Overcoming Those Differences of Opinion

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Whenever two people live together, they are bound to have differences of opinion. Misunderstandings can easily arise over almost every aspect of their lives—important or unimportant—such as child discipline, housekeeping, meals, money management, decorating, which radio station to play, which movie to go to, and on and on.

Since to some extent each of us is a product of our past environments and experiences, it’s only natural that we have occasional differences. People who grew up in the city do some things differently from those who grew up in the country. People from one part of the world do things differently from those in another part. Different ethnic, educational, financial, and religious backgrounds also produce differences in the ways we go about the daily details of living. There is also a natural difference between male and female points of view.

But being different doesn’t necessarily mean that one person is right and the other is wrong—or that one way is better than another. Unity in marriage requires a willingness to compromise, a commitment to make the relationship work, and a dependence on the Lord. Even though there may be differences of opinion, habit, or background, husbands and wives can have “their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another.” (Mosiah 18:21.)

The Church has more than thirty thousand missionaries in the field today; yet serious problems between companions are relatively few. Part of the reason is an excellent formula found in the Missionary Handbook given to all full-time missionaries. Here’s what it says:

“Being able to communicate with your companion is a fundamental step in becoming a successful missionary. Hold an inventory session with your companion.

“This is a meeting in which you discuss and set goals for your work, your companion relationship, and your personal life. …

“Use this time to resolve any companion conflicts by bringing them out and solving them together.” (Pp. 25–26; stock no. PBMI4201.)

Of course, missionary companions are often either perfect strangers or only passing acquaintances when they are assigned to work together. Roommates, too, are often strangers—or friends who think they know each other well. But hopefully, a marriage begins on much stronger footing, with two people who have had sufficient time to come to know each other well.
Whatever the situation, the basic ideas behind the missionary inventory session are outlined in Doctrine and Covenants 6:19: “Admonish [your companion] in his faults, and also receive admonition of him. Be patient; be sober; be temperate; have patience, faith, hope and charity.” [D&C 6:19] Following are some of my observations on how to apply these ideas specifically to marriage.

**Criticism**

One of the hardest things to live with in any relationship is criticism, real or implied. Yet some husbands and wives demand sharply, “Why in the world did you do that?” or “I wouldn’t have done it that way!” or “We don’t do it that way where I come from!” or “That was a dumb thing to say.” Repeated criticisms of this negative and acid nature can wear away the bonds of love until the marital fabric is weakened and ruined—with sad results for both parties.

Too often, criticism attacks tender, unprotected feelings. When we criticize, we are implying blame, censure, condemnation, reprobation, and denunciation—and we’re setting ourselves up as judges, as if we were qualified to point out someone else’s faults and weaknesses.

For some people, sharp questions or quick rejoinders are habits. Criticism is a form of humor for them, and they enjoy feeling superior when they see someone else’s discomfort. This is a tragic, sinful attitude that must be changed.

**Talking It Out**

The structure of any husband/wife discussion is, of course, flexible. It could be spontaneous, occurring whenever you or your partner sees a need. Or you could plan to hold a session regularly just to touch base—maybe weekly, monthly, or quarterly. Some prefer to keep it very informal; they discuss these items while driving in the car, while taking a walk, or while on a date together. Others prefer a more structured approach with an opening and closing prayer, a review of how things went last week (or last month), a look at the calendar for upcoming activities, and a discussion of personal and husband/wife goals.

However and whenever it is held, the discussion should focus on listening and understanding each other, solving problems, and giving loving support for the good things that are happening in the relationship.

I’d suggest that you start with the good things. Begin by expressing gratitude for each other and for your blessings. Tell your spouse the things you’re most grateful for—things you most like about him or her. Be specific. Mention detailed instances and events that clearly illustrate good things your partner has done. And express your honest feelings of gratitude and love. Relationships thrive on positive thoughts, positive words, positive actions.

After sharing sincere feelings of gratitude and appreciation, you may feel that this is an appropriate time to discuss frustrations or problems in your relationship. As you do, remember Paul’s words: “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.” (1 Cor. 7:3.) Warmth, sensitivity, and consideration should be dominant feelings during the discussion.
One of you might begin by asking, “What can I do to be a better husband (or wife)?” Then the other responds kindly with ideas and suggestions.

As you share your feelings and give your partner suggestions, be humble and nonthreatening. Don’t assume that you’re always the offended one and that your spouse is the guilty one. Remember, too, that in many situations, it’s not a matter of who is right and who is wrong—it’s simply a matter of understanding each other.

I’d suggest that you avoid a written list of faults. This is a time when relying on memory is more considerate than reading a host of complaints. Another rule you might establish is for each of you to limit the number of suggestions you bring at one time—no more than two or three at most. That way, the experience isn’t as likely to be so overwhelming.

As you’re the one receiving the suggestions, don’t become defensive. Avoid the urge to say: “Don’t nitpick! That doesn’t happen very often!” Avoid the urge to ask for evidence that you’re guilty: “When did I ever say that?” Recognize that if it’s important enough for your companion to mention, it’s something that is bothering him or her. And avoid the martyr’s response: “You expect too much.”

When your spouse suggests a way you can improve, you might respond by saying: “You’re right. I should pick up my dirty clothes and keep the bedroom cleaner. Please forgive me—and please remind me when I forget. I appreciate your patience and help.”

Then ask what else you can do to be a better partner, giving your companion a chance to bring up the other things he or she wants to talk about during the session.

After you’ve discussed those additional items, the tables are turned. It’s time for the other partner to take the initiative and ask for suggestions for improvement.

The objective is to understand each other’s feelings, to see things from the other person’s point of view, and to discuss ways to resolve problems. Again, in many cases, it’s not a matter of who is right or wrong; it’s often just a matter of different habits and customs. But your willingness to talk about these matters and look for solutions shows a great deal of love and consideration.

Compromises are often necessary. As we compromise, we protect feelings and respect the other’s right to be different. But items that are important are mentioned and resolved.

So, let’s review this procedure proposed for your consideration and adaptation. After you have begun by expressing your love and appreciation for each other, your discussion might go something like this:

A husband asks: “Honey, what can I do to be a better husband? Be honest with me. I really want to know how I can improve.”

His wife’s response, given with kindness, might be: “There are a few little things that might help out. For example, you haven’t seemed to notice, but lately you’ve contradicted me or disagreed with me
several times in front of the children. That doesn’t create a good atmosphere in our home, and it really confuses the children. I think it would be better for us and for them if we were more united.”

The husband may not think he has really been guilty of this. But it does no good at all to be defensive and ask for specific illustrations of the last three times he has done this. If his wife thinks it’s important enough to mention, he should realize that it’s important enough for him to change his behavior.

He could say, “I’m sorry, dear, and I’ll try to watch it. If you see this kind of situation developing, please help me by giving me a signal—such as saying that we haven’t had a chance to discuss that subject alone yet.”

Next, the wife might make the observation that her husband has been teasing a sensitive daughter too much about her boyfriends. Or she may remind him that the weekly date he promised as a New Year’s resolution hasn’t materialized.

Then it’s her turn to ask, “Honey, what can I do to be a better wife?”

Her husband might then suggest with love that he has noticed several unbudgeted purchases lately, and encourage her to control impulse buying. Or he might mention that he prefers fried eggs to hard boiled, even if an article she read recently did caution against fried foods.

In such discussions between husband and wife, it is normal to point out many such details about living together. Some are of great consequence; others may seem trivial. But all are important for husband/wife harmony.

Turning to the Lord

Wisdom suggests that prayer is an important part of marriage. We must seek the Lord’s help in understanding each other, resolving challenges, and reaching appropriate decisions—all without becoming defensive. Even more important, we must seek his help in changing our behavior and our hearts. As we invite the Lord to soften our hearts toward one another and as we sincerely repent of our weaknesses, he will change our hearts. He will turn us from our selfish, petty, worldly attitudes and fill us with pure, Christlike love. No amount of talking and communicating will really resolve our differences unless our marriages are based upon true gospel principles, such as faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repentance, and obedience.

As we draw near to the Lord, he can help us grow closer to one another. Only through his grace can we be blessed with Christlike love—the ability to “love thy wife [or husband] with all thy heart, and … cleave unto her [or him] and none else.” (D&C 42:22.)