When Marriages Have Problems
By Terry R. Baker

We think we’ll be different. Many of us come to marriage believing that we’ll never have to resolve differences. We think our great love for each other will let us bypass the problems that “normal” couples have.

For a while, differences may go unnoticed, and tolerance for each other’s weaknesses and mistakes is high. This is probably good, because it gets most of us married. Without the indulgence of this early love, many of us might still be looking for some mythical Mr. or Miss Perfect.

But as we begin to discover differences we didn’t notice before, our visions of an eternally blissful marriage may fade.

It is unrealistic to assume we will never have marital differences. Our backgrounds, experiences, interests, expectations, and role models are usually different from our spouse’s, even though on the surface they might appear similar. These differences sooner or later need to be resolved. Otherwise we might never learn to be unselfish, empathetic, and sensitive—and our marriage would suffer.

So instead of cursing our differences, we should be thankful for them. But is it really possible to overcome differences and achieve unity?

I’ve found that couples’ problems seem to fall into two categories: disagreeing on priorities and reconciling expectations.

An example of disagreeing on priorities is the couple who comes into some unexpected money and decides to spend it on things they’ve needed for a long time. The husband suggests buying new tires for the car, but the wife feels the children need some new clothes. The more they talk, defending their own points of view, the more frustrated they become. They lose the excitement they had over having money to spend for the family.

Another couple might have a problem reconciling their expectations of each other. It frustrates the husband to no end that his wife can’t have herself and the children ready for Sunday School on time. He hates more than most anything to walk into church late.

Such problems inevitably surface as couples balance limited resources with seemingly unlimited needs and wants, when they don’t even agree on what is a need and what is a want, and they live with each other’s personal habits, appearance, and housekeeping. Problems can erupt over deci-
sions on disciplining children, balancing work and recreation, or public behavior.

Couples work through their differences at varying levels of effectiveness, with different methods. Here are the general levels, starting at the bottom and working up to a Christlike approach. These levels aren’t inclusive; persons might function at one level part of the time and at different levels at other times:

1. Putting Each Other Down (the Worst Way)

In the world, this method is often characterized by physical fighting, swearing, and throwing things. It is accompanied by excessive selfishness and stubbornness, the idea that “my way is the only way and that I am obviously much wiser than my partner will ever be.” To make sure that the other person gets this point and believes it, the partner chooses an emotional outburst designed to put the other down.

It’s easy to function at this level; it takes little practice. All we need to do is to not think, be undisciplined, not read the scriptures, and ignore gospel teachings. Many characters on television and in the movies “solve” their differences this way.

2. Burying Feelings (a Little Better)

This method of resolving differences consists of pretending that problems don’t exist. But feelings buried alive usually refuse to die. They keep surfacing, disrupting us and those close to us. Some people suffer from buried feelings for decades. Unresolved resentment, anger, disappointment, frustration, and hurt can destroy physical health and ruin marriages and families.

Functioning at this level is a small step above level one because it does require some self-control. Those practicing this technique usually adapt it from such sayings as “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” This is sound advice on occasion. But when we repress important feelings, the one who feels hurt will continue to feel hurt, and the spouse will always be wondering in frustration what the problem is. This level is not recommended for those trying to create an eternal marriage.

3. Compromising (Better, but Not Perfect)

This level is advocated by communication specialists. It is particularly useful, they say, in solving problems of limited family resources. It is similar to the process nations use to negotiate peaceful settlements.

Couples functioning at this level usually go through a sequence of steps. First, they recognize that a conflict exists and decide to negotiate a settlement. Next, during the negotiation period, each partner recognizes the other’s rights and tries to be sensitive to the other’s needs. At the bargaining session, each person states what he or she would like, and then demonstrates willingness to compromise and trade. Above all, both sides try to make the settlement fair and equitable.

This level of problem-solving is popular among many couples in the world today and is a definite
improvement on levels one and two. It takes work, self-control, empathy, and a desire to place the relationship on at least an equal level of importance with our own personal needs and wants. But it lacks charity.

4. Being Charitable (the Best Method)

This level is based on gospel principles, especially charity—the opposite of selfishness. If we have charity, we have as much love and concern for our mate as we have for ourselves. We try to understand our partner's feelings and needs; we value our relationship more than our own wants. The level and tone of voice we use in problem-solving is the same we would use if we were talking to the Savior, the prophet, or any other important person.

When Paul and Moroni defined charity (1 Cor. 13; Moro. 7), they used such words as “suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. … Never faileth. … is the pure love of Christ, and … endureth forever” (Moro. 7:45–47; see also 1 Cor. 13:4–8). What useful counsel for husbands and wives trying to overcome differences!

These suggestions might help us use charity in solving marital problems:

a. **Deal with personal feelings first.** Intense feelings affect our self-control, which in turn influences our ability to be charitable and to communicate clearly. Therefore it is best to “cool off” first before we try to talk to our mate about the issue at hand.

Of course, it's even better to discipline ourselves not to get upset in the first place. This is difficult for most of us, but we can do it if we understand the nature of our emotional responses. Many of our initial feelings cannot be avoided. But if we continue to harbor these feelings, it is because we choose to.

Imagine, for example, a person functioning at level one, shouting and screaming about how terrible things are. A knock comes at the door. The transformation that takes place seems miraculous as he greets the caller in a pleasant manner. This transformation is possible because we can control such emotions if we want to. This doesn’t mean burying bad feelings—it involves understanding and resolving them.

One way to control such emotions is to stop wanting to make others look bad, to stop trying to find someone else to place the blame upon. Some find it helpful to do such things as count to ten, read poetry, play the piano, jog, or even cry. The method we choose is not important. The important thing is that we get control of our initial feelings before engaging in a serious problem-solving discussion, and that we not use our emotions in ways that are dishonest, impure, or uncharitable.

b. **Be sensitive to timing.** Some times are better for discussions than others. We may need to wait until the best time comes. It is unwise to discuss important feelings when we or our partners are tired, pressured, or hungry.
c. Own up to the problem. In this simple but important step, we acknowledge that we are concerned and that we aren’t trying to blame the other person. Instead of saying “you make me mad when ...” we could say something like “I have a concern that I’d like to talk to you about. Is now a good time to do it?” If the answer is yes, then continue.

d. Begin with a sincere, positive statement related to the issue. When we are angry, this is difficult to do—that’s why we have to be in control of our feelings.

For example, the husband concerned about continually being late for church with his family should make sure that he is in control of his feelings and that his wife is also receptive. Then he might say that he is proud of how nice she and the children look when they go to church. In this way he communicates that this is not an attack and that she does not need to become defensive and counterattack.

e. Honestly and kindly state feelings associated with this concern. The husband might say, “I’ve been a little embarrassed the last few weeks when we’ve walked into church late.” In this way we let our spouse know exactly what we’ve been feeling and help him or her empathize and understand our problem better.

f. State the concern in a tentative manner rather than using absolutes. By so doing, we acknowledge that what we are saying is only the way we see it and that our partner’s views are just as important as our own: Some tentative phrases are: “I wonder if ...”, “As I see it ...”, “I may be wrong but ...”, “It seems to me ...”, “In my opinion. ...”

g. Be descriptive in explaining the problem. Avoid passing judgment. It is important here to be as specific as we can in describing the other person’s behavior, rather than making judgments such as “You don’t even care if we are late or not.” For example, I could say: “As I remember it, the last three Sundays three of the children were still in bed at 9:00. That gives them only an hour to wash, eat, get ready, and travel to church. That doesn’t appear to me to be enough time.”

After we are sure our partner understands both our feelings and our perception of facts about the problems, and after we have given our spouse a chance to state his or her own feelings and perceptions of the facts, then it is time to move on to the resolution step. Unfortunately, too many of us try to skip all of the above steps and just blurt out such things as “What are you going to do about always making us late for Church?” This type of attack is dishonest—it nearly always makes the situation worse.

h. Make some suggestions, stating what you are willing to do to help accomplish those suggestions. This shows that you are not just a complainer but are willing to help make changes. The husband might offer to plan his Sunday mornings so that he can help get the younger children ready. He might add, “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

i. Be flexible. If your suggestions are not acceptable, be willing to accommodate your mate’s perceptions of how the problem can best be resolved.

For some, charity problem-solving suggestions are natural and easy. Others find them more difficult.
The prophet Joseph Smith taught that no man has ever reached perfection in a moment, and that perfection is a step-by-step process. (See Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 51.) The important thing is remembering that we are on a charted course, continually improving, accepting our failures as new starting points, and never giving up.

If we are willing to pay this price, if we are optimistic, we can turn a mortal marital relationship into an eternal companionship—despite our differences.