sex without their consent also denies their self-ownership, suggesting that they are not ultimately in charge of their own lives and bodies. Another way of saying this is that ignoring or overriding consent treats others as if they do not have boundaries that ought to be respected, that they can be violated at the will or pleasure of another. There are many ways of forcing people into sex without their consent, including rape, sexual assault, groping, sex trafficking, having sex with someone who is underage, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to give true consent, and others. All of these offenses deny our capacity to choose, central to who we are as persons, and thus reduce us to mere objects for the use of others. All of them are morally wrong.

2. Responding to the value of individual personhood. The second way we can honor the value of people in sex is by respecting their thoughts, emotions, and viewpoint in sexual acts —their “subjectivity,” we might say. One possibility of sexual desire is that we come to use others as an instrument to get what we want. The other person is *used* as a means to sexual gratification, used as one would exploit some disposable item whose value consists in its ability to meet some need or want of ours before it is discarded. Here, the other person no longer appears to us as an independent center of meaning and action, an agent whose thoughts, feelings, and well-being matter just as much as our own. The beautiful complexity of another person is reduced to a flat and one-dimensional image that is gerrymandered to fit what we want from them. By definition, there can be no real union with another when we do this, for we are willfully blind to aspects of their being that would make it possible to be united with that person as a person.

When we treat others this way, all sex becomes, essentially, masturbation, for the other person is only incidental, an alternative to a sex toy or robot. As Maggie Gallagher [points out](#), “masturbation is the logical end of the sexual revolution; completely severing sex from Eros, desire from any possibility of the union for which it longs.” There is no transcendence towards another person, only the lonely and solitary scratching of an itch.

Another way of saying this is that we sometimes treat people as fungible in sexual relationships. John Finnis has poignantly [written](#) that “Women particularly are well aware when they are being taken by their husbands or lovers not for the person, unique and uniquely related to that person, but rather as a convenient, available instance of ‘desirable woman’ whose presence as an appealing figure in the man’s aroused imagination impels him towards her until the moment when his biological tension is released, the appealing figure fades in his imagination, and his failure to integrate his insistent words and actions with a common life of friendship becomes evident even to him.” This, of course, is by definition a depersonalizing way of treating another person, for it abstracts away that person, “unique and uniquely related” to a desiring other, and reduces them to what could be have with any other “specimen” or “instance” of the kind that the other person wants. The person is ignored and disappears within a body that could be anyone’s. [John Crosby](#) uses the word “incommunicable” to describe the reality that each person is unique and irreplaceable, that “each person exists as if he [or she] were the only one.” By treating others as fungible in sex, we suggest that there is nothing particularly important about this person’s presence in the sexual act, and thus we turn away from the deep disclosure and connection that is possible in sex.

3. Responding to the value of new life. The third way we can honor the value of people in sex focuses on the new humans who are frequently created by sexual acts. Since the invention of (fairly) reliable contraception, many people have tried hard to shut their eyes to the reproductive implications of sexual relationships. The creation of babies in sex is seen as an accidental (and often unfortunate) outcome of sexual encounters, something which (in this view) should always be under our control (for insightful analysis, see [here](#) and [here](#)).

What are our obligations towards the new humans we make? My response is simple, but I think it is an answer that many people would like to avoid. Because humans come to be under conditions of radical dependency and stay in a state of dependency for many years, it is fair to say that we ought only to engage in sexual conduct which could lead to the creation of a new life if we are willing to accept responsibility for the full implications of that human’s existence. Newborn humans are completely helpless on their own and remain in a state of vulnerability and dependency for many years. Though some exceptions are appropriate and required (e.g., adoption), there is no better general principle for deciding who should have the primary responsibility for caring for a child than the child’s actual parents, the persons who are responsible for bringing the child into existence.

But surely this approach is far too limiting, isn't it? We can't really expect people to be willing to take responsibility for a child every time they have sex. If contraception fails, many people believe that abortion should be seen as an acceptable response to the problem of an unintended pregnancy. But think of what a direct and unavoidable denial of the value of human life [elective abortion](#) entails. In most cases, the point of abortion is to end the life of a living human being—if the baby lives, then the abortion has failed. There is no other category of human beings that is regularly subjected to the level of violence and discrimination that unborn humans face. These, our tiny brothers and sisters, are regularly destroyed because they are judged inconvenient, burdensome, or unwanted. Of all the depersonalizing and objectifying treatment discussed in this article, the direct and violent denial of value involved in elective abortion is in a class of its own.

Of course, even if the child is not aborted, parents can still fall far short of providing the level of care that children need. A healthy culture will take account of the facts of human reproduction and seek to create institutions and norms that will promote the welfare of parents and children—including encouraging parents to jointly take responsibility for the children they create.

4. Responding to the value of interpersonal unity in marriage. This brings us around to the fourth way that we can honor the value of persons in sex. Notice that even though we have identified some ways we can honor or objectify others in sex, we don't yet have an account of what sex is about. What distinguishes sex from other kinds of interactions? At its best, what is sex for?

One [answer](#), which I can only sketch here, sees sexual relationships as creating the possibility for a unique kind of [interpersonal union](#)—what was once known as “marriage.” Marriage, in this view, is a multi-dimensional sharing of lives in a relationship that is naturally fulfilled by the coming-to-be and nurturing of children. In marriage, sex can be an actualization of the spouses' loving and committed union with each other, one which honors each spouse as the unique, embodied, moral, emotional, and spiritual being that he or she is.

There is no other category of human beings that is regularly subjected to the level of violence and discrimination that unborn humans face.

This view sees human embodiment as a key part of the self. The body is not something beneath the self or other than the self but in a literal sense, is the self—whatever else the self is, the self is also a body. Further, because humans reproduce sexually, male and female members of the species are capable of being united in a way that other combinations of persons cannot. In sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, the couple becomes biologically united as a single reproductive unit—they become “one flesh,” in the language of Genesis.

Obviously, this doesn't mean that human persons somehow become an indistinguishable biological blob during sex, only that the reproductive parts of their bodies unite and coordinate to achieve reproduction. Just as the heart, blood vessels, and blood cells cooperate to form an integrated

biological process—circulation—so too the reproductive organs of male and female unite to form the unitary biological process of reproduction. And it is not only when conception occurs that this biological unity is achieved—whenever a man and a woman fulfill “[the behavioral conditions for reproduction](#),” they are united in a biological sense. Because human persons are embodied biological beings, there is a kind of interpersonal unity possible here that is not otherwise possible.

Of course, not every instance of biological unity forms or actualizes a marriage—biological unity can be achieved in adultery, but adultery is non-marital and even anti-marital. Marriage is a union of persons at many levels of personality, not just the physical. And I should emphasize that marriage, in this view, is not merely a means to the creation of children—a marriage (and the sex that happens within it) is valuable even when a couple has no children. However, the connection to reproduction structures the meaning of marriage.

Because the task of raising children is open-ended and the parent-child relationship never dissolves, it makes sense for the union of spouses to be **permanent**. And because only two persons (a man and a woman) can unite biologically, and because (absent advanced technology) every child has exactly two parents, it makes sense for spouses to be **sexually exclusive**—sex outside of the marital bond cannot contribute to the multi-level union between the married couple and involves, in every case, a betrayal of the two-in-one flesh union that constitutes marriage.

Taking Pleasure in Goodness. And what of pleasure? Does this view welcome and encourage pleasure in sex? The answer is yes, though the question of value (or the good) is prior to the question of pleasure. Pleasure is not a basic good, for people can take pleasure in bad things. Sex in which people objectify each other is not “good” sex, even if it produces pleasure for one or both parties. Such pleasure can detach one’s perception of the good—understood as the life-long loving and committed union between husband and wife which would be fulfilled by the bearing and raising of children—from the disposition to affirm and pursue that good. As such, it is dis-integrating—it separates one’s ability to pursue the good from the development of one’s sexual experience and dispositions.

The goal of sex, in this view, is the affirmation and health of the marriage. Sex is about the union; it is fundamentally interpersonal rather than solipsistic. It is knowing and being known at a deep level. Should this be pleasurable? Yes, of course, and spouses should seek to give and receive pleasure. Nature has thankfully and graciously made conjugal love an inherently pleasurable activity.

But, again, the question of value is prior to the question of pleasure. As Aristotle taught long ago, it is good and even virtuous to take pleasure in activities that are genuinely fulfilling, for pleasure helps cement (for better or worse) our attachment to things, people, and activities. It is part of the full realization of virtue to take pleasure in goodness.

Following our discussion in Part II, however, we should note that the **quality** of sexual pleasure differs based on our stance toward moral goodness and truth. Pursuit of value leads to transcendence, freedom, recollection, and lasting joy; pursuit of mere pleasure detached from value leads to boredom, alienation, and imprisonment in the self. In the domain of sex, Hildebrand insightfully [notes](#) that “Sex is always extraordinary, but its characteristic extraordinariness assumes diametrically opposite forms.” He goes on: “Sex possesses the tender, mysterious, ineffably uniting and intimate quality only when exercised as the expression of something more ultimate—namely, married love.” On the other hand, when sex is pursued irrespective of such love, “The depth, the seriousness, the mystery disappear, to make room for a fascinating, exciting, and befuddling charm which excludes anything beyond ... [when we pursue sex irrespective of love, we hear] something essentially incompatible with love.” Treating all sexual pleasure as essentially the same misinterpret the different qualities of sexual pleasure.

A distinction worth remembering. In sum, I hope to have shown, at the very least, that there is a serious discussion to be had about what the self is and how the self relates to gender and sex. The idea that we ought to affirm whatever sexual or gender identities people express or identify with already presupposes an expressive view of the self—one which excludes, in advance, other possible understandings. Likewise, adopting what might be called “identity libertarianism” (let each person choose what their identity means to them) [presupposes](#) that humans are not structured by a world of unchosen values which hold the possibility for joy and transcendence. This is philosophical anthropology that is fundamentally ambivalent about moral truth and which leads inevitably and inescapably to incoherence about gender, sex, and sexual morality.

Love does not require that we affirm dubious assumptions about what it means to be human or the place of sex in human life. Love does not mean that each person can define truth for him- or herself. Rather, love requires us to see each person for who they really are and to affirm the unique goodness and potential of each person. Love requires that we acknowledge the ways we are uplifted and fulfilled by responding to truth. The “law written in [our] hearts” (Romans 2:15) is neither a threat to individuality nor a divine fiat that we must blindly follow. By responding to value, we become who we truly are.

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As people of faith are increasingly critiqued for their convictions around marriage and family, they could be strengthened by a deeper appreciation of the philosophical basis of these religious teachings.

I am sometimes asked by Latter-day Saints and others how to “balance” a faithful commitment to truths about marriage and sexual morality with love for LGBT+ persons. In one sense, the question is reasonable. It springs from the laudable desire to affirm persons who “identify” as LGBT+. Such persons, as all persons, are made in the image and likeness of God, and they deserve love and friendship.

But in another sense, the idea that there is a “balancing” that needs to be done is misguided —very fundamentally so. It would make sense if one bought into LGBT+ identitarianism, but that, it seems to me, is a mistake. The LGBT+ movement presupposes that a certain “sexual orientation” or “gender identity” is central to who one is. It insists that the “I” or “me” demanding and deserving affirmation and love is the “I” or “me” whose essence is constituted in an important way by a certain sexual orientation or gender identity. As we often hear, “If you do not affirm me as, say, lesbian, transgender, etc., you are not affirming (and not loving) me.”

We should never pretend to approve what we do not, in truth, approve of; or demand that others approve of what they do not approve of.

If one believes that “sexual orientation” or “gender identity” truly is central to one’s identity or being, then The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ teaching about marriage and family, including but not limited to the Proclamation on the Family, will always be highly problematic and, indeed, mysterious. It will be defensible, if at all, sheerly by appeal to authority, and will not be comprehensible as what LDS General Authorities proclaim it to be: teachings for the good of—the integral flourishing of—the human person and the human family. This will result in the tendency to read the content of the Proclamation in respect of sexual morality as narrowly as possible (for the sake of “balancing”) and will underwrite and sustain the hope that the Church’s teachings on marriage (as the conjugal union of husband and wife) and sexual conduct (appropriate within, and only within, the marital bond) will someday change—that there will be a new revelation contradicting and canceling the old. This will impede, psychologically, the full and heartfelt affirmation of the Church’s teaching.

So where does that leave the faithful Latter-day Saint (or Catholic, or Evangelical Christian, or Orthodox Jew or Muslim) who wants to be kind, affirming, loving—as we certainly should be? It leaves that person caught between acknowledging as somehow authoritative and binding these “unloving” (or, in any case, hard to see or understand as in any way loving) revealed moral strictures, and the desire to be kind, affirming, and loving. One will, as I’ve already noted, read the strictures as narrowly as possible and feel the psychological compulsion to at least hope for their “repeal.” And, of course, one will be desperately trying to balance—I say desperately because one will not **really** be able to affirm the revelation in its fullness and on its own terms. (This is perhaps my most important point.) One will not genuinely **see** the **good** in the strictures; all they do, one will deep down suppose, is impede people from “fully being themselves.” That’s **precisely** what the LGBT+ movement, as a movement, says, and I don’t see how anyone who embraces its underlying presuppositions —the understanding of identity, the philosophical anthropology, that I briefly outlined a moment ago—can say the movement is wrong on that point. He who says A, says B. There is a relentlessness to the logic. If you are Latter-day Saint (or Catholic, etc.) and you find yourself feeling as though you have to, essentially, apologize for your Church’s teachings on sex and marriage or interpret them as narrowly as possible (or avoid discussing them whenever possible), I can tell you right now that you’ve bought into a set of other premises that are, in the end, incompatible with those teachings.

My own view is that “sexual orientation” (understood as a particular ordering of sexual desire, personal identity, and human fulfillment) is an artifact of 19th-century psychology. It would have baffled people of earlier times, not just those whose morality condemned homosexual activity, but also those who lived in societies in which homoeroticism was widely accepted and even treated as normal (at least for men).

The late Kenneth Dover's book, [Greek Homosexuality](#), and the work of the Berkeley classicist David Cohen on the regulation of sexuality in Greek antiquity are illuminating here. It's not that people in earlier times and places had "sexual orientations" but just didn't know they did or didn't have a label for it. It's that "sexual orientation" is indeed a modern concept/construct—one that is slippery and ambiguous (on this, see Michael Hannon's 2014 First Things article, "[Against Heterosexuality](#)").

The concept/construct of sexual orientation is supposed to do a particular sort of work in contemporary debates about marriage and sexual morality. You're supposed to believe that everyone has one and that some people have one that naturally orients them to romantic-sexual interest and attraction to persons of the same sex, and those same-sex relationships thus offer them wholeness and fulfillment. The step from there to the rejection of traditional norms against homosexual acts and the affirmation of same-sex sexual partnerships, even their status as marriages, is extremely short. It becomes a simple matter of kindness ... compassion ... decency ... equality ... treating like cases alike. After all, only a bigot (or someone who is abjectly ignorant or horribly cruel) could deny people their natural fulfillment. Of course, one can and should acknowledge that people experience the attractions they experience—and people experience all sorts of romantic and sexual attractions, including same-sex attraction. And people should treat each other decently and compassionately. But people also need to be honest with one another. No one should pressure someone to accept what he or she doesn't in fact believe or believe to be right. When people disagree, including about important moral questions, they should exchange reasons and offer each other arguments—but not manipulate each other (or call each other names or treat each other with disrespect). We should never pretend to approve what we do not, in truth, approve of; or demand that others approve of what they do not approve of. We need to be honest with each other.

In my experience, deep friendship can not only survive deep disagreement but can flourish despite it. I think part of the reason I personally have been able to enjoy deep bonds of friendship with people who live in ways I do not think are right, and who know that I think what I think (since my views are very public and I don't hide them), is that they know where they stand with me. They know that I love them and that I am happy to be friends with them, even though we have deep disagreements, even about things they think are central to their identities. Of course, not everyone feels that way—some people demand approval of their self-conception and way of life as the price of friendship—but you'd be surprised at how many people do.

In my experience, deep friendship can not only survive deep disagreement but can flourish despite it.

On the question of the reasonableness of the conjugal view of marriage, I want to urge my Latter-day Saint friends to study deeply the philosophical literature pertaining to marriage and sexual morality—not as an alternative to the teachings of the Church and its General Authorities, like President Nelson, Elder Holland, and President Ballard, but rather to more fully understand and appreciate why the teaching is what it is—to grasp the intelligible point of what otherwise will appear to be cold prohibitions, mere strictures, "thou shalt nots."

It is good to pray and try to be moved by God's grace to affirm what these religious authorities are teaching, but it is—forgive me for being so bold as to say this—not enough. The teachers are teaching that the teachings they teach are for the integral good of the human person and the human family—so it is critical to understand how and why this is so. In other words, the rational basis of the teachings matters—it is integral, not extrinsic, to the teachings themselves. What God commands in His moral injunctions is not arbitrary—His commandments are for the sake of our integral good. But if we do not try to understand **how** moral commandments serve our integral good, we will deep down—whatever we say with our mouths—believe them to be arbitrary (and experience them as oppressive—either to ourselves, or others).

Thankfully, there are many books and writings that can help Latter-day Saints and others deepen their understanding of these issues. On the dominance of expressive individualism and how we might confront it constructively and critique it effectively, there are the classic writings of [Robert Bellah](#) himself (who coined the phrase), [Christopher Lasch](#), [Alasdair MacIntyre](#), and others. There are also two good recent books, Carl Trueman's [*The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*](#) and Carter Snead's [*What It Means to Be Human*](#). On marriage and sexual morality, perhaps a place to begin is with my book (with Sherif Girgis and Ryan T. Anderson) [*What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*](#). For some deeper philosophical exploration of key issues in the area, there are two books I've written with Patrick Lee, both published by Cambridge University Press: [*Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*](#) (2008), and [*Conjugal Union: What Marriage Is and Why It Matters*](#) (2012). I also highly recommend Ryan Anderson's book [*When Harry Became Sally*](#) or some of his other writings on "gender identity" (and gender ideology more generally). Ryan sets a great example of how to engage on sensitive issues with dignity and compassion, while never compromising on truth.

I have been greatly honored that some Latter-day Saint leaders and members have taken an interest in my own work on marriage and sexual morality. Why would they do that? If it has any value at all, it is as an effort to better understand and, thus, to more fully appreciate the way in which marriage—rightly understood—and sexual morality—soundly conceived—serve integral human well-being and fulfillment and are rationally defensible as such. My work is, of course, imperfect. I'm sure I don't have the entire story and I certainly don't have the entire story exactly right.

I'm participating in an effort that crosses the centuries and involves a long train of thinkers trying to learn from each other and sometimes correcting each other. But the tradition, I would respectfully submit, has achievements and carries some important wisdom. And there are modern and contemporary thinkers (from Elizabeth Anscombe and John Finnis to young scholars today like Sherif Girgis and Melissa Moschella) who are valuably contributing to it—in no small measure provoked by the challenges of the sexual revolution and the ideologies it has generated. Their work is very much worth drawing on, especially inasmuch as it contests presuppositions of those ideologies that richly deserve to be contested, and which must be challenged if teaching such as that set forth in the Proclamation (and in the Bible and the teachings of the biblically-based and Abrahamic faiths) is to be truly affirmed and integrated into our lives as people of faith.

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Rethinking No-Fault Divorce: A Better Way Forward

by C.D. Cunningham

January 28, 2025



Is no-fault divorce failing people?

Evidence suggests that it reduces general marital stability and happiness.

There is a push from some on the right to [change no-fault divorce laws](#) in the United States. Commentators on the [political left have responded](#) that doing so would amount to rolling back the clock or be harmful to women. Is there a better way forward? I'll be clear before jumping in that I've benefited from no-fault divorce. The lack of legal rigor around the process made it quick and cheap. But I believe our public policy should have more important aims than what makes my life easy. I've also seen firsthand how divorce harms children, women, and men. Let's jump in.

No-Fault Divorce Is Worse For Everyone ... Mostly

The [best available research](#) shows that no-fault divorce laws [reduce marriage](#) and [increase divorces](#). It also shows that [men](#) and [women are happier](#), wealthier, and healthier when they're married and that, on average, [children are better off](#) in every measurable way when raised by married parents.

No-fault divorce has made life worse for almost everyone.

Additionally, no-fault divorce doesn't even prevent unhappy marriages, which is presumably the goal. Counterintuitively, it actually results in [more unhappy marriages](#)—perhaps because divorce has become a constant specter. So, while no-fault divorce has made life worse for almost everyone, there are two exceptions that must be addressed. First, there is some reason to believe that the rise of no-fault divorce in the 1970s corresponded with a [drop in domestic violence rates](#). The evidence isn't perfect since domestic violence wasn't measured in [any systematic way until the 1990s](#), but there are good reasons to believe it's true.

Secondly, in a small minority of divorce cases, [children are better off](#). These are cases where there is severe domestic violence or addiction in a family system. Divorce still harms these children, but because those children are also being removed from a situation that is doing greater harm in other ways, they can experience an overall net positive. Is there a way to move forward with what we've learned in our fifty-year experiment of no-fault divorce? Can we move toward a better model that doesn't move us fifty years backward but does eliminate the excesses of our current approach, which is hurting nearly everyone? And can we do it without putting those benefited by the current regime at greater risk? I think we can, but it will require a more thoughtful approach than some advocates on the right have called for, and we're likely in a better position to accomplish it than the naysayers on the left suggest.

The New Reality of Domestic Violence

It is simply dishonest to compare what it would be like to be the victim of violence by a partner in 2024 to what it would have been like in 1965. The 1994 Violence Against Women Act has been [a game-changer](#) in reducing domestic violence. The reason some have suggested that domestic violence went down after no-fault divorce laws went into place is because it made it easier for women to get away from those who beat them. Today, there is a [robust network of shelters](#) for women that didn't exist at the time no-fault divorces were put into place, allowing them safety while divorces proceed. In addition, the laws around domestic violence and the enforcement of those laws are [much more robust](#). Women who are the victims of domestic violence do not need a quick divorce to escape a violent situation. There are plentiful tools in place to do so. In fact, no-fault divorce laws may be harming victims of domestic violence today. No-fault divorce laws in most states simply split all household resources in two. But, the victims of domestic violence often need additional resources to get back on their feet. In a no-fault divorce system, they have limited ways to extract those resources from the person who caused the harm they need to overcome.

Even the most draconian fault-based divorce systems would not prevent battered women from getting divorced. Domestic violence is a fault that could grant a divorce. But, a system that no longer ignored fault entirely could provide victims the resources they need from their batterer to repair the damage. And while those divorces process, the shelter system the Violence Against Women Act put in place could protect women and their children from those that cause them harm.

To suggest that changing no-fault divorce would put women at the same risk of domestic violence that existed in the 1960s simply ignores the massive progress that has been made in addressing domestic violence that would remain in place.

The Legal Standard

One common rationale given when no-fault divorce was originally put into place is that couples who wanted a divorce would simply [conspire together to create a rationale](#) that the courts would accept.

Some worry that moving away from a no-fault standard would put us back in the same legal position. But there is no reason that a new generation of marriage law needs to fit this all-or-nothing model. Rather, states could adopt a model with multiple avenues for divorce.

States could adopt a model with multiple avenues for divorce.

1) Cause-Based Divorce

State laws could reinstitute a hearty cause-based avenue that victims of domestic violence, addiction, cruelty, or infidelity could pursue. This would require the same burdens that any breach of contract claim would face in court. This would better protect those who are victims during their marriage get the support they need. Having a cause-based avenue, would not prevent pursuing a simpler path, but would be available in the worst situations.

2) Child-Protection Divorce

In cases where children are being harmed because of the degree of conflict, there could be an avenue in which judges would merely need to agree that it is likely that the children would be better off if the marriage ended—a lower standard than the fault-based divorce, but one focused on the needs of the children rather than adults.

3) Abandonment Divorce

Perhaps the most important principle in creating a new divorce regime is respecting the autonomy of everyone involved. Abandonment divorce grants this autonomy. This avenue for divorce would allow either partner to file for divorce at any time without any given reason except that they wish to abandon the marriage. If both partners wish to abandon the marriage then assets can be divided equally. But if one partner wishes to abandon the marriage and there is no fault-based reason for doing so, judges would consider the choice to abandon the “cause” of the divorce, and would consider that in the distribution of marital assets. This would incentivize both partners to try and preserve the marriage while preserving their absolute right to leave if they choose to do so.

Right now there is no legal incentive to try and save a marriage once one party is inclined to leave, this would change that underlying dynamic and give partners a legal reason to save the marriage, an outcome that in most cases is better for them, better for their children, and better for society as a whole. It would make the marriage contract respected in the law more similarly to other contracts and would remove the constant specter of divorce, which would likely result in an overall increase in marital happiness.

Deterring that kind of divorce [may upset some people](#). But the reality is that the [no-fault divorce experiment has failed](#). This policy has resulted in men, women, and children who are less healthy and less happy. We need to move on, but we shouldn't move back to a 1950s- style divorce regime. No, it's time to move forward to something better.

C.D. Cunningham

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