They Twain Shall Be One: Thoughts on Intimacy in Marriage

1. By Brent A. Barlow

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Several years ago when I was a young missionary and had just received a new companion, we met a Protestant minister who invited us in out of the cold. After exchanging points of view on various topics, he asked us, “And what is the Mormon attitude towards sexuality?”

I choked on my cup of hot chocolate, but my new companion seemed unmoved. “Well,” said the minister after a moment of silence, “could you please tell me the Mormon philosophy toward sexuality?” I was tongue-tied and believed my new companion knew next to nothing on the matter. However, when my companion realized that I didn’t have an answer, he finally said, “Sir, we believe in it.”

It has been more than twenty years since that time, and I have been asked the same question by numerous students, friends, professional people, and LDS members and nonmembers alike. And still, I haven’t yet been able to come up with a better answer than the one given by my supposedly naive companion: “We believe in it.”

We believe in it inasmuch as we know of the sorrow that comes from the inappropriate use of sexuality outside the realm of marriage. We are acutely aware of what the prophets, past and present, have warned in these matters. As Alma declared to his son Corianton, “Wickedness never was happiness.” (Alma 41:10.)

But we also believe in the good that can be derived from the appropriate use of intimacy in marriage. We are well aware of the joy and unity that can come to a married couple when this particular dimension of the marital relationship is nurtured.

Yet, in spite of the potentially joyful aspects of sexuality in marriage, for many it is a source of frustration and even contention. Indeed, the inability of married couples to intimately relate to each other is one of the major causes of divorce. President Spencer W. Kimball noted that even in our own church, “if you study the divorces, as we have had to do in these past years, you will find there are one, two, three, four reasons. Generally sex is the first. They did not get along sexually. They may not say that in court. They may not even tell that to their attorneys, but that is the reason.” (The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, ed. Edward L. Kimball, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982, p. 312.)

Why does something so beautiful sometimes become a source of so many problems? Part of the difficulty stems from mistaken ideas. Some people still believe that sexual intimacy is a necessary evil by which we have children. These people get an inaccurate view from parents who were too embarrassed to discuss such matters with their children or who were so concerned
that their children live the law of chastity that they taught only the negative consequences of the improper use of intimacy.

Some develop inappropriate attitudes from mistaken interpretations of biblical verses. In Ephesians 5:22, [Eph. 5:22] for example, women are encouraged to “submit” to their husbands. Some have erroneously believed that this scripture means women are to submit or yield themselves to their husbands even if they do so unwillingly. Under these conditions, neither the thought nor the act does much to promote marital oneness.

In reality, however, sexuality is a beautiful power given to mankind from God. President Kimball has observed: “The Bible celebrates sex and its proper use, presenting it as God-created, God-ordained, God-blessed. It makes plain that God himself implanted the physical magnetism between the sexes for two reasons: for the propagation of the human race, and for the expression of that kind of love between man and wife that makes for true oneness. His commandment to the first man and woman to be ‘one flesh’ was as important as his command to ‘be fruitful and multiply.’ ” (Quoting Billy Graham, Ensign, May 1974, p. 7.)

It is also of interest to note that the word sex or sexuality does not appear in the scriptures. Rather, it is described in holy writ with the words know or knew. This idea of “knowing” or “becoming acquainted with” connotes a deeply satisfying aspect of married love.

To be able to know each other physically, couples need to talk together about the physical dimensions of their relationship. Partners who feel free to discuss finances, discipline, recreational activities, and so forth, often feel uncomfortable discussing this intimate subject. And they sometimes assume that their intimate relationship should just “naturally” work out and that to discuss it means something has gone wrong. This is simply not true. While these intimacies, because of their sacred nature, should not be discussed with friends or other relatives, it is totally appropriate to discuss them with a marriage partner.

In this regard Elder Hugh B. Brown has noted: “Many marriages have been wrecked on the dangerous rocks of ignorant and debased sex behavior, both before and after marriage. Gross ignorance on the part of newlyweds on the subject of the proper place and functioning of sex results in much unhappiness and many broken homes.

“Thousands of young people come to the marriage altar almost illiterate insofar as this basic and fundamental function is concerned. …

“If they who contemplate this most glorifying and intimate of all human relationships [marriage] would seek to qualify for its responsibilities. … if they would frankly discuss the delicate and sanctifying aspects of harmonious sex life which are involved in marriage, … much sorrow, heartbreak, and tragedy could be avoided.” (You and Your Marriage, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960, pp. 22-23, 73.)

Talking about this intimate relationship—including the emotional feelings that attend it—can go a long way in strengthening a marriage.

Some problems in this aspect of marriage occur when one spouse or the other either unwisely limits its use or uses it inappropriately. Sexuality should be an integral part of loving and giving.
Any use which doesn’t include these feelings is improper.

In my work as a marriage counselor, I have found that there are some couples who feel that sexuality should be restricted to one dimension—reproduction. Yet President Kimball has said: “We know of no directive from the Lord that proper sexual experiences between husbands and wives need be limited totally to the procreation of children.” (Ensign, Oct. 1975, p. 4.) While creating children is an integral and beautiful aspect of marital intimacy, to use it only for that purpose is to deny its great potential as an expression of love, commitment, and unity.

On the other hand, there are couples who seem to feel that the only reason for sexuality is physical gratification. These people become so obsessed with the achievement of sensation that the emotion of love is all but forgotten. Still others use sexuality as a weapon or a bargaining tool. This is not only a misuse of a God-given privilege, it shows great selfishness on the part of one or both partners and makes sexuality a destructive rather than a unifying element in marriage.

Lack of information about men’s and women’s sexual expressions and feelings can also cause problems in marriage.

Some people cling to old stereotypes, mistakenly perceiving women as being less sexual than men. Not long ago I was invited to speak to a group of LDS married couples on the topic of sexuality in marriage. At the conclusion of my remarks one young wife asked, “Why is the sex drive so much stronger in men than in women?” I told the group I seriously questioned whether or not it was. For years it has been widely believed that men have the greater interest and drive towards sexual fulfillment. In addition, many women have been culturally conditioned to believe that their sexual inclinations are less than those of men—and if they are not, they should be or something is supposedly wrong. But recent research indicates that the capacity for sexual response in women is just as great, and in some cases even greater, than that of males. Recognizing this can help both partners be more aware of and sensitive to the other’s desires and expectations.

Sometimes the image of men and women shown in the media subtly and incorrectly influences our perception of sexuality. Seldom does the media present a balanced, mature, loving marital relationship. Men are often presented as strong, dashing heroes with little commitment and only one desire—sex. Women are portrayed as hopelessly romantic, pragmatically businesslike, or silly, who in any case have one function—that of satisfying man’s one desire. Both of these narrow views deny the individuality of men and women. They ignore the fact that both are children of God, each with his or her own hopes, desires, talents, and emotions. When a husband and wife forget this truth and see the other as an object, sexuality can do little or nothing to promote intimacy.

Then there are, of course, physical or psychological problems which can damage this aspect of marriage. A husband or a wife who has been sexually abused, for example, may have deep-seated emotional problems. In these cases, it would be appropriate to consult a bishop or qualified counselor for help. And a medical doctor may be able to help with physical problems.

One great problem in this, as in all other aspects of marriage, is selfishness. I doubt that there is any human relationship better than marriage to teach us the need for Christlike love—that
unqualified and unconditional love that persuades us to think more of another than we think of ourselves. Yet few of us, even those of us in a seemingly good marriage, have learned to do this as well as we could or should. It’s not always easy to put all other considerations aside and look to our companion to see what his or her needs are and then do our best to fulfill them. One young wife said that the problem isn’t necessarily that husbands and wives don’t know how to love each other, but that “people don’t know how to love people.” We tend to do for others what would make us happy if someone would do the same for us. And afterward we wonder why the other person isn’t happy. One great key to success in marriage is to find out what would make our spouse happy and then to find joy in providing that happiness.

When we see sexuality as a vital part of marital harmony and happiness, it becomes more than something we simply give or receive. I like to think of it as something a husband and wife can share. It might be called a sexual guardianship.

In the parable of the talents, Jesus taught that we should improve on whatever has been entrusted to our care. (See Matt. 25:14-30.) And in marriage we are often given joint guardianships, such as children, fidelity, and the day-to-day maintenance of family members.

Examples of joint guardianships in marriage are found in the scriptures. In Moses, chapter five, we are given insights into what Adam and Eve did and were accountable for together. In verse one we read, “Adam began to till the earth, and to have dominion over all the beasts of the field. … And Eve, also, his wife, did labor with him.” Thus, they shared the joint responsibility of work or labor. In sharing other dimensions of life, they also had sexual relationships and bore children together (Moses 5:2); prayed and received inspiration together (Moses 5:4); received commandments together (Moses 5:5); taught their children together (Moses 5:12); and mourned together (Moses 5:27).

Paul implies a sexual responsibility when he says: “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence; and likewise also the wife unto the husband.

“The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.” (1 Cor. 7:3-4.)

To me, this means that neither the husband nor the wife alone control the physical relationship, that both are diligent in their commitment to each other, and that both have a nurturing attitude toward the other. With that in mind, let’s look at some of the ways husbands and wives can fulfill their part of this guardianship and better this dimension of their marriage.

**To the Husband**

A husband needs to spend time with his wife. The two need to have time together to share ideas, to grow and learn together, and to experience joy together. A wife is not going to be too excited about a husband who spends all his time at work, at church meetings, in hobbies that exclude her, or in front of the television or newspaper. A husband who always spends time in ways that exclude his wife communicates to her that she is not very important. Yet his wife should be the most important person in his life.
President Spencer W. Kimball, referring to Doctrine and Covenants 42:22 [D&C 42:22] (“Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else”), said that “the words none else eliminate everyone and everything. The spouse then becomes preeminent in the life of the husband or wife and neither social life nor occupational life nor political life nor any other interest nor person nor thing shall ever take precedence over the companion spouse.” (Miracle of Forgiveness, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969, p. 250.)

If her husband places other things first and is unable to find time to develop intimacy in other parts of his relationship with his wife, she will probably not be very interested in sexual intimacy.

Similarly, a wife may not be interested if she feels her husband is unaware of or doesn’t care about the seemingly small struggles of her life. One wife once commented to me that she wished her husband would “come home from work, look into my eyes, and ask me how I feel, how was my busy day, and then give me a kiss and a long hug.” Most wives deeply appreciate little helps that show their husband is sensitive to their needs. Many have told me of the appreciation they feel when their husbands help around the house or care for the children after a long and hectic day. Other wives appreciate their husband’s help when they are ill, pregnant, or overwhelmed with housework. Little things—thank yous, compliments, and I love yous—are important. When these “little” elements are added to a marriage, sexuality becomes more meaningful and an expression of deep love. Without these “extras,” sexual intimacy can become that which is ultimately satisfying to neither the husband nor the wife.

Wives also enjoy romance. The problem here is that sometimes husbands and wives have a different definition of romance. Many wives include in their definition the time they spend together doing things they are both interested in. They include expressions of love both verbal and written, or small gifts that have meaning for just the two of them. If the romance in marriage is limited to sexuality, wives may feel more exploited than loved.

One complaint that I have heard many times from wives is that there is little affection in their marriage. In a survey I conducted some time ago, I found that most wives put sexual satisfaction fairly high on their list of what they desired in marriage. But most wives ranked non-sexual intimacy even higher. Many told of the satisfaction they feel when they hold hands with their husbands, or sit close together while reading or watching television. A wife also appreciates her husband’s concern for her in the sexual relationship itself.

As a husband learns to find out and meet his wife’s various needs, the love in their marriage and all the expressions of that love will likely improve.
To the Wife

Perhaps the most important thing a wife can do to improve the sexual relationship in her marriage is to realize her husband is also a human being with various needs, hopes, and aspirations. Unfortunately the media blatantly convey the idea that men want only one thing out of a relationship. To adopt this narrow view of men is to do them an injustice. Men, even those who may have mistaken ideas of marital relationships, are still children of God, and treating them as such can only help improve the relationship.

Many of the ideas that apply to husbands also apply to wives. Just as husbands need to find time for their wives, so wives need to find time for their husbands. Some wives spend most of their time at work, caring for the children, or cleaning house. When children are finally in bed at night and parents have a few moments away from them, wives often prefer doing “relaxing” things watching TV, doing needlework, reading a book, talking on the phone to spending time with their husbands. If their husbands want to be with them, they are often tired and emotionally unavailable. Men are not likely to appreciate or understand such actions. If the activities of the day really are so tiring that a woman has little time or energy left to develop her relationship with her husband, she or the couple together might examine her life carefully, to decide which things can be given up for the good of the most important relationship she will ever be involved in.

Men also appreciate affection. In some ways, when it comes to affection, men can be as romantic as women. A husband enjoys putting his arms around his wife or kissing her before leaving in the morning. These actions are not necessarily sexual; they are instead his romantic expression of the love he feels for her. If these expressions of affection are continually met with “not now,” he may feel that his wife is indifferent to the love they share. These expressions are to the husband what words of appreciation and kind deeds are to the wife. A wife who rejects them tells her husband she doesn’t really care about him. On the other hand, when she stops for a quick hug or even better, initiates the affectionate action herself, she deepens the love between her and her husband.

When it comes to sexuality, some wives become very concerned about their “rights,” often speaking of their “right” to say no and yes. But marriage is also a relationship of responsibility and opportunity. In marriage, both partners have the opportunity to give. I believe few wives realize the power they have to help keep their husbands near them physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. On the other hand, I also believe few wives sense the degree of frustration and alienation husbands feel when a wife ignores his needs and interests. I believe a wise and loving Heavenly Father has given a wife the ability to achieve oneness with her husband. The key is unselfishness.

Elder Parley P. Pratt once noted that “our natural affections are planted in us by the Spirit of God, for a wise purpose; and they are the very main-springs of life and happiness they are the cement of all virtuous and heavenly society.

“The fact is, God made man, male and female; he planted in their bosoms those affections which are calculated to promote their happiness and union.” (Parker Pratt Robison, ed., *Writings of Parley Parker Pratt*, Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1952, pp. 52-53.) As husbands and wives learn to give of themselves and to understand each others’ needs and desires, these
affections will grow until they do indeed “promote their happiness and union.”

Gospel topic: marriage