When I first met Mike and Elaine, I knew right away that they meant a lot to each other. As they spoke to me in my office, I could also tell that they were a serious, concerned couple challenged by one of life’s most important decisions. There was a trace of anxiety in their voices. “Yes, we love each other,” they said, “but is our love true and sufficient for eternal marriage?” Both had asked this question, discussed it at some length, and prayed about it. Mike said he was relatively certain that Elaine was the one for him, but Elaine wasn’t as sure. How was she to know? Elaine was afraid of making a mistake on this most important decision.

While they had come from relatively happy homes, both Mike and Elaine knew people with very unhappy marriages, among them some of their own close friends. These were people who had married, full of love, only to find marriage a most difficult state. One of Elaine’s friends, married in the temple, had said, “I knew the day after my marriage that I had made a terrible mistake.” A friend of Mike’s had related how his wife had left him three weeks after their temple marriage and how they had later been divorced. Elaine therefore thought her qualms had substance.

On the other hand, they both had friends who said, “My marriage is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me”; “I have never had any regrets about my marriage”; and “I thought we were in love when we got married, but now our love is so much greater there is no comparison.”

In both the happy and sad experiences, their friends had felt at the time of marriage that they were doing the right thing.

The Lord’s statement to Oliver Cowdery was familiar to both of them: “Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

“But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

“But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong.” (D&C 9:7–9)

They both agreed that the only way they could know for sure was to receive a confirmation from the Holy Ghost. Elaine asked, “How will I know that I have really studied it out adequately in my own
mind? How can I know that I have really done my part so that I can approach the Lord, knowing he will tell me whether my decision is correct?”

I assured them that their question was a common one, faced by virtually all young couples at some time during their dating and courtship. I also commended them for their care in making the decision. I suggested that we consider the following twelve questions as guidelines for the answer:

1. Are you better people when you are with each other? Does each of you inspire the other to do his best in studies, jobs, church callings, and other significant responsibilities? Or do you both live below your standards and ideals when you are together? (President Spencer W. Kimball speaks of the motivation leading to sexual impurity as lust not love.) Whether or not you bring out the best in each other was a favorite criterion of President McKay.

2. Does either of you want to date anyone else? If so, you are not yet prepared to give yourself fully to the other. You are not really prepared to live the commandment of the Lord: “Thou shalt love thy wife [husband] with all thy heart and shall cleave unto her [him] and none else.” (D&C 42:22) The total commitment necessary in marriage is not possible as long as you are interested in dating someone else. This does not mean that you may not admire persons of the opposite sex or be impressed by them. But it does mean that you will not have a romantic interest in them.

3. Do you truly enjoy each other’s company? Or do you just enjoy each other when you are doing things you like to do? A hallmark of true love is enjoying the companionship of the other person regardless of the particular activity of the moment. The joy need not come from the activity but just from being together and sharing with each other. The companionship of each other is the primary source of satisfaction, not the activity.

4. Do you feel better about yourself when you are with him or her? Do you feel like a person of true worth, a child of God? Few things in life have more impact on what we become than what we think of ourselves. Our concept of ourselves as persons of true worth and our identity as children of God are critical. Do you help one another to have more self-esteem, or do you tend to find fault with each other? It is certainly appropriate to encourage each other to improve, but this should be done in a spirit of love. If either of you tends to focus on the other’s failings, your love for each other is in question. For as it says in the scriptures, “Charity [the pure love of Christ] suffereth long, and is kind, … envieth not; … is not puffed up, does not behave itself unseemly, … is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, … beareth all things, … hopeth all things, endureth all things.” (1 Cor. 13:4–7) True love is actively creative—it leads to the discovery of successful methods of improving or contributing to the life of another.

5. Are his or her needs as important to you as your own? Do you each find yourself continually looking for appropriate ways to make the other happy? Or are you each seeking your own happiness and interests without first considering those of the other? True love “seeketh not her own.” (1 Cor. 13:5)

6. Are you each free to be yourself when you are together or must you always be on guard? Do you need to hide what you really are? Or are you confident that you are fully accepted and loved? Unfortunately, our society sometimes encourages coyness, playing it cool, hiding part of ourselves from others—especially in a dating relationship. In a marriage relationship, however, each partner must
be free to be himself. This does not mean that you must share everything; it means that you are free to share when the need arises.

This freedom also means that each conscience is clear. If one of you has had a serious transgression in the past that you have not fully repented of, you are not prepared to enter marriage. You cannot truly accept another without fully accepting yourself. Nor can you fully give of yourself when the barrier of guilt exists.

7. Are you prepared to marry the family of your prospective mate? While you may think that you only marry one person, in a real sense, you marry into a whole family. The parents of your mate become the grandparents of your children. Do you each feel good about that—and the influence they will have on your children? Even when separated by wide distances, there is still significant involvement with each other’s families.

Do both of your families support you in your decision to get married and will they support you in future decisions? Unresolved conflicts with one or both sets of parents will place added strains on your relationship.

8. How do you each treat your own parents? Do you respect them as individuals and respect their position and authority? It is likely that you will treat each other the same way you each treat own family.

9. How does each of you feel about the other being a parent of your children? Mike, will Elaine be the type of mother that you really wish for your children? And will you want your children to be like her—because they probably will be. Of course, Elaine, you will need to ask the same question about Mike as the father of your children. Are you each now, or are you becoming, the type of individuals that you would be happy to have your children become? Have you discussed your goals for parenthood? And do you both agree upon and accept the gospel plan of bringing children into your home?

10. Do you each accept the patriarchal order? For you, Elaine, is Mike the type of priesthood bearer that you really trust? Are you willing to counsel together in love, but if necessary, abide by his counsel in righteousness and follow him in a spirit of genuine willingness? Does Mike seek your opinion on issues involving both of you? Can you call upon him in full faith and confidence to give you a special blessing when you desire? Is Mike honoring his priesthood so that he will be able to bless your children in times of illness or other needs?

For Mike: Do you fully obey your priesthood leaders in all righteousness? Are you willing to set a model of obedience to them for Elaine and your future children? Do you love and respect her enough that you give careful consideration to her ideas and feelings and make all possible decisions together? Are you willing to follow her ideas when they seem more inspired and correct than your own? Once an issue has been carefully and prayerfully considered, does Elaine accept the final decision willingly—or rebel against it? Do you trust her to help your children learn to be obedient to your righteous direction by being a model for them? Does Elaine inspire you to be a righteous priesthood leader in your home?

11. What will your destiny together be? Your potential destiny is that of god and goddess. If each of
you continues to progress as you are now, is godhood likely? Will your prospective mate help you to achieve that great destiny? Do you both accept the law of perfection and the principle of eternal progression? Does each of you see the other as becoming perfect? (If either sees the other as nearly perfect right now, perhaps you need to doff your rose colored glasses.) Is the destiny of godhood one that both of you have accepted and one that you want to help each other achieve?

At this point you may be wondering if all of these criteria carry equal weight. Must all of them be answered in the affirmative for you to feel confident in your decision? My experiences with many couples suggest that they are all important. Most of them are more than important; they are critical. However, this does not mean that they are all equally important, and perhaps if one or two of them are not fully met, the deficit is not insurmountable. You will need to consider the risk and decide.

The final guideline, number twelve, is all-important: after carefully considering the foregoing questions and then reaching a decision have you had your decision confirmed by the Lord? For this final confirmation you should go to the Lord only after you have “studied it out in your own mind.” You must keep in mind that even the Prophet “Joseph had to pray all the time, exercise faith, live his religion, and magnify his calling, to obtain the manifestations of the Lord, and to keep him steadfast in the faith.” (Journal of Discourses, 2:257)

One of the problems that many young people have in going to the Lord for confirmation is that they want the Lord to give them only the answer they want rather than his answer. To receive an answer, a person must approach the Lord with a truly open mind and a willingness to accept whatever the Lord says. With this attitude, you will be prepared to hear and heed the Lord’s counsel.

You may be wondering how your decision will be confirmed by the Holy Ghost. Will there be some dramatic witness such as a dream, vision or voice? In some cases, yes, but in most, probably no. In addition to the “burning in the bosom” or the contrary “spirit of darkness,” there are other indicators. In a revelation given to Hyrum Smith the Lord said, “Put your trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously: and this is my Spirit. Verily, verily, I say unto you, I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which will fill your soul with joy.” (D&C 11:12–13; italics added) To Oliver Cowdery the Lord said, “Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and shall dwell in your heart. “Now behold, this is the spirit of revelation.” (D&C 8:2–3) Further, to Oliver the Lord said,

“Behold, thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind: and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of truth. …

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truths of these things.

“Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?” (D&C 6:15, 22–23; italics added) Also, in the words of President Brigham Young, “Can men live so that they can have the serene, blessed, calm, soft, soothing Spirit of the Lord always to abide with them? Yes, they can. … Can women? They can.” (Journal of Discourses, 5:169)
Yes, through careful pondering, studying, fasting, and praying, you each can come to know whether or not your love is true and sufficient to enter marriage. You can know whether or not you are making the right choice. You still need to remember, however, the words of Nephi: “After ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him. …

“ye must press forward … , feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end.” (2 Ne. 31:19–20) You must continue to live by the guidelines which enabled you to make your initial decision. I know the Lord will bless you in making this most important decision as you do it according to his counsel.

Burton C. Kelly, “A True and Sufficient Love,” Ensign, Feb. 1979, 47