



**By Elder
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Served as a member
of the Seventy from
1996 to 2010

THE Proclamation ON THE Family: TRANSCENDING THE CULTURAL CONFUSION



This is the first of two articles by Elder Hafen that help commemorate the 20th anniversary of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” The second article will be published in the September 2015 issue of the Liahona.

“What are your greatest concerns?” a newspaper reporter asked President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) in June 1995, as he turned 85. He replied: “I am concerned about family life in the Church. We have wonderful people, but we have too many whose families are falling apart. . . . *I think [this] is my most serious concern.*”¹

Three months later President Hinckley publicly read “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”²

It was no coincidence that this solemn declaration was issued precisely when the Lord’s prophet felt that, of all the subjects on his mind, unstable family life *in the Church* was his greatest concern. Later he added that the greatest challenge facing both America and the rest of world “is the problem of the family, brought on by misguided parents and resulting in misguided children.”³

The proclamation was not merely a collection of pro-family platitudes. It was a serious prophetic warning about a major international problem. And now, 20 years later, the problem is getting worse, which shows just how prophetic the 1995 warning was.

Before we explore what that means for each of us, let us consider how modern culture ended up where it is today.

Universal Love Story

Humankind’s oldest, most hoped-for story line has a familiar plot: boy meets girl, they fall in love, marry, have children, and—they hope—live happily ever after. That universal love story is so central to the great plan of happiness that it began with Adam and Eve, and for most Church members, it still guides our lives like the North Star.

The joys of human love and family belonging give us hope, purpose, and a desire to live better. They make us long for the day when we will take

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the hands that have held ours and together enter the Lord’s presence. There we will embrace our loved ones and stay with them always, to “go no more out” (Revelation 3:12).

For many years society generally supported this inborn longing to belong. Of course, families had problems, but most people still believed that “tying the knot” of marriage created a relatively permanent family unit. And those knots held the fabric of society together, with “hearts knit together in unity and in love” (Mosiah 18:21).

In recent generations, however, the fabric has increasingly frayed as we have experienced what some writers call “the collapse of marriage.”⁴ Many people outside the Church no longer see marriage as a source of long-term commitments. Rather, they now see marriage and even childbearing as temporary personal options. Yet permanent commitments to marriage and parenthood are like two anchor threads running through the design of our social tapestry. When those threads fray, the tapestry can unravel and we can lose the plot of the universal love story.

I have watched this unraveling from my own perspectives as a father, a Church member, and a teacher of family



law. Beginning in the 1960s, the civil rights movement spawned new legal theories about equality, individual rights, and liberation. These ideas helped the United States begin to overcome its embarrassing history of racial discrimination. They also helped the country reduce discrimination against women. These protections from discrimination are part of each citizen's *individual interests*.

Some forms of legal classification, however, are actually beneficial. For example, the law “discriminates” *in favor* of children on the basis of their age—they can't vote, drive a car, or sign a binding contract. And they receive years of free education. These laws protect children and society from the consequences of children's lack of capacity while also preparing them to become responsible adults.

Laws have also given a privileged status to relationships based on marriage and kinship—not to discriminate against single and unrelated people but to encourage biological parents to marry each other and to raise their own stable children, who are the key to a stable continuing society. Such laws thus express society's *social interests* in its children and in its own future strength and continuity.

Historically, laws maintained a workable balance between social interests and individual interests because each element plays an important role in a healthy society. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. courts began to interpret family laws in ways that gave individual interests a much higher priority than social interests, which knocked the legal and social system off balance. This change was but one part of the transformation of American family law—the biggest cultural shift in attitudes about marriage and family life in 500 years. I will illustrate this transformation with some examples from U.S. law, although the laws of most developed countries have followed similar trends.

A Culture Shift

In a nutshell, advocates began using potent individual-liberation ideas to challenge laws that had long supported the interests of children and society in stable family structures. Courts and legislatures accepted many of these individualistic ideas, even when the ideas damaged larger



social interests. For example, no-fault divorce was first adopted in California in 1968 and then spread across the United States. No-fault significantly changed the way people thought about marriage. Under the old divorce laws, married people couldn't just choose to end their marriage; rather, they had to prove spousal misconduct, like adultery or abuse. In those days only a judge representing society's interests could determine when a divorce was justified enough to outweigh the social interest in marital continuity.

As originally conceived, no-fault divorce had worthy goals. It added irretrievable marriage breakdown, regardless of personal fault, as a basis for divorce—which simplified the divorce process. In theory, only a judge, who still represented society's interests, could decide whether a marriage was beyond repair. But in practice, family court judges deferred to the personal preference of the couple and eventually *liberated* whichever partner wanted to end the marriage.

These legal changes accelerated a larger cultural drift that no longer saw marriage as a relatively permanent social institution but rather as a temporary, private relationship, terminable at will—without seriously considering how divorce damaged children, let alone how it damaged society. Before long, judges' doubts about society's right to enforce wedding vows gave married couples the false impression that their personal promises held no great social or moral value. So now, when marriage commitments intrude on personal preferences, people are more likely to walk away. They see marriage as a “nonbinding commitment,” whatever that contradiction means.

Reflecting these new attitudes, courts expanded the parental rights of unwed fathers and began to give child custody and adoption rights to unmarried individuals. This uprooted the long-established preference

that family law had given, whenever possible, to the married, two-parent biological family. Both experience and the social science research had clearly shown—and still show—that a family headed by married, biological parents almost always provides the best child-rearing environment. But over time, the unwed-parent cases contributed to, and were influenced by, skyrocketing rates of unmarried cohabitation and births outside marriage.

Further, in 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court granted individual women the right to choose abortion, thereby rejecting long-held cultural beliefs about the social interests represented by unborn children and by elected legislators who until then had collectively decided the value-laden question of when life begins.

Talking about no-fault divorce leads logically to a brief comment about same-sex marriage. This has become a difficult and poignant topic, even though only 17 years ago, no country in the world had legally recognized same-sex marriage. So how could this very idea burst upon the international scene precisely when the historic concept of marriage had lost so much public value during the previous four decades?


One likely answer is that the “personal autonomy” theory of the first U.S. pro-same-sex marriage case in 2001



simply extended the same individualistic legal concept that had created no-fault divorce. When a court upholds an individual’s right to *end* a marriage, regardless of social consequences (as can happen with no-fault divorce), that principle may also seem to support an individual’s right to *start* a marriage, regardless of social consequences (as can happen with same-sex marriage).

In other words, when people see man-woman marriage as just a matter of personal preference rather than as society’s key social institution, it’s little wonder that many would now say of same-sex marriage that individuals should be free to marry as they choose. That’s what can happen when we lose track of society’s interest in marriage and children. Clearly God loves all of His children and expects us to treat one another with *compassion* and *tolerance*—regardless of private conduct we may or may not understand. But it is a very different matter to *endorse* or *promote* that conduct by altering a legal concept—marriage—whose historic purpose was to promote society’s interest in having biological parents rear their own children in stable homes.

The U.S. Supreme Court relied on the personal autonomy theory, among other legal theories, when it ruled on June 26, 2015, that state laws may not “bar same-sex couples from marriage.” Thus same-sex marriage is now legal in every U.S. state.



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Significantly, however, the court's majority opinion also "emphasized that religions, and those who adhere to religious doctrines, may continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction that, by divine precepts, same-sex marriage should not be condoned. The First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protection as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths, and to their own deep aspirations to continue the family structure they have long revered. The same is true of those who oppose same-sex marriage for other reasons."⁵

Effects on Marriage and Children

Now consider the effect of these changes on marriage and children. Since about 1965 the U.S. divorce rate has more than doubled, although it has dipped slightly in recent years—partly because the number of unmarried couples has increased by about 15 times, and their frequent breakups aren't included in the divorce rate. Today about half of all first marriages end in divorce; about 60 percent of second marriages do. The United States is the world's most divorce-prone country.⁶

Today 40 percent of U.S. births are to unmarried parents. In 1960 that number was 5 percent.⁷ About 50 percent of today's teens now consider out-of-wedlock childbearing a "worthwhile lifestyle."⁸ The percentage of children in single-parent families since 1960 has increased fourfold, from 8 percent to 31 percent.⁹ Over half of today's U.S. marriages are preceded by unmarried cohabitation.¹⁰ What was highly abnormal in the 1960s is the new normal.

In Europe, 80 percent of the population now approves of unmarried cohabitation. In parts of Scandinavia, 82 percent of firstborn children are born outside marriage.¹¹ When we lived in Germany recently, we sensed among Europeans that, in many ways, marriage is no more. As a French writer put it, marriage has "lost its magic for young people," who increasingly feel that "love is essentially a private matter which leaves no room" for society to say anything about their marriage or their children.¹²

Nonetheless, the children of divorced or unwed parents have about *three times* as many serious behavioral, emotional, and developmental problems as children in two-parent families. By every measure of child well-being, these children are far worse off. And when children are dysfunctional, society becomes dysfunctional. Here are some examples of that dysfunction, acknowledging that some elements in such general trends may have multiple causes. In the past five decades:

- Juvenile crime has increased sixfold.
- Child neglect and all forms of child abuse have quintupled.
- Psychological disorders among children have all worsened, from drug abuse to eating disorders; depression among children has increased 1,000 percent.
- Domestic violence against women has increased, and poverty has shifted increasingly to children.¹³

How serious are these problems? As President Hinckley said in 1995, these issues were his "most serious concern." And the trends that troubled him then are now measurably worse. As a *Time* magazine writer put it:

"There is no other single force causing as much measurable hardship and human misery in this country as the collapse of marriage. It hurts children, it reduces mothers' financial security, and it has landed with particular devastation on those who can bear it least: the nation's underclass. . . .

"The poor [have uncoupled] parenthood from marriage, and the financially secure [blast] apart their [own] unions if [they] aren't having fun anymore."¹⁴

Turning Our Hearts

One tattered golden thread in the unraveling social tapestry reflects the heart of the problem: the children—bone of our bones, flesh of our flesh. Something true, even holy, about posterity—children and procreation and eternal bonds of affection—resonates deeply within the mystic chords of our collective memory.

The child-parent tie matters so much that God sent Elijah in 1836 to “turn the hearts” of the fathers and the children toward each other. If those hearts do not so turn, He said, “the whole earth [will] be smitten with a curse” and “utterly wasted” before Christ returns (D&C 110:15; Joseph Smith—History 1:39; see also Malachi 4:6). In today’s world, those hearts do appear to be turning—but away from, rather than toward, each other.

Are we already living in the time of the curse? Perhaps. Today’s children (and therefore society—the earth) are indeed being “wasted” (devalued, made useless, rendered desolate) by each issue discussed here.

The doctrine is clear—and is substantiated by years of research. We don’t need to return to the family laws of yesteryear, *but* if we could just care more about our children and their future, people would marry before becoming parents. They would sacrifice more, much more, to stay married. Children would be raised, whenever possible, by their biological parents. Ideally, there would be no elective abortions or unwed births. Of course, some exceptions are needed—some divorces

are justified, and adoption is often heaven-sent. Yet in principle, the 1995 proclamation on the family says it perfectly: “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.”¹⁵

But we are suffering from collective amnesia. We are not hearing the mystic chords of eternal, or even recent, memory. The enemy of our happiness wants to convince us that the sacred, long-term bonds of family affection are confining, when in fact no relationships are more liberating and fulfilling.

Building a good marriage is not easy. It is not supposed to be easy. But when a confused culture confuses us about what marriage means, we may give up on each other and ourselves much too soon. Yet the gospel’s eternal perspective, as taught in the scriptures and the temple, can help us transcend the modern marital chaos until our marriages are the most satisfying, sanctifying—even if also the most demanding—experiences of our lives. ■

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NOTES

1. In Dell Van Orden, “Pres. Hinckley Notes His 85th Birthday, Reminisces about Life,” *Church News*, June 24, 1995, 6; emphasis added.
2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2010, 129.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Sarah Jane Weaver, “President Hinckley Warns against Family Breakups,” *Deseret News*, Apr. 23, 2003, deseretnews.com.
4. See Caitlin Flanagan, “Why Marriage Matters,” *Time*, July 13, 2009, 47.
5. Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. (2015).
6. See census.gov/compendia/statab/2011/tables/11s1335.pdf; see also Alan J. Hawkins, *The Forever Initiative: A Feasible Public Policy Agenda to Help Couples Form and Sustain Healthy Marriages and Relationships* (2013), 19.
7. See “Disastrous’ Illegitimacy Trends,” *Washington Times*, Dec. 1, 2006, washingtontimes.com.
8. See *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2012* (2012), 101, 102.
9. See “One-Parent and Two-Parent Families 1960–2012,” Office of Financial Management, ofm.wa.gov/trends/social/fig204.asp.
10. See Bruce C. Hafen, *Covenant Hearts: Why Marriage Matters and How to Make It Last* (2013), 227.
11. See Noelle Knox, “Nordic Family Ties Don’t Mean Tying the Knot,” *USA Today*, Dec. 16, 2004, 15, usatoday.com.
12. *Report of the Mission of Inquiry on the Family and the Rights of Children*, a study commission appointed by the National Assembly of France, Jan. 25, 2006, 32.
13. See Hafen, *Covenant Hearts*, 226–27.
14. Flanagan, “Why Marriage Matters,” 47; emphasis added.
15. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 129.

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