



The Divine Pattern of Eternal Marriage

“**M**arriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God” and “is essential to [God’s] eternal plan.”¹ This divinely designed pattern of marriage is neither an experiment nor a sociological innovation. Rather, it is a relationship “central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”²

The Apostle Paul taught, “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11). Accordingly, husbands and wives are to “cleave” to each other: “Therefore shall a

man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). This commandment for husbands and wives to “cleave” to each other reflects an eternal reality: men and women complement and complete each other in unique ways that enable them individually and as a couple to fulfill their divine potential.

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to a marriage relationship unique perspectives and experiences. The man and the woman contribute differently but equally to a oneness and a unity that can be achieved in no other way. The man completes and perfects the woman and the woman completes and perfects the man as they learn from and mutually strengthen and bless each other.”³ Thus, by divine design, men and women are intended to progress together toward redemption and enduring joy.

Rather than teaching people to pursue their own interests as the way to personal fulfillment, Jesus Christ taught, “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:25). The

divine doctrine of eternal marriage is infused with ennobling and selflessly motivated duties and obligations. The covenant and responsibilities of marriage provide a sacred context within which we gradually turn from self-centeredness and selfishness to selflessness and service. In marriage, we live not exclusively for ourselves but also for our spouses and children and posterity.

“The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. . . . God’s commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force . . . [and He] has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

“. . . The means by which mortal life is created [is] divinely appointed.”⁴



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The sanctity of life is central and essential in God's 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."⁵ Husbands and wives "have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. . . . 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."⁶

In fulfilling their marriage covenant, husbands and wives perform distinct but complementary roles. "A home with a loving and loyal husband and wife is the supreme setting in which children can be reared in love and righteousness and in which the spiritual and physical needs of children can be met. Just as the unique characteristics of both males and females contribute to

the completeness of a marriage relationship, so those same characteristics are vital to the rearing, nurturing, and teaching of children."⁷

As husbands and wives "lose" their lives in fulfilling these sacred duties of marriage and family, they find themselves—becoming true servants of God and disciples of Jesus Christ.

As President Henry B. Eyring, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, noted at the Vatican: "Where there is selfishness, natural differences of men and women often divide. Where there is unselfishness, differences become complementary and provide opportunities to help and build each other. Spouses

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and family members can lift each other and ascend together if they care more about the interests of the other than their own interests.”⁸

Sacred Sacrifice vs. Secular Selfishness

This vision of marriage as a holy order based on enduring covenants, duties, and lifelong sacrifice stands in stark contrast to a modern secular concept of marriage. That worldly formulation has virtually nothing to do with losing your life in service to family or in self-sacrifice for spouse and children.

To the contrary, many in our society today are quickly turning to, as one expert termed it, “a purely private, contractual model of marriage, in which each party has equal and reciprocal rights and duties and in which two parties, of whatever gender or sexual orientation, have full freedom and privacy to form, maintain, and dissolve their relationship as they see fit.”⁹

This is no less than a full-fledged revolution, transforming marriage from “a social institution with binding claims of its own and with prescribed roles for men and women into a free

association, easily entered and easily broken, with a focus on the needs of individuals.”¹⁰ This revolution is based on extreme conceptions of personal autonomy and individual rights that elevate one’s own will over God’s will, that opt for personal choice over personal responsibility, and that prioritize the desires of individuals over the needs of spouses and children.

This inordinate focus upon rights without a commensurate concern about obligations and responsibilities has produced the shrill and demanding entitlement we encounter so often in our contemporary world. People clamor constantly for their individual rights, believing that the highest good is unfettered freedom to pursue their narrow self-interests, while failing to understand that the most important reason for the protection of individual rights is to allow us to live dignified lives that are whole and rich with the duties of faith and family.

Increasingly obscured is the truth that our individual rights find their greatest expression and fulfillment as we, without compulsion, align our rights, our choices, and our responsibilities with the will of God. Voluntarily allowing covenant responsibilities to supersede



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individual interests and rights is the only surrender that leads to victory.¹¹ We frequently need to be reminded about the principle we learned early in life and believed was indelibly established and understood by all good men and women: we receive more when we give than when we take.

Never has a global society placed so much emphasis on the fulfillment of romantic and sexual desires as the highest form of personal autonomy, freedom, and self-actualization. Society has elevated sexual fulfillment to an end in itself rather than as a means to a higher end. In this confusion, millions have lost the truth that God intended sexual desire to be a means to the divine ends of

marital unity, the procreation of children, and strong families, not a selfish end in itself.

We are losing the basic understanding that society has a unique and profound interest in marriage because of its power to form a male-female union that is the optimal setting for the bearing and rearing of children—ensuring to the greatest extent possible that every child has an opportunity to know and to be loved and cared for by the mother and father who brought him or her into the world.

No wonder, then, that marriage has become so fragile and transient. Influenced by this increasingly pervasive ideology of self-centeredness and selfishness, men and women too often pursue relationships and marriage focused on their own needs and desires rather than on building stable marital and family relationships. The compulsion to vindicate their freedom, rights, and autonomy overshadows a proper understanding of the enduring commitments, covenants, duties, and sacrifices necessary to build successful marriages and families and to bring lasting joy.

Given this trend, many in our culture could not long resist the call to redefine marriage from





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the union of man and woman to the union of any two people, regardless of gender. After all, if marriage is little more than a vehicle for advancing personal autonomy and individual rights—rather than a sacred and enduring union between man and woman centered on self-sacrifice and raising a family—then it becomes very hard to deny marriage—any type of marriage—to any couple or group of people that seek it.

Why, the argument goes, should we limit this efficient vehicle of personal rights and individual satisfaction to only a select few? If the ultimate aim is the highest form of self-satisfaction, why should not marriage be open to all in whatever form will most quickly and easily bring that result? Having lost the predicate upon which marriage has always been based, many find it difficult to dispute the conclusion.

But this skewed conception of marriage has serious personal and social consequences.

Personal and Social Consequences

First, it inevitably cankers the souls of those who seek to employ it, leading to heartbreak and despair. There is no long-term joy to be found in selfishness; nor can it be found in exercising one's individual rights to their fullest extent in order to somehow find "freedom."

Freedom in marriage does not come from doing whatever one wants whenever one wants. Such a course only leads to wanting more and demanding more.

Conversely, peace and joy come from subjecting one's self in love to the needs of spouse and family, tempering one's individual needs and desires, and focusing instead on the needs and desires of others. An increasingly cynical and self-absorbed world sees this principle of selflessness as old school and paradoxical. But we know that it is paradisiacal.

Second, this skewed conception of marriage often leads to divorce as people bounce from one relationship to another, desperate to find something that is elusive because it does not exist: a relationship that will afford people ultimate freedom, ultimate self-fulfillment, and ultimate happiness—all without their having to give anything from within themselves. The relationship sought is no relationship at all because selfishness is by definition singular.

This view inevitably leaves in its wake traumatized children who needed the rich and committed soil of selfless and dedicated parents in which to sink their roots, abandoned

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because a father or mother has determined that he or she just is not being “true to himself or herself” by remaining in a marriage that he or she selfishly perceives is no longer serving his or her own interests or orientation. Ironically—and tragically—the freedom and personal autonomy they seek will, in the end, leave them bound by chains of isolation, loneliness, and deep regret.

Third, and perhaps worst of all, increasing numbers of people are giving up on the very

idea of marriage, believing that relationships are inherently unstable and transitory, thereby avoiding in their view the unnecessary commitments of formal marriage and pain of the inevitable divorce. Millions of children are being born into situations where they cannot experience the true nature and purpose of marriage and stable family life. Those children find it doubly hard to enter into the divinely designed pattern of marriage because they have never seen an example of what such a marriage should be.

Thus, the vicious circle repeats itself, taking with it the innocent who would have thrived in the relationship marriage was always intended to be. And as the residual societal stability is eroded that was created in the strong marriages and families of previous generations, the prospects for our future grow ever more uncertain and even bleak.

We certainly recognize that all marriages are not perfect, any more than those who defend traditional marriage are perfect. Regrettably, some children and spouses who are in traditional marriages experience only disappointment and heartache. But these sad outcomes do not occur because the principles of



true marriage are in error; rather, failure occurs when we do not live up to those true principles and the serious marriage covenants into which we have entered.

One of the great tasks of our time—one on which diverse faith communities should be united—is to help people understand the true meaning and purpose of marriage. All people, especially the rising generation, need a vision of the richness of family life and its potential for developing the highest and best in each of us. In an age of increasing selfishness, we must highlight marriage's capacity to lift men and women beyond their narrow self-interests to the joys that come from dedicating one's life to a higher and holy purpose.

Rich Blessings

In truth, the building of stable marriages and families is part of the hard work of a meaningful life. There are spouses and children who struggle, sorrows and disappointments, and illness and death. But marriage affords unique opportunities for some of the richest blessings of life, such as:

- Finding deep meaning in the complementary roles of husband and wife, father and mother, and experiencing the profound unity that can come only from marriage.
- Learning to sacrifice for a higher cause.
- Seeing our own faces in our newborn child, who embodies our shared love, faith, and hopes.
- Establishing family patterns and traditions that give meaning to the ordinary tasks of life.
- Cultivating faith in our children and watching it blossom and grow.
- Imparting our knowledge and wisdom to our children and then striving to be an example to them of the highest and best in life.
- Rejoicing with children who honor their parents and carry on their name, and weeping with those who struggle.
- Helping with grandchildren, as the ever-widening circle of life and family continues.

In marriage and family life, we learn and grow together as God intended. In our families we cannot hide from who we really are

as we strive to become who we are destined to become. In essence, a family is the mirror that helps us become aware of imperfections and flaws we may not be able or want to acknowledge. No one knows us better than a spouse and the other members of our family. Thus, the family is the ultimate mortal laboratory for the improving and perfecting of God's children.¹²

In marriage and family, we can experience profound loyalty, pure love, and consummate joy. We learn in a deeply personal way about God's love for each of us.

To paraphrase what Jesus Christ taught, as we lose ourselves in service to spouse and family, we find our true selves (see Matthew 16:25). Every day we become more of who He wants us to become. And that is the source of enduring joy and true self-fulfillment. ■

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NOTES

1. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, May 2017, 145.
2. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 145.
3. David A. Bednar, "Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan," *Ensign*, June 2006, 83–84.
4. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 145.
5. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 145.
6. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 145.
7. David A. Bednar, "Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan," 84.
8. Henry B. Eyring, "Renaissance of Marriage: To Become as One" (address given at The Complementarity of Man and Woman: An International Interreligious Colloquium, Vatican City, Rome, Nov. 18, 2014), ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
9. John Witte Jr., "A New Concordance of Discordant Canons: Harold J. Berman on Law and Religion," in *The Integrative Jurisprudence of Harold J. Berman*, ed. Howard O. Hunter (1996), 127.
10. Allan W. Carlson, "The Judicial Assault on the Family," in *The Most Dangerous Branch: The Judicial Assault on American Culture*, ed. Edward B. McLean (2008), 62.
11. See Neal A. Maxwell, "Plow in Hope," *Ensign*, May 2001, 60.
12. See David A. Bednar, "Arise and Shine Forth" (Brigham Young University–Idaho Education Week devotional, June 28, 2003), web.byui.edu/devotionalsandspeeches.