

# **19<sup>th</sup> Century Polygamy and Fundamentalist Polygamy Today**

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Polygamy is a well-known term that many adults these days have heard about. Many have heard radical things and have some different views or beliefs, and others haven't heard that much about it and are skeptical. Polygamy has been around for many ages; it dates back all the way to biblical times with Abraham and his wives as well as Jacob and his wives.

The term polygamy comes from a Greek term that when translated means "often married". Polygamy is where you have multiple spouses living in the same household, most of the time these multiple spouses are wives. Polygamy is a social practice that isn't tolerated in most countries and is against the law.<sup>1</sup> Utah is one of those that have the practice of polygamy illegalized. Utah has a rich history of polygamy, dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Mormons, or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints arrived here in the Salt Lake Valley. Back in the day, the Mormons called this practice "plural marriage", but nowadays the modern fundamentalist religion calls it "the Principle".

The reason that members of the Latter Day Saint faith practiced polygamy because they believe that's what God wanted at the time and it is backed up by the bible. The Book of Mormon, which the church uses as scriptures states "Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none. For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things."<sup>2</sup> So, from learning from that scripture we can see why the LDS faith believes what they believe. It seems

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<sup>1</sup> Polygamy, "What is polygamy", polygamy.com, <http://www.polygamy.com/> (accessed 11/24/2012).

<sup>2</sup> Polygamy, "What is polygamy", polygamy.com, <http://www.polygamy.com/> (accessed 11/24/2012).

to appear that they believe that monogamy is the normal practice, but when the Lord wants to or needs to He permits polygamy.

Polygamy had already been practiced in the different parts of the world for a while; but the “enlightened” America saw the practice as incomprehensible and unacceptable. Plural marriage became the churches most controversial and least understood practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints publically announced that they practice polygamy on August 29, 1852. This gave all the more reason for the rest of the nation to think negatively of them. This whole idea of plural marriage also challenged some members of the church. Some were spiritual descendants of the Puritans and sexually conservative and they didn't like embrace the principle of having to marry and have relations with more than one wife. They only did embrace it though after receiving personal spiritual confirmation that they should practice it. This was not only a shaky or weary action for the members to take but also for the Prophet Joseph Smith who introduced it.

In the Doctrine and Covenants, another book of scriptures from the LDS faith, Joseph Smith wrote a revelation he had in 1843 about eternal marriage and how under certain conditions a man might be authorized to have more than one wife.<sup>4</sup> Many people believe and many evidences show that the idea of plural marriage was known by Joseph Smith more than ten years before that though. The prophet knew that when he would announce it, it would receive a ton of criticism. His only desire was to teach the gospel and to do God's will. He did

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<sup>3</sup> Harold B. Lee Library. Encyclopedia of Mormonism. New York: Macmillan, 1992. Page 1091  
<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/EoM/id/4391/show/4055>

<sup>4</sup> Harold B. Lee Library. Encyclopedia of Mormonism. New York: Macmillan, 1992. Page 1092  
<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/EoM/id/4391/show/4055>

not want to hurt families, including his own. He knew that this was the will of God and after he told Brigham Young that he was determined to press ahead though it would cost him his life for “it is the work of God, and He has revealed this principle, and it is not my business to control or dictate it”.<sup>5</sup> This is one of my favorite quotes of Joseph Smith. It shows that he was not trying to do what he wanted here on earth but only what God wanted.

Polygamy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could not be performed by anyone in whatever circumstance. The plural marriages had to be performed only by the sealing power which was controlled by the presiding authority of the Church.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the US federal government was fighting polygamy pretty strongly. There were many acts put out to stop the plural marriages. Just to list a few, some of them were: 1862 Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, 1882 Edmunds Act, 1887 Edmunds-Tucker Act and the 1890 Manifesto banning plural marriage. These acts stripped the saints of the church of their rights as citizens, dis-incorporated the Church, and permitted the seizure of Church property. Both the Church and the government stopped with the manifesto of 1890. Some though found it hard to stop practicing polygamy, and with that President Joseph F. Smith issued a ‘second manifest’ in 1904. Since that time, it has been uniform Church policy to excommunicate any member either practicing or openly advocating the practice of polygamy<sup>6</sup>. The ones that still practice today, practice outside of the church and are members of Fundamentalist groups.

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<sup>5</sup> Harold B. Lee Library. Encyclopedia of Mormonism. New York: Macmillan, 1992. Page 1093  
<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/EoM/id/4391/show/4055>

<sup>6</sup> Harold B. Lee Library. Encyclopedia of Mormonism. New York: Macmillan, 1992. Page 1095  
<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/EoM/id/4391/show/4055>

Fundamentalist groups are appearing in many places now in the United States, most of them belonging to the FLDS religion. It is estimated that there are at least 30,000 Fundamentalists living in North America, spreading across many of the Intermountain Western states (Utah, Idaho, Arizona, Nevada and Texas), but as well as Canada and Mexico. Mormon fundamentalists, continue to embrace the doctrine and practice of “plural marriage” or polygamy. It is a central tenet of Mormon fundamentalism, and is considered a requirement for achieving salvation or “exaltation” which is the highest “degree of glory” in Heaven.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, the Mormon fundamentalists have been more in the public than ever. They have been in the news, on the radio and on the television. There has been a show on the TV channel TLC I learned, called ‘Sister Wives’. This show isn’t about portraying the sister wives’ sexual lives or how they marry underage children, but rather about how a fundamentalist family lives. He is only legally married to one of the women but is spiritually married to the other three wives.<sup>8</sup>

Fundamentalists started after the second manifesto in 1904 when there was a quiet growth of a fundamentalist Mormon movement. The people within the movement held fast to their beliefs, even as the LDS Church tried to stop their practiced and shut them down. Fundamentalist Mormons see themselves keeping the main practices of the LDS Church,

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<sup>7</sup> A Shield and Refuge. “Understanding Polygamy and Fundamentalism.” [http://www.shieldandrefuge.org/fund\\_overview.htm](http://www.shieldandrefuge.org/fund_overview.htm) Accessed, Nov. 27, 2012

<sup>8</sup> Ravitz, Jessica. “‘Sister Wives’ explained: A fundamentalist Mormon polygamy primer”, CNN, last modified Oct 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010. <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/10/25/sister-wives-explained-a-fundamentalist-mormon-polygamy-primer/>

including plural marriages. Some of the members of this break-off church consider themselves Mormon, although the LDS church doesn't want anything to do with them and excommunicates them as quickly as it can find them. Some other members rather not be called "Mormon" fundamentalists as they feel there is nothing Mormon about them.<sup>9</sup>

The Fundamentalist church believes that the prophet and president of the LDS Church John Taylor, called his apostles who called other new men to carry on the tradition of plural marriage. This is the succession they believe in, but of course there were some conflicts and nowadays we have many fundamentalist groups across the Western side of the United States. The most popular and the one that we in Utah hear most of is the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This FLDS church has said that the LDS church is guilty of apostasy for banning plural marriages. The leader and president of the FLDS church is Warren Jeffs. He has been convicted of two felony counts of child sexual assault.<sup>10</sup> There seems to be many problems coming from the Fundamentalist church. In specific, a raid that happened in Texas stands out, where more than 400 children were removed from a fundamentalist Mormon compound.<sup>11</sup> This was one of the bigger raids to take place, but many other ones do happen.

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<sup>9</sup> Ravitz, Jessica. "'Sister Wives' explained: A fundamentalist Mormon polygamy primer", CNN, last modified Oct 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010. <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/10/25/sister-wives-explained-a-fundamentalist-mormon-polygamy-primer/>

<sup>10</sup> Richey, Warren, "Prophet to pedophile: Polygamist Warren Jeffs sentenced to life in prison," The Christian Science Monitor. Aug 9, 2011. <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2011/0809/Prophet-to-pedophile-Polygamist-Warren-Jeffs-sentenced-to-life-in-prison>

<sup>11</sup> Winston, Kimberly, "Analysis: Fundamentalist Mormons stress polygamy above all," USA Today. 5/30/2008. [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-04-17-polygamist-mormon-sect\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-04-17-polygamist-mormon-sect_N.htm)

In conclusion, I believe that the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ and other fundamentalist groups have many similarities with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormon practice of “plural marriage”. They both believed that that is what they had to realize in order to reach and obtain exaltation. However, with this run off fundamentalist groups it appears that they have taken more extreme and rather rash decisions on going about practicing it. First off, being illegal and then there are the sad things we have to hear about the children and the abuse. I believe we do live in a free country, but we also have to follow the laws of this great land. In my eyes and my opinion I believe the 19<sup>th</sup> century practices of polygamy had more of a solid reason and foundation built with God. Today, with these fundamentalist groups, I see that they like to be extreme and maybe get attention. It almost seems as if they are doing it for the wrong reasons. In my personal opinion I don`t believe God would be wanting multiple young girls having relations with an older gentleman. Polygamy has left and continues to make a significant mark in the diverse history of Utah.

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