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Competing Spouses

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Competing Spouses

When the Dolans, a Christian couple, came to see me, they had not spoken to each other for several weeks. The tension had become unbearable.

The issue was over dancing in gym class. Hal Dolan had said flatly that their son should not participate.

Melissa Dolan had agreed in front of her husband, but privately gave their son permission to participate. Hal found out about it through a conversation with a neighbor who had visited the gym class.

That night at dinner Mr. Dolan asked his son Dave, “What do you do during gym class?”

“I study in the library” he lied. Then Mr. Dolan told them what he had heard. There was a bitter fight that night. Hal ordered Dave to obey him. Dave refused. His mother backed Dave.

Mr. Dolan threatened to leave and Melissa told him to go. His bluff was called. He didn’t leave, but they hadn’t spoken since.

It was impossible to talk to them together. One contradicted the other. After many sessions, it became clear that this incident was only the last straw. Across the years they had clashed over many issues.

The Dolans were competitors, opponents. I referred them to a Biblical principle: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

This was inconceivable to them. Even though they went to church regularly they never really took the Bible seriously, and they seldom consulted it. Mr. Dolan perceived his role as head of the house to mean that he should give the orders without consulting his wife. To consider her opinion meant that he was weak. To her, it was important that she stick up for her rights, or she would lose her identity.

“What you are really saying,” I told them separately, “is that you must have your own way.” Both had the personal problem of selfishness. The issue over folk dancing only brought their problem to a head.

After many counseling sessions together, there was finally a confession to the Lord of selfishness and a plea to Him for help in getting on the same team. With a new spirit of oneness between them, the Dolans are now working out a mutually agreeable and satisfactory life together.

[Dr. Henry Brandt shares insights from various couples he counseled. The names and certain details in these true case histories have been changed to protect each person's identity and privacy.]