



# Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners

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*Temple marriage covenants do not magically bring equality to a partnership. Those covenants commit us to a developmental process of learning and growing together.*

**H**is house key is in the lock. He's home from work and about to step inside. In the kitchen, real life is scattered all around. The baby is crying. The three-year-old just poured milk—not in a glass but all over the counter. The seven-year-old needs some daddy attention. And dinner isn't ready.

With a deadline at work tomorrow, a head buzzing from rush-hour traffic, and a Church meeting tonight, he's hoping she will greet him with some *relief*.

Hearing him come in, she is glad a *relief* party has arrived! But when she sees his face fall as he looks around, she defends herself: "Look—I work all day too. I've been with these kids nonstop, and I really need a break. Will you please fix this macaroni and cheese and help with the kids?"

In the heat of her request, his hope evaporates into exasperation, and he is about to react.

At this crossroads of their busy day, these two have some choices. Will they use this moment to practice being

the kind of companion each has covenanted to become? Or will each one default to past conditioning—familial and cultural? Certain attitudes and ideas have crept into the very air they breathe, challenging them as they try to work *with* each other rather than *against* each other.

Suppose *he* grew up with a father who was a dominant husband and a mother who was a subordinate wife. The cheery husband calls out, "Honey, I'm home!" as he strides through the polished front

door. The calm wife—not a hair out of place and wearing fresh lipstick and a starched apron—greet him with, "Your dinner is ready, dear. Take off your tie and sit down." Everything is in its place.

Suppose his parents believe that a wife's first duty, as one U.S. church wrote recently in its creed, is to "submit graciously to her husband." And suppose they believe that a husband's duty is to give directions—leading out, assigning tasks, and expecting results.

Now suppose *she* grew up with parents who aligned

themselves with women's liberation. Her mother is grateful to live in a day when women no longer feel pressured to conform to a rigid, self-sacrificing role that seems to deny their sense of self.

Perhaps her mother, even her father, would say that a smart wife keeps boundaries around how much of her time and self she will give to support her husband and children because she first needs to look out for herself and her personal priorities in this new age of female freedom.

### **Becoming Interdependent**

Correcting these two extremist attitudes, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" teaches a husband-wife concept that clearly differs from *both* households where this hypothetical couple grew up. It states that fathers "are to preside" and "to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families," while mothers "are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children." Fathers and mothers are to "help one another" fulfill these duties as "*equal partners*."<sup>1</sup>

Our young husband's parents believe the old idea that women are fully *dependent* on their husbands. Our young wife's parents believe the new idea that women are *independent* of their husbands. But the restored gospel teaches the eternal idea that husbands and wives are *interdependent* with each other. They are equal. They are partners.

The incorrect idea in Christian history that wives should be *dependent* began with the false premise that the Fall

of Adam and Eve was a tragic mistake and that Eve was the primary culprit. Thus women's traditional submission to men was considered a fair punishment for Eve's sin.<sup>2</sup>

Thankfully, the Restoration clarifies Eve's—and

Adam's—choice as essential to the eternal progression of God's children. We honor rather than condemn what they did, and we see Adam and Eve as equal partners.

The modern liberationist idea that married people are *independent* of each other is also incorrect. It typically claims that there are no innate differences between men and women or that, even if some differences do exist, no one has the right to define gender-based roles.

In some ways, the excessive selflessness of the *dependent* wife allowed and perhaps even

encouraged male domination. In reaction to this, the radical wing of the women's liberation movement swung to the other extreme of *independence*, moving past the possibilities of *interdependence*. This cultural motion, and emotion, pushed some women from being overly selfless to being overly selfish—causing them to miss the personal growth that can come only from self-chosen sacrifice, which makes possible a woman's ability to thrive from nurturing all within her circle (see John 17:19).

The concept of interdependent, equal partners is well-grounded in the doctrine of the restored gospel. Eve was Adam's "help meet" (Genesis 2:18). The original Hebrew for *meet* means that Eve was adequate for, or equal to,



Adam. She wasn't his servant or his subordinate. And the Hebrew for *help* in "help meet" is *ezer*, a term meaning that Eve drew on heavenly powers when she supplied their marriage with the spiritual instincts uniquely available to women as a gender gift.<sup>3</sup>

As President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has said, men and women are by nature different, and while they share many basic human traits, the "virtues and attributes upon which perfection and exaltation depend come [more] naturally to a woman."<sup>4</sup>

Genesis 3:16 states that Adam is to "rule over" Eve, but this doesn't make Adam a dictator. A *ruler* can be a measuring tool that sets standards. Then Adam would live so that others may measure the rightness of their conduct by watching his. Being a ruler is not so much a privilege of power as an obligation to practice what a man preaches. Also, *over* in "rule over" uses the Hebrew *bet*, which means ruling *with*, not ruling *over*. If a man does exercise "dominion . . . in *any degree* of unrighteousness" (D&C 121:37; emphasis added), God terminates that man's authority.

Perhaps because false teachings had twisted original scriptural meanings, President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) preferred "preside" rather than "rule." He said: "No woman has ever been asked by the Church authorities to follow her husband into an evil pit. She is to follow him [only] as he follows and obeys the Savior of the world, but in deciding [whether he is obeying Christ], she should always be sure she is fair."<sup>5</sup> In this way, President Kimball saw marriage "as a full partnership," stating, "We do not want our LDS women to be *silent* partners or *limited* partners" but rather "a *contributing* and *full* partner."<sup>6</sup>

Spouses need not perform the same functions to be equal. The woman's innate spiritual instincts are like a

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moral magnet, pointing toward spiritual north—except when that magnet's particles are scrambled out of order. The man's presiding gift is the priesthood—except when he is not living the principles of righteousness. If the husband and the wife are wise, their counseling will be reciprocal: he will listen to the promptings of her inner spiritual compass just as she will listen to his righteous counsel.

And in an equal-partner marriage both also bring a spiritual maturity to their partnership, without regard to gender. Both have a conscience and the Holy Ghost to guide them. Both see family life as their most important work. Each also strives to become a fully rounded disciple of Jesus Christ—a complete spiritual being.

#### **Equal-Partner Marriage**

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said that for too long in the Church, the men have been the theologians while the women have been the Christians.<sup>7</sup> To be equal partners, each should be both a theologian *and* a Christian. When Elder Maxwell learned in 1996 that he had leukemia, the diagnosis was discouraging. He had worked for years on making himself "willing to submit" (Mosiah 3:19) to the Lord's will. If it was time to face death, he didn't want to shrink from drinking his bitter cup.

But his wife, Colleen, thought he was too willing to yield. With loving directness, she said that Christ Himself earnestly pleaded first, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Only then did He submit Himself, saying, "Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). Elder Maxwell saw his wife's doctrinal insight and agreed. As a result, they pleaded together that his life might be spared. Motivated by their determination, Elder

Maxwell's doctor found a new medical treatment that prolonged his life for several years. Elder Maxwell was grateful that he was not the only theologian in their marriage.<sup>8</sup>

In an equal-partner marriage, "love is not possession but participation . . . part of that co-creation which is our human calling."<sup>9</sup> With true participation, husband and wife merge into the synergistic oneness of an "everlasting dominion" that "without compulsory means" will flow with spiritual life to them and their posterity "forever and ever" (D&C 121:46).

In the little kingdom of a family, each spouse freely gives something the other does not have and without which neither can be complete and return to God's presence. Spouses are not a soloist with an accompanist, nor are they two solos. They are the interdependent parts of a duet, singing together in harmony at a level where no solo can go.

Each gives abundance to the other's want. As Paul wrote,

"For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened:

"But by an equality, that . . . your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality" (2 Corinthians 8:13–14).

Temple marriage covenants do not magically bring equality to a partnership. Those covenants commit us to a developmental process of learning and growing together—by practice.

That couple we saw at the kitchen threshold share a commitment to the promise of eternal family unity. But equal partnerships are not made in heaven—they are *made on earth*, one choice at a time, one conversation at a time, one threshold crossing at a time. And getting there is hard work—like patiently working through

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differing assumptions about who was bringing relief to whom that night or any of thousands of nights like it.

As milk drips from the counter, she holds a box of macaroni and cheese in her hand, he faces a deadline and a meeting, and both feel the pull of weariness on their faces. How would people in a covenant, balanced relationship handle such a moment, and how could the next few moments help create an equal partnership?

Young wife, do you see in him someone who has worked all day to bring sustenance to your table? Young husband, do you see in her someone who has worked all day to make nourishment of that sustenance? Can you both see beyond the *doing* of the day and remember the inestimable worth of the *being* to whom you are married?

### Thresholds of Love

After a lifetime of practice and patience together, what will your last earthly threshold look like? Will it look and feel something like that of John and Therissa Clark? In 1921 John Haslem Clark of Manti, Utah, wrote what became his last journal entry:

"The folks have been here today, but have gone to their homes. The clatter of racing feet, the laughter and babble

of tongues have ceased. We are alone, *We two*. We two whom destiny has made one. Long ago, it has been sixty years since we met under the June trees. I kissed you first. How shy and afraid was your girlhood. Not any woman on earth or in heaven could be to me what you are. I would rather you were here, woman, with your gray hair, than any fresh blossom of youth. Where you are is home. Where you are not is homesickness. As I look at you I realize that there is something greater than love, although love is the greatest thing in earth. It is loyalty. For were I driven away in shame

you would follow. If I were burning in fever your cool hand would soothe me. With your hand in mine may I pass and take my place among the saved of Heaven. Being eight years the eldest—and as the years went by and I felt that the time of parting might be near—it was often the drift of our thought and speech: how could either of us be left alone. Alone, after living together for 56 years. I scarcely dared think of it and though a bit selfish comforted myself thinking [that] according to our age I would not be the one left alone.”

Another handwriting then appears later on the same page. It is Therissa’s voice, gently closing John’s journal:

“Almost two years and a half since the last writing, and its following events are so sad, so heartbreaking for this, his life’s companion that this pen has been laid down many times ere this record is made. Loss and loneliness [are] ever present and will be with me to the end. . . . Will time soften this sadness, will I be able to leave the Old Home and not feel that he is waiting for me, calling me? I am only content at home where I feel that he is watching over me, his presence always with me.

“On March 11, 1923, John Haslem Clark passed away after an illness of only one week. He seemed so like himself, talking and active. We had no thought that the end was near until he passed into unconsciousness a few hours before his death. Oh, may we all be as clean and pure, ready to go before our Maker.”<sup>10</sup>

We do not know the details of John and Therissa’s life as they crossed over the thresholds of their days. But we do know how 56 years of daily conversations finally shaped the kind of people they became, the kind of love they knew.



**The daily conversations of John and Therissa Clark shaped the people they became.**

If our young couple could only know that this love is what they could feel and understand at the end of their lives, what wouldn’t they give! They’d listen more and choose better, over and over, day after day, crossing after crossing. They would learn, by patient experience, that “work is love made visible.”<sup>11</sup> They would realize as the years pass that their marriage is helping them become better disciples of Jesus Christ, even becoming a little more like Him. Then they would understand as they cross the final threshold of mortality that the extent to which they have become one with Him is

the extent to which they are one with each other. ■

#### NOTES

1. *Liabona*, Oct. 2004, 49; *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102; emphasis added.
2. See Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (1988), 68.
3. Donald W. Parry, Brigham Young University professor, helped with the Hebrew translations.
4. “For Time and All Eternity,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 22.
5. “The Blessings and Responsibilities of Womanhood,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1976, 72.
6. “Privileges and Responsibilities of Sisters,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1978, 106.
7. See *Wherefore, Ye Must Press Forward* (1977), 127.
8. See Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple’s Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (2002), 14–15, 555.
9. Madeleine L’Engle, *The Irrational Season* (1976), 98.
10. In Bruce C. Hafen, *Covenant Hearts: Marriage and the Joy of Human Love* (2005), 265–66.
11. Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (1973), 28.