

The Right Person, the Right Place, the Right Time: Guidelines for Wisely Choosing a Spouse

THOMAS B. HOLMAN

In January of 1972, after eating at a nice restaurant and attending the Osmonds in concert, I asked my wife to marry me. She said, “No.” A little over a month later, as I was walking her home from Church, she said, “Well, are you going to marry me or am I going to have to get a job?” I wisely agreed to marry her. She had, very sensibly, not accepted my invitation too quickly and been careful to make sure she had chosen the right man. She understood President Gordon B. Hinckley’s counsel: “This will be the most important decision of your life, the individual whom you marry. . . . Marry the right person in the right place at the right time” (“Life’s Obligations,” *Ensign*, February 1999, 2).

Where is the right place? Who is the right person? When is the right time? Fortunately, President Hinckley and others have given us inspired counsel concerning these questions, and more than 60 years of research in the social sciences adds another witness to their counsel. Although the guidance I am going to share today is primarily for unmarried individuals, much of what I say can help married couples continue to strengthen their marriages.

The Right Place

The right place is, of course, the temple. “There is no substitute for marrying in the

temple,” counsels President Hinckley. “It is the only place under the heavens where marriage can be solemnized for eternity. Don’t cheat yourself. Don’t cheat your companion. Don’t shortchange your lives” (“Life’s Obligations,” 2).

The Right Person

A person committed to temple marriage must then ask: “Whom should I marry?” “How do I identify the right person for me?”

Everyone has advice for single people considering marriage. The Beatles sang: “All you need is love, love; love is all you need.” Newsstand magazines claim: “Good communication is all you *really* need.” Television and film media seem to shout: “Find someone who is good looking, someone who really ‘turns you on’; then you’ll be happy!”

We actually have a great deal of advice from sources a lot better than the Beatles, magazines, or television and films. The words of the Savior in the scriptures and the teachings of inspired

Thomas B. Holman was a BYU professor of marriage, family, and human development and associate director of outreach for the Family Studies Center in the BYU School of Family Life when this devotional address was given on 1 August 2000.

ancient and modern prophets set us on the right path. This divine and prophetic counsel is supported by more than 60 years of social science research on premarital predictors of later marital quality and stability. First let us look at what the scriptures and General Authorities teach about spouse selection. Then let us see how the results of research on premarital phenomenon that influence later marital success can be a “second witness.”

Let me make two things clear about what is meant by “the right person.” First, movies, plays, and fiction sometimes lead us astray with the idea there is a “one and only” somewhere out there with whom we made a covenant to marry in the premortal existence. We think finding a mate is simply a matter of waiting for “some enchanted evening,” locking eyes with someone “across a crowded room,” heading off hand-in-hand to the closest temple—probably singing the rest of the score from *South Pacific*—and then living happily ever after. No matter how romantic this idea is, it is not supported by prophetic counsel. President Spencer W. Kimball said this:

*“Soul mates” are fiction and an illusion; and while every young man and young woman will seek with all diligence and prayerfulness to find a mate with whom life can be most compatible and beautiful, yet it is certain that almost any good man and any good woman can have happiness and a successful marriage if both are willing to pay the price. [“Marriage and Divorce,” in *Speeches of the Year, 1976* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1977), 146]*

Evidently, seeking for a mate is not a matter of waiting for that “one and only” to walk by and grab you.

Being the Right Person

Second, one of the most important principles we learn from the scriptures to help us choose an eternal companion is articulated by the Savior in Matthew 7:3–5:

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell spoke more specifically to those in families, including those in the courtship stage, when he said:

*If the choice is between reforming other Church members [including fiancés, fiancées, spouses, children] or ourselves, is there really any question about where we should begin? The key is to have our eyes wide open to our own faults and partially closed to the faults of others—not the other way around! The imperfections of others never release us from the need to work on our own shortcomings. [“A Brother Offended,” *Ensign*, May 1982, 39]*

Thus, as you think about the prophetic counsel and the research I will now discuss on choosing a spouse, you need first to apply the ideas and counsel to yourself. Then you can more appropriately critique another’s rightness for you.

Finding the Right Person

The first quality many young people look for in a potential spouse is someone with whom they can “fall in love,” which often means someone for whom they feel a strong physical attraction. Although love is more than physical attraction, being physically attracted to a potential spouse is not bad. Indeed, Elder Bruce R. McConkie said, “The right person is someone for whom the natural and wholesome and normal affection that should exist does exist.” Then he went on to add: “It is the person who is living so that he or she can go to the temple of

God and make the covenants that we there make" (CR, October 1955, 13).

Being "in love" and attracted to a person is a good start, but clearly not enough. President Gordon B. Hinckley suggested several other factors we should keep in mind:

Choose a companion of your own faith. You are much more likely to be happy. Choose a companion you can always honor, you can always respect, one who will complement you in your own life, one to whom you can give your entire heart, your entire love, your entire allegiance, your entire loyalty. [Hinckley, "Life's Obligations, 2]

Elder Richard G. Scott suggested that in a potential spouse we should look for

essential attributes that bring happiness: a deep love of the Lord and of His commandments, a determination to live them, one that is kindly understanding, forgiving of others, and willing to give of self, with the desire to have a family crowned with beautiful children and a commitment to teach them the principles of truth in the home. ["Receive the Temple Blessings," *Ensign*, May 1999, 26]

More than 60 years of research proposes several factors that both witness and complement the attributes outlined by President Hinckley and Elder Scott. That research suggests what my colleague Dr. Jeff Larson has called "the marriage triangle" that we need to look at in choosing a spouse (see Thomas B. Holman and Associates, *Premarital Prediction of Marital Quality or Breakup: Research, Theory, and Practice* [New York: Plenum, in press]). These factors are: first, the individual attributes and core values of the person; second, the quality of the relationship we are able to build with the person; and third, the person's past and present circumstances and environments. Let's consider each of these.

First, we need to know a lot about the person we are thinking of marrying. As Elder Scott notes, the beliefs the person has about family

life matter, and research confirms this. The more the person values marriage and family life, the better the marriage will be. President Hinckley admonishes us to choose a person we can honor, respect, and give our whole heart, love, allegiance, and loyalty to. The research shows that this kind of person will have a healthy sense of self-respect, maturity, self-control, and good mental and emotional health.

The Right Relationship

President Hinckley suggested you choose a person "who will complement you," and Elder Scott says our choice should be a person who "is kindly understanding [and] forgiving of others." Thus, we need to find a person not only of good character, but a person with whom we can have a good relationship.

Two hallmarks of good premarital relationships that Church leaders have stressed are love and communication. These two things help couples solve problems, resolve differences, and increase agreement on important issues. President Spencer W. Kimball helped a young couple on the verge of marriage with this counsel:

The love of which the Lord speaks is not only physical attraction, but also faith, confidence, understanding, and partnership. It is devotion and companionship, parenthood, common ideals, and standards. It is cleanliness of life and sacrifice and unselfishness. This kind of love never tires nor wanes. It lives on through sickness and sorrow, through prosperity and privation, through accomplishment and disappointment, through time and eternity. . . . Today it is a demonstrative love, but in the tomorrows of ten, thirty, fifty years it will be a far greater and more intensified love, grown quieter and more dignified with the years of sacrifice, suffering, joys, and consecration to each other, to your family, and to the kingdom of God. ["An Apostle Speaks About Marriage to John and Mary," *Improvement Era*, February 1949, 76; also "John and Mary, Beginning Life Together," *New Era*, June 1975, 7–8]

Researchers have also found that the greater the love couples have in their relationships before they marry, the more successful their marriages. However, one researcher reviewed dozens of studies on love and found that there is both “immature love” and “mature love.” Mature love, she declared, is the kind of love needed for successful marriage and family life (Patricia Noller, “What Is This Thing Called Love? Defining the Love That Supports Marriage and Family,” *Personal Relations* 3 [1996]: 97–115). Love, whether immature or mature, has three aspects—how love feels; how you think about love; and how you behave, or act, when in love.

Aspects of Love in the Social Sciences

I. Emotional Part of Love

<i>Immature Love</i>	<i>Mature Love</i>
Possessiveness	Lasting Passion
Jealousy	Desire for
Infatuation	Companionship
Preoccupation	Warm Feeling of
Anxiety	Contentment

II. Belief Part of Love

<i>Immature Love</i>	<i>Mature Love</i>
“Love Is Blind”	Commitment
External to Us	Trust
Beyond Our Control	Sharing
	Sacrifice

III. Behavior Part of Love

<i>Immature Love</i>	<i>Mature Love</i>
Selfish	Create an Environment
Lustful	for Growth and
Concerned Only	Development
with Satisfying	Allows Other Space
Own Needs	for Growth
Clinging	
Overdependent	
Demanding of	
Obedience	

Notice how the characteristics of love spoken of by President Kimball mirror what research has found to be the characteristics of the mature kind of love upon which stable, high-quality marriages and family life are built. But the love of which Church leaders speak goes beyond the love even the best social science research has discovered. It includes, as President Kimball noted, a “consecration” to partner, to family, and also to the kingdom of God. This kind of love is intimately connected to covenants and to our love of the Lord. It is a love between couples “that binds them to each other and to the Lord” (Bruce Hafen, “Covenant Marriage,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 28). This kind of love eschews the lust and selfishness of premarital sex and unlawful cohabitation. This kind of love cares more about the other person than the self.

The way we communicate in dating and courtship usually influences how our partner will feel about us and our relationship. Relationships are established upon the comfort and trust created by sincere communication. Research notes that positive communication, practiced in dating and courtship relationships, increases the likelihood of greater commitment, better conflict resolution, and more love between partners in their marriage.

Good communication begins with a righteous heart. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh,” said the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 12:34). On the other hand, communication from a selfish heart is generally just manipulation. Elder Marvin J. Ashton adds:

If we would know true love and understanding one for another, we must realize that communication is more than a sharing of words. It is the wise sharing of emotions, feelings, and concerns. It is the sharing of oneself totally. [“Family Communications,” *Ensign*, May 1976, 52; emphasis in original]

Past and Present Circumstances

Besides checking out the person's character and your ability to create a good couple relationship with them, you need to consider past and present family relationships. President David O. McKay taught: "In choosing a companion, it is necessary to study the disposition, the inheritance, and training of the one with whom you are contemplating making life's journey" (*GI*, 459).

Research supports President McKay's counsel. Good family environments and family relationships tend to lead to good quality marriages by the children; poor family environments and family relationships often result in poor marriages by the children from these homes. Young adults from divorced families, for example, may experience more depression and anger and have trust or commitment issues as a result of the trauma of parental divorce. Some individuals—whether their parents divorced or not—may have been exposed to poor models of communication and conflict resolution in their families. Individuals from families that were emotionally cold and distant, chaotic, dangerous, unpredictable, detached, full of conflict, or where addictions or violence were chronic problems may need special help in overcoming such an upbringing.

However, one whose family background is less than perfect must never feel that he or she is "damaged goods" and cannot have a good marriage. Nor should such a person be automatically eliminated from another's "pool of eligible spouses." We are not doomed to suffer the consequences of our parents' iniquities "unto the third and fourth generation." The very scriptures that warn of wickedness being passed on to the third and fourth generation also show the way out of a troubled family background. Doctrine and Covenants 124:50 tells us that the iniquities of the fathers will be visited upon the heads of the children "so long as they [the children] repent not, and hate me." Thus repentance and loving the Lord help free us from the sins of

our parents. What is most important is that the person has turned from the "wicked traditions" of the parents and is striving to keep the Lord's commandments (Alma 23:3).

The Right Time

When it comes to determining "the right time," at least two questions need to be asked and answered. First, when is the right time of life to get married? Second, how much time should I spend in the process of going "from first date to chosen mate"? Let me briefly address these issues.

Years of research suggest that marriage has the fewest risks of later problems when people marry in their twenties. Marrying in your teens or into your thirties simply increases the risk factors associated with poorer marital quality and stability.

President Harold B. Lee helps us understand when the best time in life is to marry. He said:

Now don't misunderstand me. I am not trying to urge you younger men to marry too early. I think therein is one of the hazards of today's living. We don't want a young man to think of marriage until he is able to take care of a family, to have an institution of his own, to be independent. He must make sure that he has found the girl of his choice, they have gone together long enough that they know each other, and that they know each other's faults and they still love each other. . . .

*Please don't misunderstand what we are saying; but, brethren, think more seriously about the obligations of marriage for those who bear the holy priesthood at a time when marriage should be the expectation of every man who understands [his] responsibility. ["Priesthood Address," *Ensign*, January 1974, 100]*

Sisters also need to wait until they are mature enough to assume the responsibilities of a wife and mother, without waiting too long while pursuing less important things.

The ABCs of Courtship

How much time does it take to move through the process of finding the right person and preparing to marry him or her in the temple? Two research projects involving largely BYU students show what couples believe or have found to work for them. These two studies show that the average time from first date to temple marriage is about nine to 10 months. Some couples move much faster, some considerably slower. On average, three to four months of that nine to 10 months is the engagement. In a study of LDS couples married eight years, and in another study of single BYU students asked what the ideal length of an engagement should be, the vast majority think that three to four months is about right. Don't take these numbers as goals you must meet. What the Brethren and the research do seem to suggest is that you can go too fast or too slow through the process. There are, for example, discernible stages that most couples need to go through on the path from first date to chosen mate. We might call these stages the "ABCs of courtship," and there are certain tasks you need to accomplish in each stage (George Levinger, "Development and Change," in Harold H. Kelley et al., *Close Relationships* [New York: W. H. Freeman, 1983], 321).

A is the Attraction and Acquaintance stage. Research on LDS students by my colleague Dr. Craig Ostler, in the Department of Religious Education, shows initial attraction usually consists of physical attraction, attraction to the person's personality, and/or attraction to their perceived spiritual qualities. According to Brother Ostler's research, LDS young people are most able to move from initial attraction to acquaintance and the start of a relationship if both the male and female are seeking, sending, and receiving what he called "interest cues and attraction strategies" (

from a Religiously Conservative Population" [Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1995]). Thus relationships generally develop only when you are seeking to know if a person is interested; sending interest cues appropriately; and receiving back, or understanding how to interpret the other person's interest in you, or lack thereof. One who is deficient in one or more of these processes finds that relationships tend not to develop, and one or both partners can become very frustrated. Dr. Ostler found that the females especially understood what they needed to do—and they were willing to teach roommates who were frustrated. They said, "What you do is touch him on the arm, look him in the eye, and laugh at his jokes. Within a few days he will be asking you out."

When the seeking, sending, and receiving is done in sync—in other words, both people are seeking, sending, and receiving the same messages—the couple moves to the B or Build-Up Stage. At this point the couple gets to know each other and checks out the person to see if he or she is the right person for them. Research by two of my master's students—EmRee Pugmire and Nancy McLaughlin—has shown that, generally speaking, LDS males and females move through this stage best when a friendship is developed first; when both persons feel they are full and equal partners in the growing relationship; when this friendship happens before much, if any, physical involvement has occurred; and when both people are relaxed and not worrying about whether this particular relationship is "the one" and just kind of let things happen.

If all these things happen, then the couple is ready to move to the C stage, the stage of Consolidation, Continuation, and mutual Commitment to the eternal relationship.

Making the Decision

President Gordon B. Hinckley has some counsel about this stage:

I hope you will not put off marriage too long. I do not speak so much to the young women as to the young men whose prerogative and responsibility it is to take the lead in this matter. Don't go on endlessly in a frivolous dating game. Look for a choice companion, one you can love, honor, and respect, and make a decision. ["Thou Shalt Not Covet," Ensign, March 1990, 6]

We must finally “make a decision,” as President Hinckley says. In doing this, most Latter-day Saints want a spiritual confirmation that they are making a wise commitment. As you seek a spiritual confirmation, you need to keep at least five things in mind.

First, be worthy to receive the inspiration you need. Elder Boyd K. Packer reminds us that if we “desire the inspiration of the Lord in this crucial decision, [we] must live the standards of the Church” (*Eternal Love* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973], 11).

Second, understand the balance between agency and inspiration. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie said, “We make our own choices, and then we present the matter to the Lord and get his approving, ratifying seal” (“Agency or Inspiration?” *New Era*, January 1975, 42).

The experience of one young man illustrates this:

There are two things in my life that I've always felt would be important: a career and marriage. Yet at the time I didn't feel like I was getting a response. I prayed, “Heavenly Father, this is so important, I need to know whether or not it's right.” Then, toward the end of our courtship, I went to the temple. I was so frustrated because I wasn't getting an answer either way. After praying and waiting for an answer, I got more frustrated and gave up. That was when an impression came to me: “You already know the answer.” Then I realized that God had answered my prayers. The decision to marry Becky always made sense and felt right. I can see now that God had been telling me in my heart and in my mind that it was a good decision. And later, at the

time of the ceremony, I had another confirmation that what I was doing was right.

Third, seek multiple witnesses. The scriptures teach us that “in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (2 Corinthians 13:1; D&C 6:28). A spiritual witness can be confirmed a second or greater time at the altar in the temple, as noted above; in prayer by the Spirit again; in discussions with parents, a bishop, or a trusted friend; while partaking of the sacrament; or in any number of circumstances.

Fourth, learn to discern between inspiration, infatuation, desperation, and a desire to please others. Inspiration comes as explained above: when one is living worthy, when one is exercising agency and studying it all out carefully, and when one's decisions are confirmed by multiple spiritual enlightenments and peaceful feelings (see D&C 6:15, 22–23). Infatuation is usually manifest by the immature “love” I discussed earlier—that including great anxiety, possessiveness, selfishness, clinging, and overdependence. Infatuation may be more likely with individuals who lack emotional and spiritual maturity. Desperation is often associated with social or cultural circumstances that create an atmosphere (at least in the person's mind) of “now or never.” Pressure from peers, family, and cultural norms may create a sense of desperation that leads to an unwise decision. A desire to get away from an unpleasant family situation or fear of failure in school or work situations can also cause someone to look desperately to marriage as a way out of a problem. On the other hand, pressure from peers, family, and cultural norms may create a situation where you put off marriage for fear that others will think you are just a “Molly Mormon” or a “Norman the Mormon” who doesn't “understand” that marriage is “old-fashioned” and can “ruin your career.” Such pressures to marry or not marry often create fears and anxieties that “speak” so

loudly in our minds that we cannot hear the still, small whisperings of the Spirit.

Fifth, the spiritual confirmation needs to come to both parties involved. A person should not feel that if his or her partner receives a confirmation, that he or she is therefore released from the necessity of seeking a similar confirmation. Elder Dallin H. Oaks discussed this issue:

If a revelation is outside the limits of stewardship, you know it is not from the Lord, and you are not bound by it. I have heard of cases where a young man told a young woman she should marry him because he had received a revelation that she was to be his eternal companion. If this is a true revelation, it will be confirmed directly to the woman if she seeks to know. In the meantime, she is under no obligation to heed it. She should seek her own guidance and make up her own mind. The man can receive revelation to guide his own actions, but he cannot properly receive revelation to direct hers. She is outside his stewardship. ["Revelation," 1981–82 BYU Fireside and Devotional Speeches (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1982), 25]

The D and E of Relationship Development

Not all relationships end in marriage, and rightly so. Therefore we need to understand not only the ABCs of courtship but also the D and E stages of courtship: Deterioration and Ending. The D and E phases of relationship development are possibly the most difficult to deal with. Relationships, of course, can “deteriorate” and “end” very quickly—after only a few minutes of acquaintance or at any stage of development. But breaking up a relationship that has grown toward a sense of interdependence and possible thoughts of marriage are particularly difficult to end.

If it is right to break off a relationship, how can that be done so as to cause the least hurt? The revelation given by the Lord to Joseph Smith and contained in section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants provides excellent counsel not only for strengthening but also

ending a relationship. Especially helpful is the counsel contained in these verses:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile—

Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy;

That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death. [D&C 121:41–44]

Verses 41 and 42 teach us that we should not attempt to continue a relationship by any unrighteous means. A partner should not be coerced into staying in a relationship, nor should we ever feel coerced. Furthermore, when a relationship should end, the principles articulated in verses 41 and 42 can be a guide for dealing with the hurt and emotion that may result. One may need to be very long-suffering, gentle, meek, and kind with a partner who does not understand or resists the change. The counsel given in verses 43 and 44 may seem extreme, but when considered carefully, it is some of the best counsel we can get for ending a relationship. To reprove means “to correct,” and betimes means “early on.” Thus, when “pure knowledge,” received by the Holy Ghost, helps us understand that a relationship must end, we should “correct” the situation (end the relationship) quickly and not let it drag on. The word *sharply* can mean “with clarity”—think of a sharp picture—rather than “with severity,” as it is most often interpreted. Thus, while being as loving and kind as we can, we should make it clear that the relationship is ending and why—rather than “beating around the bush,” hoping the partner will get the message. Again, this should be done with kindness, meekness, and love unfeigned; recognizing

that even if the partner has hurt us in some way, she or he is a beloved child of God who must be treated in a Christlike manner.

If one is the “breeker” rather than the “breaker,” the same counsel applies: This partner you believe you love should not be coerced or forced in any way to continue if she or he does not want to continue. Even if the emotional hurt you feel is strong, you need to back off, not try to hurt the partner back in some way, and allow yourself time to heal.

Breaking up is not the end of the world. Great learning and maturity can come from surviving a premarital breakup. If one initiates or goes through a breakup with as much Christlike behavior and feelings as possible, and allows himself or herself to be healed by the peace of the Spirit, that person is then more ready to move on to a relationship that can result in an eternal marriage—but not too quickly, mind you.

Helps for Choosing the Right Person, the Right Place, and the Right Time

The Church and BYU have some wonderful resources to help you choose the right person, the right place, and the right time. Let me note three of them:

1. Most institutes of religion and Church universities will have a religion course numbered 234 and titled Preparation for a Celestial Marriage. It is my understanding that a new student text for the course is coming out this fall. I encourage you to take this course.

2. The Family Studies Center at Brigham Young University has a Web site designed specifically to provide resources for couples preparing for marriage. It is the Before Forever site. Its URL is <http://marriageinfo.byu.edu>. Before Forever provides comprehensive and ready-to-use information online to help LDS couples better plan their future marriage. Before Forever is not a dating service or a counseling center. The site offers publications such as *Ensign* articles, books, and speeches

about various marital and premarital topics; work sheets about different premarital and marital issues; and news and information about marriage and family events.

3. Another Family Studies Center Web site contains a survey called the RELATIONSHIP Evaluation, or RELATE, which you and your partner can complete online. Within minutes you will receive feedback online regarding the strengths and work areas in your relationship. RELATE is designed for unmarried and newly married couples, and we will soon have adolescent, remarriage, and mature adult versions available. Also, it will soon be available online in Spanish and Portuguese. RELATE’s URL is <http://relate.byu.edu>.

The Right Person Is Not Perfect—Yet

Our son Matt recently married a wonderful young woman from Oregon, and as my wife, Linda, and I were driving to the reception in Oregon, we reminisced about our own courtship and marriage. The more we talked, the more I remembered how immature I had been when we married.

Finally, in bewilderment, I asked Linda, “Why did you marry me?”

Her simple answer was, “I saw potential.”

As we search for a mate with whom we can spend the eternities, therefore, we would do well to remember Elder Richard G. Scott’s counsel that mirrors my wife’s comments:

*I suggest that you not ignore many possible candidates who are still developing these attributes, seeking the one who is perfected in them. You will likely not find that perfect person, and if you did, there would certainly be no interest in you. These attributes are best polished together as husband and wife. [“Receive the Temple Blessings,” *Ensign*, May 1999, 26]*

That you may “marry the right person in the right place at the right time” is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.