

Polygamy and the Church: A History



Joseph F. Smith, nephew of the founding prophet, and his family. Courtesy: Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Of all the Mormon doctrines, none caused as much controversy as polygamy, called plural or celestial marriage within the church. It divided prophet Joseph Smith's own household, caused a schism in his church, and brought the wrath of many Americans down on the Mormons for decades to come.

First Revelations

Smith may have received a revelation on polygamy as early as 1831, when he was studying Old Testament prophets and wondering about their practice of having multiple wives. Smith would later assert that the Lord told him such acts were not adultery when done at divine command; multiple women could be eternally "sealed" to the same man. At the time, however, he kept the doctrine secret, although he may have married Fanny Alger, a teenager working in his home, in the mid-1830s. Smith first dictated the revelation about plural marriage on July 12, 1843, though he always denied it outside the Mormon community, and the polygamy doctrine was not publicly acknowledged until 1852. Plural marriage was not for everyone -- in fact, at most 20 to 30 percent of Mormons would ever practice it, more among the church leadership than the regular members. But if commanded to take other wives by God and the church, an obedient Mormon was expected to

comply. Smith himself may have taken as many as 30 wives, some of whom were married to other men.

Dissent

Smith's revelation was questioned by many of his fellow Mormons. Oliver Cowdery, who had taken down the dictation of much of *The Book of Mormon*, accused Smith of adultery. When told he should practice plural marriage too, Brigham Young said, "It was the first time in my life that I desired the grave." (Young would change course and later take many wives who bore him 57 children. One of the wives, Ann Eliza, later sued for divorce and gave popular anti-polygamy lectures before such luminaries as President Ulysses S. Grant.) Emma Smith, the prophet's wife, was kept in the dark about several of his relationships. She was first informed of the polygamy doctrine not by Joseph but by his brother Hyrum. Although she initially vacillated on the subject, Emma soon turned against plural marriage, even threatening Smith with divorce. After he was killed and many Mormons moved West, Emma remained in Illinois and joined the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which was headed by her son, Joseph III, and rejected polygamy.

Denunciation

The doubts raised by church members were nothing compared with the vitriol unleashed by non-Mormons when the doctrine of polygamy became publicly known. It was denounced, along with slavery, as a "twin relic of barbarism" by the Republican Party in 1856 -- not an accidental linkage because opponents considered plural marriage a form of white slavery that degraded women. Polygamy also drew the attention -- and criticism -- of numerous novelists, even figuring in the first Sherlock Holmes adventure. In 1862, the Morrill Act criminalized plural marriage, though President Abraham Lincoln declined to enforce its provisions. In his words, Mormons were like a log "too hard to split, too wet to burn, and too heavy to move." And with the Civil War raging, Lincoln had more pressing issues.

The Raid

The post-war era brought a renewed focus on polygamy. The cause of plural marriage became a rallying cry for the Mormon faithful, an example of the supremacy of God's law over men's laws. It was promoted by the church leadership and sanctioned, if not actually practiced, by most of its members. But U.S. lawmakers did not abandon their attempts to destroy plural marriage. In addition to blocking the Utah Territory's petitions to join

the Union, lawmakers passed the Edmunds Act, which made "unlawful cohabitation" illegal and took the vote away from practitioners of plural marriage. Armed with new legal tools, federal prosecutors went after individual polygamists with a vengeance. The conviction of Rudger Clawson in 1884 marked the beginning of a 12-year period known as "the Raid," in which more than 1,400 indictments were issued. Mormons challenged anti-polygamy statutes. The Supreme Court repeatedly upheld them. Mormons refused to testify (or suffered convenient amnesia) in court; went into hiding; and, by the hundreds, were sent to prison.

Fundamentalists' Justification

John Taylor, who succeeded Young as church president, died in 1887, while on the run from federal authorities. Before he died, however, he made it very clear that he believed that the Saints must not give up the practice of polygamy. Today, fundamentalists who continue to practice polygamy call themselves Mormons and cite President Taylor's position on this matter to justify their current practice -- though official church policy bans plural marriage and excommunicates its practitioners.

The Manifesto

For the Mormon mainstream, the 1887 Edmunds-Tucker Act proved the final straw. The U.S. Congress renewed its attack on polygamy by disincorporating the church and seizing its assets. In 1890, church president Wilford Woodruff, fearful that the continuation of the practice of plural marriage would lead to the destruction of all Mormon temples, announced an end to official support for polygamy. His "Manifesto" was reinforced by a 1904 decree threatening polygamists with excommunication; in response, the government returned church property, pardoned polygamists, and admitted Utah to the Union in 1896. The Manifesto, though never described as a revelation, has remained the official church position for more than 100 years.