Sometime back a man came into my office in deep emotional distress. He was a big, tough-looking man, obviously accustomed to looking out for himself and to hard physical labor, but he wept bitterly as he told me his story.

He had been married in the temple some twenty years earlier and thought he had a reasonably good, happy marriage. He and his wife had had their problems, but he assured me that if I asked anyone in their ward, they would tell me this was the happiest couple in the ward. Then, one day she packed up, took the kids, moved out of their home, and filed for divorce.

This man was astonished. He literally could not believe his wife had left him. As he continued with his story, he voiced deep resentment and anger. It was clear that he considered her action viciously evil and that he felt it had to be stopped at any cost. I became more uncomfortable as it became evident that he wanted me to find some way to force his wife to come back to him. Finally I interrupted him and said, “I can’t make your wife come back to you if she is determined not to.”

His face fell piteously, and he said, “I’ve gone to my bishop and my stake president, and they couldn’t help me. They told me you were a marriage counselor, so I came to see you, and you say you can’t help me. Now where do I turn?”

I tried to help him consider some approach other than forcing his wife to come back, but he could not accept that. As he saw it, she was wrong and had to be punished soundly and forced to do right. He resented the very suggestion that there might be an alternative. As far as I know, he never changed his view on that, and his marriage eventually dissolved.

A central factor in many marital disputes is the eternal struggle between individual agency and force. Few principles of the gospel are more clearly spelled out in the scriptures, and few are recognized and talked about more widely. Yet few seem so widely misunderstood and abused.

Moses 4:14 explains clearly that the rebellion in heaven was over the issue of agency versus force. God announced a plan allowing for man’s agency. Satan proposed changing the plan, boasting, “I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost.” Christ supported God’s plan, saying, “Thy will be done.” There was a war, and God explained the outcome, saying: “Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down.”
Most of us have a good intellectual understanding of the principle of agency as opposed to the use of force. In the context of international politics, for example, it seems clear enough to us that a free government is more compatible with eternal principles than a totalitarian one. But somehow many people get confused by the same issues as they apply to their own lives and marriages.

The marriages of many faithful Church members are undermined, damaged, and destroyed by the well-meaning attempts of one or both of the spouses to force the other to live by righteous principles.

There are at least five different tactics by which one spouse may attempt to impose his or her will on the other.

**Use of Physical Strength**

The first and most obvious means of force is physical. The use of violence and other forms of physical coercion to impose one’s will on another is clearly contrary to gospel principles and has been repeatedly condemned by Church leaders. There are many scriptural references that establish and reinforce this stand. One of the most graphic is found in Matthew 26:51–52 [Matt. 26:51–52], wherein Jesus was being arrested by Roman centurions prior to his crucifixion. One of his followers drew a sword and took a swing at one of the soldiers, cutting off one of the man’s ears. Jesus healed the soldier on the spot and rebuked his follower, saying, “All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.”

Christ consistently denounced the unrighteous use of violence, yet there are still professed Christians who justify the use of violence in imposing their will on their spouses. I recall one man who justified hitting his wife by saying, “I never hit her unless she deserves it.” Once we established an understanding that he would not use violence with his wife whether he felt she deserved it or not, we were able to work on some of the other problems in their relationship.

Violence—the use of physical force to impose one’s will on one’s spouse—has no place in any marriage. That should go without saying among people who have a testimony of Jesus Christ. “Wife abuse,” as President Hinckley has reminded us, “is totally inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.” (Ensign, May 1985, p. 49; see also Nov. 1985, p. 51.)

**Misuse of Priesthood Authority**

The second tactic a spouse may use to impose his will on the other is more subtle and therefore more difficult to deal with. It is appealing to the authority of the priesthood, one’s calling or position, or the patriarchal order as leverage to force another to do one’s will. This practice has been explicitly and soundly condemned in scripture. D&C 121:39, for example, states: “We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.” This verse and those that follow make very clear that the priesthood and the patriarchal order can only function properly in an atmosphere of unfettered agency. Verse 46 [D&C 121:46] of the same section caps this discussion by teaching that if authority is used properly, “thy scepter [will be] an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without
As with the ban on physical violence, this renunciation of the use of priesthood authority as an instrument of force seems to escape the understanding of some Church members. Some men in the Church erroneously insist that because they are the priesthood authority in their homes, the members of their family must do what they say, no questions asked, so long as compliance results in righteous behavior.

On the other hand, some women in the Church will go to almost any extreme in an attempt to make their husbands magnify their priesthood callings. In either case, by trying to force the other to do the right things, they are doing pretty much what Lucifer sought to do when he rebelled against God. They forget that it was not necessarily Satan's goal which was rejected by the Father, it was the destructive and evil means by which he proposed to achieve it. The use of force, even to achieve what may be considered righteous objectives, was rejected when Satan first proposed it, and it is still condemned.

**Appeal to Higher Authority**

A third tactic of force is the appeal to higher authority. This involves using the scriptures, quoting general or local authorities, or invoking gospel principles to force compliance. This is a highly manipulative tactic and often makes a heavy-handed use of guilt or shame.

This power tactic is not to be confused with legitimate religious sentiment or the appropriate use of counsel from our ecclesiastical leaders. Rather, we are focusing on the cynical and predatory use of scripture or of the names and statements of Church authorities to force compliance with one's own will. The abuse of authority in this way is wrong, even if the objective of the tactic is compliance with righteous principles.

I know of a couple, members of the Church, who were receiving marital counseling. She was very dedicated to the Church. He attended church with moderate regularity, but had little desire to carry his involvement much beyond that. He was a good, loving husband, dedicated to his wife and family, but he did not have a genuine testimony of the gospel and was not interested in adopting many of the aspects of the LDS life-style. This deeply distressed his wife, who mistakenly saw his lukewarm, lackadaisical attitude toward Church involvement as a direct threat to her eternal salvation.

She had tried many different ways to force him to change. Finally, she brought her husband to a marriage counselor, knowing that he was a dedicated Church member and hoping he would understand the distress she felt, which he did. The husband came very reluctantly. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding between them that the husband was there so the marriage counselor could whip him into functioning as a good Church member should.

The counselor rejected that role, leaving the wife perplexed and the husband much relieved. Throughout the counseling sessions, she never gave up the persistent attempt to enlist the counselor's help in forcing him to comply with “righteous principles” as she perceived them. She repeatedly quoted scriptures and Church authorities and gospel principles to encourage the counselor in this. But as the counselor continued to avoid that role, the husband became less and less threatened and more and more interested in discussing the problems he and his wife were having.

At one point, the counselor offhandedly mentioned the verses in section 121 mentioned above,
suggested to the wife that trying to force her husband’s compliance was not appropriate. To the counselor’s great surprise, the next time they came in, the husband brought a copy of the Doctrine and Covenants, reminded him of the reference he had made, and then opened to section 121 [D&C 121] and read several verses. The husband looked at the counselor earnestly and said, “Does this mean she shouldn’t be trying to force me to take her to the temple?”

The counselor said, “That’s the way I understand it. What do you think?”

He said, “Yes, I’ve always believed that. I love my wife very much. I want to be with her for all eternity, if that is possible. I don’t know if it’s possible or not, but I know it isn’t right for her to be trying to shove temple marriage down my throat.” He looked intently at the page he had just read from, and his wife quietly wept.

This couple continued their counseling sessions, dealing with other problems they were having. During the next few weeks, he never changed his attitude or behavior regarding the Church, and she tried half-heartedly once or twice more to get the counselor to make him change, but the issue had lost its bite. More important, the dedicated, loving relationship they had in other aspects of their marriage began to flourish. When she gave up her attempts to use force by appealing to an authority figure, the beauty and vitality returned to this basically happy and healthy marriage.

I do not know what has happened with that couple, but I feel confident that his chances of finding the joy of gospel living are far greater in an environment of love and free expression of agency. Probably the most devastating flaw in Satan’s approach is that it simply doesn’t work. Behavior can be forced in the short run, but a relationship can only endure when both partners are free to commit themselves to one another and to righteous principles.

From a scriptural standpoint, the most reprehensible thing about the use of power tactics is the hypocrisy this displays. The woman in the preceding story was not as manipulative and hypocritical as many people are in appealing to higher authority to achieve their own ends. Some people get very ugly in the name of righteousness. In doing so, they sometimes violate gospel principles in a much more offensive way than the people they are trying to correct.

Christ was always understanding and forgiving of every type of repentant sinner, but of those who hypocritically professed righteousness as a manipulative device to serve their own selfish ends, the Lord reserved his most withering denunciations. “Wo unto you … ,” he said, “for ye are like unto whitened sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones.” (Matt. 23:27.)

Some of the most difficult moments in marriage counseling come when people try to camouflage their manipulative tactics under the guise of righteous principles. The scriptures refer to those who attempt to do this as wolves in sheep’s clothing. Their hypocrisy is deep, insidious, and evil.

**Use of Criticism**

The fourth tactic of force is the use of criticism, ridicule, and blame. Great damage is done in a marriage through the brutalizing forces of criticizing, blaming, and fault-finding. One couple who came to see me spent the better part of the session picking away mercilessly at each other. Finally I asked...
them if they could think of anything good to say about their partner. They glared at each other for several moments, then the wife shrugged her shoulders and said, “Well, what can I say? He hasn’t killed anybody.”

Both of these people were honest, sincere people with many good, endearing traits. They got married because there were a lot of things about each other that they liked. But over many years of neglect, those good, attractive, endearing things had been forgotten. In their attempts to control and change each other’s behavior, they had replaced the acknowledgement and reinforcement of those good traits with a constant stream of criticism and disapproval. This had soured their relationship almost beyond repair. Before this couple can regain the sweet, loving relationship that made them want to get married in the first place, they will have to give up their critical nagging and backbiting, and with it the attempt to force change on their partner.

**Use of Personal Power**

The fifth tactic used by people to force their will on others is simply the strength of their personality. In a marriage where one person is more self-assured and assertive than the other, the weaker person is likely to lose in any confrontation. Such a situation may be comfortable for the strong one, but the weaker person will likely build up deep resentment and anger over a period of time. Fear and insecurity usually keep these feelings from surfacing immediately. Such a situation is a fertile breeding ground for depression and apathy on the one hand, and for subtle, hidden retaliation on the other. Ultimately, it creates a very fragile marriage which the weaker person will tend to tolerate as long as possible and then just leave in despair.

Marriages like this are particularly difficult to repair because the partners usually don’t seek help until it is too late. The strong person sincerely does not perceive a problem, and the weaker one is too timid or frightened to make the problem clear until the marriage becomes irreparable.

Again, the scriptures provide an ideal pattern for avoiding the use of force in this type of situation. John 4:6–42 tells the story of the woman at the well. There are different ways to study this experience, but at present I want to focus only on the Savior’s reluctance to use force and allow the woman her agency. It is quite obvious in this story that Jesus is dealing with a woman weaker than he, spiritually and emotionally. The interesting thing about this story, though, is not the vast difference in their character and personality strengths, but how carefully Jesus avoids taking advantage of his strength in dealing with her. He could have used not only his personal strength, but also his scriptural authority and criticism to attempt to force her compliance with his will, but he intentionally avoids using any of these power tactics. Instead, he said, “Go, call thy husband, and come hither.”

“The woman answered and said, I have no husband.” (John 4:16–17.)

Her response was clearly misleading, and Jesus knew it, but he did not criticize or flaunt the knowledge. He carefully protected her feelings and spoke to her in a sensitive, caring way; yet he still got to the point, saying, “Thou hast well said, I have no husband:

“For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly.” (John 4:17–18.)
Note the lack of criticism or sarcasm, the complete lack of any hint of a forceful, pushy attitude. Jesus fought for the principle of agency prior to our mortality, and he did not violate it in his earth life.

What follows in this story is very instructive: “The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet.” (John 4:19.)

This respectful, sensitive attitude brought a positive response. The woman was receptive and teachable. She proceeded to learn gospel principles from him, and she was instrumental in bringing many in that city to a knowledge of Christ. It is clear from this story that Jesus was much more effective by respecting this woman’s agency than he could possibly have been by using his superior knowledge and strength of personality to overpower her.

Often in marriage there is a difference in personality strength between spouses. This need not be a problem if the stronger spouse does not use his or her strength as a weapon of force, but too often the stronger one runs roughshod over the weaker one. These strong people—and they may be female as well as male—would likely be shocked at the thought of using physical force to impose their will on their spouse, but the force they use is no less damaging psychologically. The use of superior personality strength to force one’s will on one’s spouse is no less a violation of gospel principles than the use of superior physical strength.

We have explored five tactics that weaken marriages. If we eliminate all of these tactics, what is left? How can we achieve our righteous purposes and help our spouses grow and improve? We can use those means that are compatible with gospel principles and that are at once more effective and more appropriate. Besides denouncing unrighteous dominion, Doctrine and Covenants section 121 [D&C 121] outlines some legitimate tactics, and chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians [1 Cor. 13] expands on them. We would all do well to read those passages and then examine our various relationships in light of them.

The opposite of force is agency. Force can ensure that people will behave in a certain way in the short term, but will cause resentment and provoke resistance. In the long run, it will always fail. Love, fidelity, and loyalty can thrive only in an atmosphere of freedom. This was the major issue in the War in Heaven, it is a significant factor in this earth life, and it will likely continue to be important throughout eternity.

A happy, mutually satisfying marriage will not long survive tactics of force, regardless of the reason. A successful, eternal marriage must be built slowly and carefully on a foundation of individual agency.

Larry K. Langlois, “Marriage without Manipulation,” Ensign, Mar. 1987, 42