

COUNSELING TOGETHER IN Marriage

By Randy Keyes

As a marriage and family therapist in Victoria, Canada, I counseled with a couple, Bob and Mary (names have been changed), who often had disagreements when they tried to make decisions together. During one meeting Bob said to me, “I try to

preside and get things done, but when I come up with ideas of what we need to do, *she won't sustain the priesthood!*”

From his comment I could tell that he did not fully understand what it means to preside. When couples marry, they form an equal partnership in which they strive to make decisions together in a spirit of unity.

I shared with this couple some principles about counseling together that I learned from the model of priesthood councils. Although councils in the home function somewhat differently than councils do in the Church, many of the same principles apply. As we strive to employ these principles in our homes, they can help us strengthen our marriages in a way that is pleasing to the Lord.



PRINCIPLE 1: UNANIMOUS DECISION MAKING

In Priesthood Councils

Presidencies, councils, and bishoprics all work upon principles of unanimous, harmonious agreement. Elder M. Russell Ballard explained that the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles comes to a united decision before they act on any issue: “We discuss a wide variety of issues, from Church administration to world events, and we do so frankly and openly. Sometimes issues are discussed for weeks, months, and occasionally even years before a decision is made.”¹ Unity is so important that they will not move forward with a decision until unity has been achieved.

The Lord taught the same principle of unity in councils to Joseph Smith: “And every decision made by either of these quorums must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member in each quorum must be agreed to its decisions, in order to make their decisions of the same power or validity one with another” (D&C 107:27).

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reinforced this principle when he taught, “We can’t receive inspiration if we’re not united.”² When we are unified in purpose and prayer, we invite guidance and inspiration from the Holy Ghost.

In the Home

The principle of unity is true for priesthood councils, and it is true for marriages. The Brethren have taught that the family council is the basic council of the Church.³ Notice that they have not taught that the husband is the most basic council or that the wife is the most basic council. This council consists of both of them together.



It is not uncommon for couples to struggle in coming to a unanimous decision, especially when the issue at hand is significant. Further, when spouses are more concerned with being right than with gaining consensus, “communication with Heavenly Father breaks down, [and] communication between spouses also breaks down. And Heavenly Father will not interfere. He doesn’t generally intrude where He is not invited.”⁴ The key is to actually invite—rather than exclude—our Heavenly Father into our discussions. If we humbly work together and listen to each other, we gain the essential blessing of the Lord’s guidance.

It is important to make united decisions with the guidance of the Spirit—especially if the decision doesn’t seem logically to be the best choice. President George Q. Cannon (1827–1901), First Counselor in the First Presidency, explained that the Lord sustains the counsel of united leaders and that He will improve their less-than-perfect plan and will “supplement it by His wisdom and power and make it effective.”⁵ This promise is offered to all councils, including couples.

However, decision making does not always have to be accomplished through a formal process. Elder Ballard teaches that “when a husband and wife talk to each other, they are holding a family council.”⁶

Additionally, just as the Lord does not

Just as priesthood councils strive for unity in their decisions, unity in marriage is essential.

command us in all things, spouses do not need to hold councils for every decision. Couples should trust each other to make daily decisions that eternally have little consequence. Together, with guidance from the Lord, the scriptures, and the words of the prophet, they determine those decisions that require mutual discussion.

PRINCIPLE 2: FULL PARTICIPATION

In Priesthood Councils

In the worldwide leadership training meeting in November 2010, Julie B. Beck, Relief Society general president, shared the following scripture: “Appoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not all be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege” (D&C 88:122). Elder Walter F. González of the Presidency of the Seventy followed her comments with the observation that participation fosters inspiration.⁷ When everyone has an equal chance to contribute, the combined ideas of individual people become stronger.

In the Home

The principle of participation teaches us the importance of having both spouses contribute to the decision-making process. It is not enough for one spouse to make all the decisions and the other to merely agree. Couples achieve greater success as they both seek inspiration and then listen to each other’s thoughts and feelings.

President Howard W. Hunter (1907–95) said: “A man who holds the priesthood accepts his wife as a partner in the leadership of the home and family with full knowledge of and full participation in all decisions relating thereto. . . . The Lord intended that the wife be a helpmeet for man (*meet* means equal)—that is, a companion equal and

necessary in full partnership.”⁸ We are made to help each other. When we invite and accept our spouse’s participation, we can enjoy one of the great benefits of marriage.

PRINCIPLE 3: PRESIDING RIGHTEOUSLY

In Priesthood Councils

Understanding the correct meaning of *presiding* is vital in conducting an effective priesthood council. Those who preside “watch over the church” (Alma 6:1) and are responsible for ensuring that unity, equal participation, and other principles of counseling are being practiced. Elder Ballard reminds us that “those who hold the priesthood must never forget that they have no right to wield priesthood authority like a club over the heads of others. . . . Priesthood is for service, not servitude; compassion, not compulsion; caring, not control. Those who think otherwise are operating outside the parameters of priesthood authority.”⁹

In the Home

The husband’s patriarchal duty as one who presides in the home is not to rule over others but to ensure that the marriage and the family prosper. President David O. McKay (1873–1970) explained that one day every man will have a personal priesthood interview with the Savior: “First, He will request an accountability report about your relationship with your wife. Have you been actively engaged in making her happy and ensuring that her needs have been met as an individual?”¹⁰

The husband is accountable for growth and happiness in his marriage, but this accountability does not give him authority over his wife. Both are in charge of the marriage. In righteous marriage councils both spouses share a set of virtues that when applied help them focus on each other.

We can study some of these virtues in Doctrine and Covenants 121:41: “No power or influence can or ought

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to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned.”

We cannot use the priesthood to assert power and influence. Therefore, we can't use unrighteous means to establish dominance in marriage. True power comes only when we work together in righteousness and so qualify for blessings from the Lord.

BUILDING AN ETERNAL MARRIAGE

Couples who struggle with control issues or disagreements over how to handle time, money, children, in-laws, or anything else should consider reassessing the foundational principles they have chosen to follow in their marriage. Can they improve their marriage by establishing a pattern where they counsel together with love unfeigned?

The principles of unity, participation, and presiding in righteousness allow us to reach a proper consensus with our spouse

and invite the Spirit into our lives. Applying the virtues of love and kindness will soften many arguments, lead to deeper satisfaction in marriage, and build a relationship that can last through eternity. ■

NOTES

1. M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils: Learning to Minister Together in the Church and in the Family* (1997), 18–19.
2. David A. Bednar, in “Panel Discussion,” *2010 Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, lds.org/broadcasts/archive/worldwide-leadership-training/2010/11.
3. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 211.
4. M. Russell Ballard, “Family Councils: A Conversation with Elder and Sister Ballard,” *Liahona*, June 2003, 17; *Ensign*, June 2003, 19.
5. *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of George Q. Cannon*, sel. Jerreld L. Newquist (1957), 163.
6. M. Russell Ballard, “Family Councils,” *Liahona*, June 2003, 14; *Ensign*, June 2003, 16.
7. See “Panel Discussion,” *2010 Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*.
8. Howard W. Hunter, “Being a Righteous Husband and Father,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 50–51.
9. M. Russell Ballard, “Strength in Counsel,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 78.
10. David O. McKay, quoted by Robert D. Hales, “Understandings of the Heart” (Brigham Young University devotional address, Mar. 15, 1988, 8), speeches.byu.edu.

In righteous marriage councils, both spouses try—through respect, kindness, and full participation—to build the relationship and seek for unity.