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Separated but not Divorced: The LDS Church's Uncomfortable Relationship with its Polygamous Past

Craig L. Foster

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SEPARATED BUT NOT DIVORCED:
THE LDS CHURCH'S UNCOMFORTABLE
RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS POLYGAMOUS PAST

Craig L. Foster

Abstract: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints's uncomfortable relationship with its polygamous history is somewhat like an awkward marriage separation. This is, in part, because of the fitful, painful cessation of plural marriage and the ever present reminders of its complicated past. This essay looks at examples of members' expression of discomfort over a polygamous heritage and concludes with suggestions of possible pathways to a more comfortable reconciliation.

Divorce can be an ugly, painful experience that leaves all involved angry, confused, and embarrassed. The separation before the actual divorce can often be even more embittered. The period between the separation and actual divorce can seem nebulous and interminable. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints's uncomfortable relationship with its polygamous past is much like the painful interim between when the parties have gone their separate ways but are not yet allowed to completely sever their ties.

Plural marriage was introduced to Church members by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the 1840s as a commandment from God and continued as doctrine and an official practice until 1890.¹ Official Church support for plural marriage ended

1 Joseph engaged in one plural marriage with Fanny Alger in the 1830s. He did, however, not require any other members to practice the doctrine until the Nauvoo period. See Don Bradley, "Mormon Polygamy before Nauvoo? The Relationship of Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger," in *The Persistence of Polygamy:*

after the Manifesto, and many members have come to see this change as the final end of plural marriage. The historical record, however, clearly demonstrates that Church leaders intended at least a few plural marriages to continue without the Church's public sanction and encouragement.² This contributed to the difficulties of the next few decades. The practice suffered a slow, difficult death as the Church and its members came to terms with the demise of the practice and yet continued their efforts to keep what they regarded as a sacred principle alive.

By the end of these few decades, a number of members had doctrinally and physically separated themselves from the body of the Church because they continued to teach and practice plural marriage. In spite of their migration out of the mainstream Church, discomfort within the Church persisted and intensified over time. Members were stung by the presence of those who had chosen to continue plural marriage outside of the Church's control.³ This constant reminder to both members and the outside world has embarrassed and bothered Church officials and members alike.

Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy, eds. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 14–58, and Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 1:85–126.

2 It should be noted that while most of the sanctioned post-Manifesto plural marriages were performed outside of the United States, some were performed within U.S. borders. For more information regarding these post-Manifesto marriages, see Drew Briney, *Apostles on Trial: Examining the Membership Trials of Apostles Taylor and Cowley* (Salt Lake City: Hindsight Publications, 2012); B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); and D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18/1 (Spring 1985): 9–105.

3 For examples of people who chose to secretly practice plural marriage while still members of the LDS Church, see Craig L. Foster, "The Persistence of Plural Marriage Within Mainstream Mormonism: The Example of the Barr and Mary Musser Family," in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism Within Mormonism*, eds. Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2007): 290–314.

This essay will examine the uncomfortable relationship between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its polygamous past and the effect this discomfort has had on its members. I will examine examples of members' expression of discomfort over a polygamous heritage and conclude with suggestions of possible pathways to reconciliation.

A Complex, Often Misunderstood History

From the time of its introduction, plural marriage has been wrapped in controversy. The confusion and conflict began with the secrecy and prevarication of Joseph Smith when he revealed plural marriage to a trusted circle of the Nauvoo elite.⁴ Plural marriage was not openly practiced until after the Saints left Illinois and were safely ensconced in the Great Basin of the western United States. Plural marriage continued to be practiced in the open until the anti-polygamy persecution of the 1880s and the issuance of the Manifesto in 1890. After that, the practice again went underground and was once more surrounded by a veil of secrecy which made it even more difficult to completely stop.⁵

Unfortunately, the obfuscation which attended the beginning and end of the official practice of plural marriage—necessary though it was—provided ammunition for anti-Mormons and anxiety for modern Church members. From the 1840s to the present, anti-Mormon literature has accused Church leaders and members of immorality and lasciviousness,

4 As already noted, Joseph Smith entered into plural marriage before the Nauvoo period. His first plural wife was Fanny Alger in 1835–1836 as explained by Bradley, “Fanny Alger,” in *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 14–58.

5 For an excellent discussion about this pivotal time period, see Gregory L. Smith, “Polygamy, Prophets, and Prevarication: Frequently and Rarely Asked Questions about the Initiation, Practice, and Cessation of Plural Marriage in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” FAIR, 2005, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/publications/polygamy-prophets-and-prevarication>.

with suggestions that Joseph Smith started plural marriage to cover-up his own adulterous affairs.⁶ The 1840s saw some early purveyors of the lustful and lascivious stereotype in the supposed insider exposés of John C. Bennett and the Van Dusens.⁷ Ironically, some of these clichéd stereotypes are still being used today. Not surprisingly, many members have believed these unfortunate and mostly false accusations and stereotyping, in no small part because some historians have repeated and embraced them uncritically.⁸

Joseph Smith's involvement in so-called polyandrous marriages added to the image of him as a man with unbridled lust. Anti-Mormon literature has portrayed Smith as sneaking around behind unsuspecting husbands' backs and seducing willing women. In fact, most of the literature discussing these marriages suggests Joseph had sexual relations with these women, usually without the cuckold husband's knowledge.⁹

6 For a more detailed discussion of anti-Mormon accusations and stereotyping, see Craig L. Foster, "Victorian Pornographic Imagery in Anti-Mormon Literature," *Journal of Mormon History* 19/1 (Spring 1993): 115–32; "Old Themes and Stereotypes Never Die: The Unchanging Ways of Anti-Mormons," FAIR, 2003, accessed October 14, 2011, http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2003_Unchanging_Ways_of_Anti-Mormons.html, and Craig L. Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics: A Critical Analysis of Anti-Mormon Pamphleteering in Great Britain, 1837–1860* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003).

7 John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842). Increase and Maria Van Dusen published a series of "tell all" pamphlets about the temple ceremony and polygamy during the 1840s and early 1850s. For more information on the Van Dusens, see Craig L. Foster, "From Temple Mormon to Anti-Mormon: The Ambivalent Odyssey of Increase Van Dusen" *Dialogue* 27/3 (1994): 275–86.

8 Examples of some who have furthered and even built upon some of this sensational and inaccurate stereotyping are Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945); George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... but we called it celestial marriage"* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008); and Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

9 "Joseph Smith married other men's wives while they were still married to their husbands," *Mormon Think*, accessed October 12, 2011, <http://>

Another accusation of more recent date, perhaps even more insidious than the previous, charges the Mormons of pedophilia because of marriages with teenage brides.¹⁰ This

mormonthink.com/joseph-smith-polygamy.htm#other. This website noted Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner married Joseph Smith in 1842 when she was seven months pregnant and queried whether the child was Adam Lightner's or Joseph Smith's. Another example of anti-Mormon accusations of adulterous polyandry can be found at LDSFreedom.org, "Polyandry & Joseph Smith," accessed October 12, 2011, <http://www.ldsfreedom.org/node/7>. Unfortunately, George D. Smith's *Nauvoo Polygamy* appears to not only accept the idea that Joseph Smith was sexually involved with these women because parts of the book are reminiscent in language and imagery of early anti-Mormon exposés. For a discussion of *Nauvoo Polygamy*, see Craig L. Foster, "Review of Nauvoo polygamy: '...but we call it celestial marriage,'" *Mormon Historical Studies* 11/1 (Spring 2010), 155–58. Brian C. Hales, on the other hand, in an excellent essay, "Joseph Smith and the Puzzlement of 'Polyandry,'" in *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 99–151, offers a compelling argument for the proposition that Joseph Smith's polyandrous marriages were non-sexual and were "eternity only" sealings. Hales expands this argument about Joseph Smith's "polyandrous" marriages in his three volume work titled, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2013). Another source providing good answers and positive information regarding Joseph Smith's polyandrous marriages is "Joseph Smith and Polyandry," FairMormon Answers, accessed February 22, 2014, http://en.fairmormon.org/Joseph_Smith/Polygamy/Polyandry.

10 For examples of accusations of Joseph Smith and pedophilia, see Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*; Mark Webster, "He's a Dangerous Man: God Talk and Sexual Abuse," Beyond Opinion.com: Christian Apologetics Ministry, December 13, 2010, accessed October 14, 2011, <http://beyondopinion.com/tag/joseph-smith/>; and Sandra Tanner, "Joseph Smith as a Sexual Predator," *Mormon Coffee: It's Forbidden But it's Good*, June 21, 2009, accessed October 12, 2011, <http://blog.mrm.org/2009/06/joseph-smith-as-a-sexual-predator/>. Ironically, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, who was mentioned above, was 16 when she married Adam Lightner, and yet critics have not condemned Lightner for marrying a teenager when he was 25. In contrast, Craig L. Foster, David Keller, and Gregory L. Smith use both history and a statistical review of Mormon and non-Mormon marriage practices in Illinois and neighboring Iowa to demonstrate that marriage to teenage women was not uncommon for the place and time in which Joseph Smith lived, nor was it considered pedophilia: "The Age of Joseph Smith's Plural Wives in Social and Demographic Context," in *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 152–83. Alternately, Todd D. Compton, in an essay in the same volume, 184–232, titled, "Early Marriage in the New England and Northeastern States, and in Mormon Polygamy: What Was the Norm?" argues that such age gaps between marriage partners were unusual, but because his analysis relies on New England marriage

slur has been aimed particularly against Joseph Smith in order to attack his claim to be a prophet of God. These and other negative claims against early Mormon polygamy have caused understandable mental and spiritual turmoil for members.

A Constant Reminder

There are thousands of fundamentalist Mormons throughout the Intermountain West who are a constant reminder of Mormonism's polygamist past. Indeed, some even try to dress like 19th-century Mormons, except in neo-pioneer style pastel dresses topped off with a bizarre hairstyle. Mormon fundamentalism seems to be ever-present, even invading television on shows such as the now-ended HBO series "Big Love," which one television critic described as understanding "local culture," "our idiosyncrasies," and, in fact, "the whole Mormon thing."¹¹ While some people would contest this description, the television show did, nevertheless, have an impact and likely encouraged the reality show "Sister Wives" as well as other copycat reality fare gracing the cable channels.

"Sister Wives" follows the large family of Kody Brown and his four wives. The show's first season was set in Utah Valley until the Utah County police began to investigate the family. The Browns then moved to Las Vegas, where they continue to produce their show.¹² Not to be outdone, the Darger family

patterns rather than those of the frontier, I do not believe he has rebutted the perspective offered by Foster, Keller, and Smith. For more information showing Joseph's Smith's marriages to teenage wives were not out of the cultural and social norm of his time, see "Joseph Smith/Polygamy/Marriages to Young Women," FairMormon Answers, accessed February 22, 2014, http://en.fairmormon.org/Joseph_Smith/Polygamy/Marriages_to_young_women.

11 Scott D. Pierce, "More Often Than Not, Big Love Gets it Right," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, December 28, 2010, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=12564307&itype=storyID>.

12 Steve Chapman, "Kody Brown and His Four Wives," townhall.com, July 14, 2011, accessed July 14, 2011, http://townhall.com/columnists/stevechapman/2011/07/14/kody_brown_and_his_four_wives, and Brent Bozell,

published *Love Times Three: Our True Story of a Polygamous Marriage*.¹³ They took to the talk show circuit to describe their lifestyle and went so far as to suggest they were the inspiration for the family on “Big Love.” Given the Darger’s soap opera adventures, this might be a rather dubious honor.

Most recently, Rebecca Wall Jeffs Musser, a former plural wife of Rulon Jeffs, with the assistance of award-winning author M. Bridget Cook Burch, published *The Witness Wore Red: The 19th Wife Who Brought Polygamous Cult Leaders to Justice*.¹⁴ This is a fascinating account of her life within and eventual escape from the FLDS, a branch of the fundamentalist movement.

It is television shows and books like these that confuse non-Mormons. Since the time of the Manifesto, there has been suspicion that Latter-day Saints still practice plural marriage.¹⁵ Rumors and stereotyping of secret Mormon polygamous marriages have continued to the present, as news commentators and political pundits alike misconstrue and misrepresent LDS history and doctrine. For example, television talk show host Bill Maher explained that Mormonism is “a religion founded on the idea of polygamy. They call it The Principle. That sounds

“TLC’s Lobbying Show,” townhall.com, July 15, 2011, accessed July 15, 2011, http://townhall.com/columnists/brentbozell/2011/07/15/tlcs_lobbying_show/page/full/.

13 Joseph Perkins, “Will Same-Sex Marriage Lead to Legalized Polygamy,” *Christian Post*, October 8, 2011, accessed October 8, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/will-same-sex-marriage-lead-to-legalized-polygamy-57640/>.

14 Rebecca Musser and M. Bridget Cook, *The Witness Wore Red: The 19th Wife Who Brought Polygamous Cult Leaders to Justice* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013).

15 See for example, Mollie, “Picturing Polygamists,” *Patheos* (December 24, 2011), accessed February 15, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/getreligion/2011/12/picturing-polygamists/>, and “Do Mormons Practice Polygamy?” Mormon.org, accessed February 15, 2014, <http://mormon.org/faq/practice-of-polygamy>.

like The Prime Directive in ‘Star Trek.’”¹⁶ Is there any wonder a 2011 poll undertaken by a California polling company found that almost half of those polled thought “Mormons either ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ practice polygamy”?¹⁷

This non-Mormon perception of Latter-day Saints is more prevalent than many members of the Church realize. I remember a fifth or sixth grade classmate who came to my central California elementary school and said, “You’re a Mormon, right?” I answered in the affirmative, and he then announced, “My father says Mormons can have more than one wife. Is that true?” I thought he was joking. I thought everyone knew we no longer practice plural marriage, so I played along with him.

“Sure,” I said, “My dad has three.”

Unfortunately, he believed me, and it took a little bit of explaining for him to finally believe I had been joking and that members of the LDS Church no longer practice plural marriage.¹⁸

Other members of the Church have recounted anecdotal evidence of the widespread perception of polygamy among mainstream Mormons. Hamani Stevens of the University of Oregon football team recounted how “the usual misconception

16 Joseph Walker, “Sarandon Calls Pope a ‘Nazi,’ Maher Calls Mormonism ‘Ridiculous,’” *Deseret News*, October 20, 2011, accessed October 21, 2011, <http://www.deseretnews.com/user/comments/700189837/Sarandon-calls-Pope-a-Nazi-Maher-calls-Mormonism-ridiculous.html>.

17 Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Poll: Most Still Unsure about Mormons and Polygamy,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 12, 2011, accessed September 13, 2011, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/52568348-78/mormon-mormons-polygamy-percent.html.csp>. According to the newspaper article, the Lawrence Research poll found that 15% said Mormons definitely practice polygamy while another 31% said Mormons probably practice polygamy: a total of 46%.

18 Craig L. Foster, “Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic: Latter-day Saints and Popular Polygamy Stereotypes,” Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2010-Craig-Foster.pdf>.

about Mormonism is that we all believe in polygamy.”¹⁹ That mistaken perception is compounded and exploited by merchandizers like Wasatch Brewery in Park City that sells “Polygamy Porter,” a beer whose advertisement invokes a polygamy theme, asking “Why have just one?” Along with the beer, they sell polygamy-themed merchandise. “The Polygamy Porter T-shirts are our best seller,” the owner explained. “One guy from Japan ordered 5,000 of them for resale.”²⁰ Another alcoholic beverage company banking on the polygamy image is Five Wives Vodka, an Ogden, Utah distillery whose suggestive label displays five women in old-fashioned nightgowns.²¹

The Church Reacts to Present-Day Plural Marriage

It is within this milieu of multifarious information and misinformation that modern members of the Church are placed. Many are confronted with these issues regarding plural marriage without a firm understanding of the LDS Church’s polygamous past. Even some of those who became aware of plural marriage at a young age approach the subject through a 21st-century prism that warps their understanding.

It isn’t surprising that modern members are ignorant of Mormon plural marriage and the context in which it was practiced, since the LDS Church has, in many ways, downplayed and even ignored its own history. As one historian explained regarding the 20th-century Church’s approach to plural marriage:

19 Sam Finley, “Duck Football: From One Mission to Another...,” *Eugene Daily News*, September 16, 2011, accessed September 16, 2011, <http://eugenedailynews.com/2011/09/16/duck-football-from-one-mission-to-another>.

20 Bill Redeker, “Beer Maker Finds Polygamy Ads Sell,” “Good Morning America,” February 8, 2011, accessed February 10, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=126371&page=1>.

21 Bill Frost, “Idaho Bans Ogden’s Five Wives Vodka,” *City Weekly*, May 29, 2013, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.cityweekly.net/utah/blog-21-7669-idaho-bans-ogdens-five-wives-vodka.html>.

As time passed, fewer and fewer Mormons came to identify personally with polygamy. By the 1950s Mormons had become thoroughly Americanized and tended to display a split opinion about polygamy. On one hand, they were immensely proud of the sacrifices made by their pioneer ancestors, but as modern Americans and the very model of American family values, they were also uncomfortable with their heritage of socio-sexual experimentation. Raised on *Essentials in Church History* and similar volumes and never hearing of Joseph Smith's own plural relationships in general conferences or in other official publications, the new public memory began to take root.²²

It is human nature, explained one Mormon blogger, to "choose aspects of our past that we feel define us. In like manner, we hide or diminish those things that embarrass us." One of those things is Joseph Smith's practice of polygamy because "it seems that his polygamy is only in the picture when we're called upon to defend him."²³ Such an approach is not confined solely to individuals.

The Church of Jesus Christ itself has been described as "a Church very much against polygamy" that "will continue to distance itself as far away from polygamy as possible."²⁴ As

22 Stephen C. Taysom, "A Uniform and Common Recollection: Joseph Smith's Legacy, Polygamy, and the Creation of Mormon Public Memory, 1852–2002," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35/3 (Fall 2002): 136.

23 David Grua, "From Embrace to Embarrassment: Remembering Joseph Smith's Polygamy," *The Juvenile Instructor* (November 2, 2007), accessed August 24, 2011, <http://www.juvenileinstructor.org/from-embrace-to-embarrassment-remembering-joseph-smiths-polygamy/>. On a positive note, the LDS Church has recently taken a more active approach to interpreting and defining its polygamous past. In December 2013, the LDS Church published an essay titled, "Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah," accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-and-families-in-early-utah?lang=eng>.

24 Melissa Crabtree, "Modern Mormon Misconceptions Linger," CBS 42, Birmingham, Alabama, September 26, 2011, accessed September 28, 2011, <http://>

previously explained, the Church has, since at least the late 1920s, repeatedly tried to distance itself from fundamentalist Mormonism and modern plural marriage. These strenuous denials have continued to the present, in large part because of the negative publicity generated by Warren Jeffs, the FLDS, and other branches of Mormon fundamentalism.

For example, the Public Affairs Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has, over the years, issued a number of press releases explaining that the Church does not practice or allow plural marriage and has differentiated between the LDS Church and fundamentalist Mormons.²⁵ There have also been comments by Church leaders. In 1998, the late LDS president Gordon B. Hinckley proclaimed, “I wish to state categorically that this Church has nothing whatever to do with those practicing *polygamy*. They are not members of this Church. Most of them have never been members. They are in violation of the civil law. They know they are in violation of the law. They are subject to its penalties. The Church, of course, has no jurisdiction whatever in this matter.”²⁶

LDS Apostle M. Russell Ballard stated in a Semiannual General Conference session, “Let me state clearly that no polygamist group, including those calling themselves Fundamentalist Mormons or other derivatives of our name, have any affiliation whatsoever with The Church of Jesus Christ

www.cbs42.com/content/localnews/story/Modern-Mormon-Misconceptions-Linger/9N3Lxvw0AUS0USwYKsQHig.csp or http://www.clipsyndicate.com/video/play/2879871/modern_mormon_misconceptions_linger, accessed April 10, 2014.

25 For examples of numerous press releases and public statements regarding past and modern plural marriage, see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Newsroom: The Official Resource for News Media, Opinion Leaders and the Public, <http://newsroom.lds.org/search-results.xqy?q=polygamy&x=0&y=0>.

26 Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking About Us?” *Ensign* (November 1998): 70.

of Latter-day Saints.”²⁷ LDS Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland was even more outspoken in referencing the fundamentalists, “We haven’t practiced polygamy for over a century...and it’s a little frustrating to have these fundamentalist groups resurface.”²⁸

Discomfort about the Church’s polygamous past is particularly noticeable in Church-produced literature and at Church-owned historical sites. Almost any discussion of the subject seems to be discouraged through a lack of mention in the manuals and public presentations. For example, several years ago the priesthood/Relief Society manual on the teachings of Brigham Young included a timeline of significant dates in his life, including his first marriage and his second monogamist marriage after the death of his first wife. There was not, however, any mention of Brigham Young’s plural marriages. And, later, the priesthood/Relief Society lesson about Doctrine and Covenants section 132 discussed celestial marriage but did not mention plural marriage. A whole lesson about Doctrine and Covenants 132 and not one mention of plural marriage? A manual focused on the present-day application of doctrine might understandably devote little attention to plural marriage, but complete silence may heighten the sense that we are ashamed and that there *is* actually something to hide.²⁹

27 M. Russell Ballard, “The Importance of a Name,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints October 2011 General Conference Addresses, accessed October 24, 2011, <http://lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/the-importance-of-a-name?lang=eng>.

28 Michael Brissenden, “The Mormon Moment,” ABC.net, October 18, 2011, accessed October 19, 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2011/s3342583.htm>.

29 Newell G. Bringhurst, “Where Have All of Brigham Young’s Wives Gone?: Latter-day Saint Ambivalence over Its Polygamous Past,” in *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 88, and Lesson 31: “Sealed . . . for Time and for All Eternity” in Doctrine and Covenants and Church History: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual, accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.lds.org/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-and-church-history-gospel-doctrine-teachers-manual/lesson-31-sealed---for-time-and-for-all-eternity?lang=eng>. The manual emphasized that plural marriage “should not be the focus of the lesson.” On the posi-

I remember being about 15 or 16 years old and visiting Brigham Young's Winter Home in St. George. The sister missionary was giving the tour to what appeared to be a non-member family and me. The missionary told how Brigham Young's wife would keep house, and I naturally wondered which wife, so I asked. Her expression approximated that of a deer in the headlights, and she replied, "Well, his wife."

"Okay," I persisted, "Which wife?"

"Well, *his* wife."

I finally realized that she did not want to discuss Brigham's plural wives, especially if I was accompanied by non-members, so I dropped the subject.³⁰

This experience is likely not an anomaly. A number of years later I was organizing a visit of some dignitaries to Salt Lake City. Recognizing their interest in history, I decided to arrange a tour of the Beehive House to accompany the usual tour of Temple Square. When I suggested to a volunteer at Church Hosting that we take the guests to the Beehive House, she immediately said, "Oh you don't want to do that."

I asked why not and she gave a nervous laugh and said, "Well, *you know*."

"I know?" I said, somewhat puzzled.

She gave another nervous laugh and repeated, "*You know*." She continued, "They might ask questions."

"About plural marriage?" I wondered.

"Yes," she responded, relieved that I had understood at last.

"Well," I replied, perhaps a little too sarcastically, "we wouldn't want them to do that."

tive side, unlike earlier Sunday School manual referred to, the online version of the latest Sunday School manual includes an explanation and discussion points about plural marriage.

30 Foster, "Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic."

“No,” she answered. I thanked her and hung up, amazed at the extent of her embarrassment and effort to avoid the subject.³¹

A Polygamy Survey

This palpable discomfort with polygamy is shared by regular members of the Church. In preparation for this essay, I conducted an unscientific online survey of attitudes about plural marriage among current and former members of the LDS Church. The survey was not random, as people were contacted by e-mail and on Facebook and asked to participate and to spread the word among their LDS family and friends. There were approximately 400 people who participated in the survey with an almost even mix of men and women.³²

In spite of the limited number of respondents, there actually was a good variety of people from different ages and backgrounds in terms of marriage status and activity in the LDS Church. There was not, unfortunately, a good representation of race and ethnicity: almost all of the respondents were Caucasian, with just a few identifying themselves as Hispanic or Asian/Pacific Islander.³³ Respondents lived all over the United States as well as in Canada and several other countries. Not surprisingly, the largest number of respondents who identified their place of

31 Foster, “Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic.”

32 The survey on plural marriage was titled “Your Feelings About Plural Marriage” and was conducted at SurveyMonkey, located at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GQZSTGR> between September 16 and October 20, 2011. There were 400 respondents, with a little over half being male. While this survey was intended only for those of a Latter-day Saint background, at least two respondents identified themselves as non-Mormons. There were also several who identified themselves as fundamentalist Mormons of former LDS membership. While another, more up-to-date survey was not conducted before publication, anecdotal evidence suggests attitudes have not changed between fall 2011 and winter 2014.

33 “Feelings About Plural Marriage.” There was one who chose Native American as an identifier while there were no African-Americans represented.

birth were from Utah, with the next largest group identifying their birthplace as somewhere in the western United States. The midwestern United States also had a good representation, as did Canada (especially western Canada). Even so, 12 other countries were represented, most from European countries.³⁴

Over 47% of survey respondents heard about polygamy as a child while another 39% heard about it as teenagers, for a total of over 86% learning about plural marriage while in their childhood or youth. That is a significant number. While there were a variety of ways people first learned about plural marriage, about 42% of respondents said they learned from their family.³⁵

Obviously, those who converted later in life did not have family who could explain the background of the doctrine and practice. Converts' reactions varied, and for some the concept was difficult to accept. One convert, who joined at age 24, wasn't told about the Church's polygamist past until after he was baptized. His first thought was, "What a dumb idea, why would anyone want more than one woman telling him what to do?"³⁶ Another convert who did not learn about plural marriage was a woman who was "distressed about the very thought of having [to] share my husband with another." It bothered her enough that she discussed it with other members, and she was told to pray about it. Through prayer and a very powerful dream she experienced, she "no longer worried about it all."³⁷

34 "Feelings About Plural Marriage." Over 230 of the respondents were born in Utah or the western United States. Interestingly enough, 5 of the respondents were from England, with at least 3 of them identifying themselves as fundamentalist Mormons.

35 "Feelings About Plural Marriage."

36 John Kitzmiller, personal interview, October 13, 2011. He explained that he was not troubled by the knowledge as the Church was a restoration of all things.

37 "Claire," e-mail correspondence, October 4, 2011. Copy in author's possession.

Unfortunately, many members are not reconciled to aspects of plural marriage.

While 57% of respondents said their feelings were neutral toward polygamy when they first became aware of it, over a quarter of the respondents' reactions were unfavorable to very unfavorable. These negative feelings increased when confronted with criticism of the Church on the subject of plural marriage. At the time of the survey, 30% of the respondents had unfavorable to very unfavorable feelings regarding plural marriage. Of those who had a very unfavorable feeling toward plural marriage at the time of the survey, over three quarters of them learned about polygamy as a child or teenager.³⁸

An intriguing survey finding was that almost 58% were children or teenagers when they learned about Joseph Smith having plural wives. Surprisingly, only 4% of the respondents did not know he had plural wives. Of those who were aware, thirty percent had learned from a family member while almost ten percent learned from sources critical of the Church.³⁹

As interesting as the survey statistics were, the most fascinating parts of the survey data were the respondent comments. They were similar to statements that I have heard and read in other settings and reflect a combination of discomfort, embarrassment, and ignorance regarding plural marriage. Comments ranged from the positive to the negative and for some people, the discovery of the Church's polygamous past was devastating.

Beyond an overall dislike for plural marriage expressed by those who had negative views, there were several factors that seemed to particularly distress them. These included the lying about plural marriage, the apparent polyandrous marriages of

38 "Claire," October 4, 2011. The percentage with very unfavorable feelings toward plural marriage was the highest among the possible unfavorable, including possible unfavorable feelings toward the LDS Church.

39 "Feelings About Plural Marriage."

Joseph Smith, the teenage wives of Joseph Smith, and the idea that plural marriage will be practiced in the celestial kingdom.

Lying About Plural Marriage

Some members of the LDS Church have expressed shock and puzzlement that early Church leaders such as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young would lie about plural marriages before the public announcement of the doctrine and practice. Even more disturbing for these members is the possibility that they have been lied to by modern Church leaders. Unfortunately, many believe the lack of information in official Church publications about plural marriage is a form of cover-up. They interpret this lack of information as a species of lying—about Joseph Smith, about other Church members' polygamous past, or about the events which surrounded the cessation of Church-sanctioned plural marriage.

For example, one survey respondent wrote, "The Church has done much to cover up that part of its history, and little to bring the truth into the light. That makes me sad." Another wrote, "In general I was OK with polygamy, thinking it was instituted by Brigham Young. Finding out Joseph Smith practiced was a shock—as I had not learned this in Church. Discovering the details of his polygamous practices was particularly distressing (polyandry, 14-year-old-wives, etc.). These details (in part) caused me to lose my testimony."⁴⁰

Such shock at the prospect that Joseph Smith would have practiced plural marriage reminds me of an experience I had almost thirty years ago. I commuted between Provo and Salt Lake City and enjoyed visiting with other regular commuters,

40 "Feelings About Plural Marriage." In contrast to the perception the Church and its leaders try to hide the Church's past, one respondent wrote that he had previously had problems with polygamy until a general authority visited his mission and, during a question and answer period, explained the background of plural marriage. From that point on, the respondent was okay with it.

all of whom were active members of the Church. During a conversation regarding Mormon history, I mentioned in passing that Joseph Smith had plural wives. One woman got an angry look on her face and exclaimed, “He did not! Brigham Young might have done that, but Joseph Smith never would.” I let the subject drop.

Given the lack of available information from official sources, it isn’t surprising that members like this woman would believe Brigham Young was the prophet who introduced plural marriage. One of the members of a private e-mail group of faithful Latter-day Saints wrote, “EVERYTHING that Correlation has produced, since its inception, indicates the Church is running away from polygamy as fast as it can.”⁴¹

Polyandrous Marriages of Joseph Smith

For many active and disaffected members of the Church, certain aspects of Joseph Smith’s polygamy have been difficult to understand or accept. The prospect of polyandrous plural marriages seems particularly problematic. For some, it has been too much. One survey respondent wrote, “Inadvertently finding out the truth about polygamy/polyandry absolutely devastated me.”⁴² Another complained about Joseph Smith “shacking up with women for years” and then wrote, “I am glad I discovered the truth about dirty Joe’s polyandry.... I am much happier as a saved Christian outside the vile, lying Mormon cult.”⁴³

Discovery of Joseph Smith’s polyandrous marriages can be a traumatic experience. One faithful Latter-day Saint wrote of his in-laws’ learning of Joseph Smith’s polyandry, “My

41 “Polygamy in the Spotlight,” e-mail correspondence, July 14, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

42 “Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy.”

43 “Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy.”

mother-in-law's eyes bulged out."⁴⁴ One woman who found out about Smith's polyandrous marriages, combined with other issues regarding Joseph Smith and Mormonism, declared she was "done, done and DONE!!!"⁴⁵ Another woman's exit letter from the Church had a series of accusatory questions including, "Why did Smith marry and have sex with 11 women who were married to other men at the same time, some of whom he sent away on missions before marrying their wives? Why did he marry young teenagers, including 14-year-old Helen Mar Kimball, who had both parents and didn't want to be married?"⁴⁶

Joseph Smith Marrying Teenagers

Joseph Smith's marriages to teenagers have increasingly become a stumbling block to faithful members. In fact, some have left the Church specifically because of this issue. The depth of dismay occurs in part because of the negative publicity attending Warren Jeffs's marriages to under-aged brides as well as modernity's changed concept of childhood and adulthood. Nevertheless, it remains a problem that is extremely difficult for some members to reconcile and even some of the most faithful Latter-day Saints remain troubled by it.

For example, one active Latter-day Saint in a private e-mail group opined about possible similarities between Smith and Jeffs, "None of this eases the nagging feeling in the back of the brain that somehow Warren Jeffs is a 21st-century Joseph Smith."⁴⁷ This same member had previously written, "I can see

44 "How to Explain Polyandry to the Church Membership," e-mail correspondence, July 14, 2011. Copy in possession of the author.

45 "Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy."

46 Dianne Chryst Ormond, "It Started with Science," MormonThink.com, 2006, accessed October 15, 2011, <http://mormonthink.com/itstartedwith-science.htm>.

47 "Nate Oman on Jeffs and Modern Mormonism," e-mail correspondence, August 25, 2011. Copy in possession of author.

how the Jeffs case really could be a problem for some. Jeffs, in a way, *is* practicing what Joseph practiced. Polygamy. Teenage wives. Sex with teenage wives.”⁴⁸

Plural Marriage will be Practiced in the Celestial Kingdom

The idea that plural marriage will be practiced in the celestial kingdom, the highest degree of salvation in Mormon theology, probably elicits more comments and reaction from the women of the LDS Church than any other aspect of plural marriage. A few reasons suggest themselves: first, while 19th-century polygamy happened, it is, after all, in the past. Eternal plural marriage would be in the future, and, for some Latter-day Saint women, that makes it a very dark future. Second, celestial polygamy seems to evince a degree of sexism in the Church and even God’s eternal plan.

One female survey respondent commented, “I don’t feel a need to defend the original practice, and I don’t think it is an eternal principle. It is not part of my ‘testimony’ of the Church.”⁴⁹ Another respondent referred to the idea that plural marriage would extend into the eternities as nothing more than “folk belief,” which “is very distressing, especially to women of faith,” and “many individuals of LDS background have left the Church over this and similar issues.”⁵⁰

In July 2011, Mormon author and blogger Jana Riess wrote about an e-mail she had received from a former Latter-day Saint woman who had “eventually left the Church over several issues, including the persistence of polygamous theology among Mormons.” Riess went on to explain, “As for individual belief, I’ve occasionally heard it taught from the pulpit (and Relief Society’s lace-draped table) that heaven will be polygamous. To

48 “Nate Oman on Jeffs,” August 25, 2011.

49 “Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy.”

50 “Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy.”

be fair, in the RS lesson this declaration evoked criticism and debate of a kind not often seen in RS.”⁵¹

An outspoken skeptic of the plurality of wives as an eternal principle is former BYU professor Valerie Hudson. At the 2011 FAIR Conference, Hudson gave a presentation describing plural marriage as an Abrahamic sacrifice, or an “exception to God’s law” rather than an eternal principle.⁵² Her conference presentation, titled “A Reconciliation of Polygamy,” was based on an earlier article of hers titled “Polygamy.” Hudson claimed that “in the eternities we will have the privilege of living under the law, not the exception to the law.”⁵³ She further referred to the belief, which she felt was mostly held by male members of the Church, as nothing more than “celestial lust.”⁵⁴ In her article, she also made comments regarding modern Latter-day Saint beliefs about the eternal nature of plural marriage:

If cultural misinterpretations cause the women and men of the Church to mourn over polygamy, either because they mistakenly believe that God is indifferent between sacrifice and non-sacrifice and so no escape from this sacrifice will be provided by God or because they are led to believe that they are selfish and not

51 Jana Riess, “My Polygamous Heaven . . . Not,” *Flunking Sainthood*, July 5, 2011, accessed August 11, 2011, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/flunkingsainthood/2011/07/my-polygamous-heaven-not.html>.

52 Joseph Walker, “Recent Events Highlight Confusion of Polygamy,” *Deseret News*, August 6, 2011, accessed August 7, 2011, <http://www.deseret-news.com/article/700168842/Recent-events-highlight-confusion-of-polygamy.html?pg=2>.

53 “Recent Events Highlight Confusion of Polygamy.” For the actual presentation, see <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2011-fair-conference/2011-a-reconciliation-of-polygamy>.

54 Valerie Hudson, “A Reconciliation of Polygamy,” presentation at the 2011 FAIR Conference, notes in possession of author. At the time, Hudson suggested some Mormon men had “celestial lust.” She compared these men to the young Muslim suicide bombers who killed themselves and others expecting to be rewarded with 72 virgins in the hereafter. Her comparisons troubled, even angered, some conference attendees.

righteous if they feel pain at the thought of polygamy, then these cultural interpretations are actively harming our people. We then have a duty to root out these cultural misinterpretations from our midst, lest they cause great spiritual mischief.⁵⁵

Echoing the thought that belief in plural marriage as an eternal principle should be rooted out among Latter-day Saints were several faithful Latter-day Saints who actively discuss Church doctrine and history. One man commented, “I see a lot of men... in the Church who have become a little too complacent in pat (but unsatisfying) answers to questions about polygamy and women’s issues in the Church, which causes some understandable frustration for women trying to see how they’re still of equal importance.”⁵⁶ In response to that comment, a woman wrote, “I have watched a current thread about polygamy on the message board. For the very first time, I am seeing outright ‘no’ in response to will there be celestial polygamy. And not just one isolated no. We are indeed turning a corner... finally.”⁵⁷

Another active Latter-day Saint responded:

Are you suggesting that what is making you pleased is the denial of relationships in the Celestial Kingdom? That some are now agreeing—on message boards—that polygamy is something that will NOT be present in the post [mortal] world in any form, by any couple? I am not sure that those that faithfully practiced it many years ago would be with that conclusion—do you?

55 V. H. [Valerie Hudson] Cassler, “Polygamy,” <<*Square Two* 3/1 (Spring 2010), accessed May 14, 2010, <http://squatetwo.org/Sq2ArticleCasslerPolygamy.html>.

56 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, August 11, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

57 E-mail correspondence, August 11, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

Their sacrifice, etc., involving the practice was in vain and for a false principle????⁵⁸

The discussion by e-mail continued back and forth between those who believed that plural marriage was a celestial principle and those who either did not believe or at least questioned whether it was indeed something that would be practiced in the Celestial Kingdom. As the discussion grew heated, one group member observed in a private e-mail to another, “Most of those who did not agree with the reinterpretation of whether or not plural marriage...will be practiced in the Celestial Kingdom... have been hammered into submissive silence by louder voices and the powers that be.”⁵⁹ Near the end of the online discussion, one of the men answered a woman who adamantly expressed her belief that plural marriage would not be a requirement or even a possibility in the celestial kingdom. “If this is the only thing that is causing all this polygamy angst why not just accept that it is NOT a requirement to have multiple wives in heaven and let it go at that? If someone believe[s] differently is it really worth getting upset over and offended? I would think not.”⁶⁰

Not surprisingly, the ambivalence among even active, faithful Latter-day Saints regarding plural marriage continues. In a 2012 e-mail discussion between fellow Latter-day Saints about Joseph Smith and polyandry, one member wrote, “There really is a chance that these married women might have been just as interested in the ‘prurient’ side of this as Joseph Smith.”⁶¹

58 E-mail correspondence, August 11, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

59 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, August 14, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

60 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, August 13, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

61 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, February 17, 2012. Copy in author’s possession.

Another later agreed that “polyandry, no matter how you try to present it, is weird. That’s just how it is.”⁶²

Suggestions of What To Do

Unfortunately, over time there have been a number of members of the Church who have been upset and offended about aspects of plural marriage, especially the so-called “weird” aspects. This has led to unanswered—perhaps even unspoken—questions, as well as hurt feelings, insecurity, and resentment. Even more tragically, accidental discovery and/or inadequate teachings about the Church’s history and relationship to plural marriage have caused crises of faith which have alienated members of the Church and, in many cases, led to their eventual departure from the faith.

Even one soul lost over the now-unpracticed principle of plural marriage is too many. The Church and its defenders have begun to take steps to inoculate members against the insidious attacks of critics and enemies. Anti-Mormons are constantly pushing and picking at members’ faith in order to plant seeds of doubt and to destroy members’ testimonies. Plural marriage has proven to be a prime weapon because a little of the truth can be devastating. This weapon must be neutralized. While steps have been taken to inoculate members, more can be done.

Here are some suggestions that might help members avoid the potential negative impact of the Church’s plural marriage heritage.⁶³ Members need to be taught the full history of the Church, including plural marriage from Joseph Smith into the 20th century. Plural marriage did not start nor end abruptly. The commencement and particularly the end of plural marriage

62 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, August 7, 2012. Copy in author’s possession.

63 It is not my place to advise Church leaders on how to handle this problem and, therefore, these suggestions should be seen as such—simple suggestions that might help.

were fitful and certainly painful for those involved. This and other facts about plural marriage need to be understood by Latter-day Saints, so information and specific detail regarding the theology and practice of plural marriage need to be provided at the appropriate time and place. The place is easy—a Church setting in which accurate information may be taught in programs such as Primary, Sunday School, and Seminary. The time or times of such sacred education needs a little more explanation.

Children

There is gospel wisdom in Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way they should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” This gospel principle certainly includes learning about Church history and doctrine. When people learn gospel principles as children, they are able to grow in their understanding as they learn line upon line, precept upon precept.⁶⁴ It should be the same regarding the Church’s history of plural marriage.

Of course, the teachings should be simple and matter-of-fact information such as mentioning in passing that early Church leaders like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, as well as other early members of the Church, were commanded by God to have more than one wife. Then it should be emphasized that we no longer practice plural marriage. With simple explanations, children become aware of this aspect of Church history without being overly burdened by all of the complexities. My wife and I, for example, would explain to our children about their own ancestors from the time when they were able to understand. As they grew up, we would point to pictures of ancestors on the wall and explain how they came from his fifth wife or that the lady in the photograph was the plural wife of the man in

64 2 Nephi 28:30.

the photo hanging next to hers. As the children grew in age and understanding, we would explain a little more so that by the time they were teenagers, they had a broad familiarity with Mormon polygamy as a historical reality.

Youth

Our teenage youth need to know about plural marriage, including the fact that Joseph Smith, by commandment of God, introduced the doctrine and practice of the plurality of wives. A couple of years ago, I was talking with one of my daughter's 16-year-old friends, a descendant of LDS polygamists, and mentioned Joseph Smith's plural wives. Her eyes bugged out, her mouth dropped open, and she asked in a weak voice, "Joseph Smith had more than one wife?" Afterward, she repeated several times that she was blown away.⁶⁵

If my daughter's friend had been taught from her childhood, she would not have been blown away. Furthermore, if she had been learning about the Church's polygamous history in the youth Sunday School programs, she would have had a better foundation on which to stand. Unfortunately, she was not alone in being shocked to learn Joseph Smith had plural wives. For some of our youth, the shock is too traumatic for their tender testimonies.

When my daughter heard about her friend's shock at learning that Joseph Smith had plural wives, she said, "You didn't know that? I thought everyone knew that."

I replied, "They don't all have parents like you do." As with every gospel principle, the foundation needs to be laid in their childhood and then built upon in their youth with more information about the faith and sacrifices practicing plural marriage necessitated among the Saints, as well as the reasons for ending the practice.

65 Foster, "Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic."

Adults

By addressing difficult aspects of Church history like plural marriage in their childhood and youth, eventually an understanding of the historical practice of plural marriages would be commonplace among active adult members of the Church. Nevertheless, with reactivation success, there will always be a need to teach adult members about the Church's polygamous past.

There should, then, be a better historical and doctrinal explanation of plural marriage in adult Gospel Doctrine classes. Members should learn that one practices plural marriage only when God commands it through his prophets, and we are following the prophet by not presently practicing it.

New Members

Not all members of the Church have been members since their childhood, and too many new converts have stumbled upon the Church's history of plural marriage and have been shocked and even angered they were not told of it before their baptism. Missionaries should learn more about the history of plural marriage and then mention this in a faithful way before converts' baptisms.

This brings up another matter that needs to be addressed: missionaries at Church historical sites must be taught how to discuss the topic of Mormon polygamy because it is inevitable it will be brought up by curious visitors. Gains have been made since the days I observed palpable discomfort in missionaries and volunteers. Nevertheless, more should be done since the obvious discomfort and embarrassment of Church representatives is not only fodder for anti-Mormons but also sets a poor example for their fellow members, many of whom are struggling with their own ambivalence about plural marriage.

If missionaries, as well as other members of the Church, are given more information to gain a better understanding and firmer foundation regarding the history and doctrine of plural marriage, they might not be so uncomfortable discussing it with non-Mormons. That understanding will come through appropriate Church courses and Church literature. Rather than plural marriage being noticeably absent from Church publications, it should be adequately discussed. It should be placed within historical and theological context and be available as resource material for Saints with questions or for those who need to respond to questions.

Now, in a world-wide Church such as the LDS Church, not all members will have the same need for or interest in information about the Church's polygamous past. For example, this topic is probably not as important to African or Asian Saints as it is to those living along the Wasatch Front. For that matter, it may not even be as important to Saints residing in the eastern parts of Canada and the United States as it is to those residing in the western United States. And while such issues might be of little interest in one stake or ward, members in a neighboring stake or ward might be very interested or have a need for further teaching and explanation. Therefore, leadership at different levels could decide what and where to teach its members, as well as who might be the most knowledgeable and able to teach such sensitive matters.⁶⁶

Hopefully these suggestions will help those who are troubled or discomfited about the Church's legacy of plural marriage. At the very least, it might help dispel the popular

66 The LDS Church leadership already does a very good job of listening to and trying to address the needs of its members. However, it is obvious more needs to be done to answer the questions and concerns of members of all ages. When there are problems in different places around the world over difficult subjects like plural marriage, such as the recent apostasy problems in Sweden, leadership could then place even more emphasis on the education of its members in those specific places.

perception that plural marriage revolved around sexuality—and not only sexuality, but the dominance of male sexuality. Because of plural marriage's inherent sexual implications, it is natural there would be some discomfort and embarrassment. But sexual relations and procreation were only one aspect of plural marriage.

True, many non-Mormons and even some members nervously—or insensitively—joke about the plethora of plural wives in a suggestive way. Most of these people, however, are just trying to find a way to react to something that is so contrary to accepted marriage patterns. Latter-day Saints should remember that while there are certainly non-members who want to attack, criticize, or simply make fun of the Church's polygamous past, there are many who are genuinely curious and who mean neither harm nor insult. For example, a number of years ago I showed some important guests around the Family History Library and then the neighboring Museum of Church History and Art, both in Salt Lake City. After leaving the museum, they tentatively, almost apologetically, asked me about how plural marriage started and what it was like. I told them I would be glad to answer any question they had. We spoke for at least 45 minutes during which time I was very open and honest about aspects of plural marriage, including my own family's history. They thanked me for being willing to so openly and comfortably talk about plural marriage. They said they had asked other Mormons about plural marriage and had been met with embarrassment, silence, and awkwardness.⁶⁷ I was sorry for both them and the members who had not known how to gracefully react to honest curiosity.

67 Foster, "Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic."

Conclusion

When marriages suffer from serious problems, separation almost always leads to either reconciliation with the hopes of the marriage surviving or to divorce. While some periods of separation are longer and uglier than others, a finality is almost always achieved. Unfortunately, such an outcome is not the case for Latter-day Saints and their polygamous history. Since few anticipate plural marriage's return, and even fewer hope for it, the estranged partners are not getting back together. But, on the other hand, the Church and its members will never be able to divorce themselves from historical plural marriage. No matter how hard the LDS Church may try to cut ties to its polygamous past, the two are irrevocably and inseparably tied to each other.

With every separation or divorce comes uncomfortable reminders of former relatives. In many ways, Fundamentalist Mormons are like Latter-day Saints' former relatives—ex-uncles or crazy former cousins who cause embarrassment and discomfort, for they remind us of a married past we would rather forget. Quite often, in spite of divorce, extended family members remain connected because of a common interest, such as children. In many ways, the Fundamentalists are the Latter-day Saints' extended and somewhat estranged relatives. After all, both the LDS Church and Fundamentalist Mormons share common roots and attributes. And, like plural marriage itself, they are not going away.⁶⁸

The LDS Church and its members must confront and accept not only its past but also the fact that the Church will probably forever be associated with polygamy. Indeed, in the minds of

68 Unlike Warren Jeffs and a small minority of polygamists, most Fundamentalist Mormons are quiet, law-abiding (other than practicing polygamy) people of good report who generally blend in with the rest of society and who have no desire to attract attention to themselves or their religious practices.

many people, 19th-century Mormon polygamy defines western polygamy.⁶⁹ Accepting that the twain are inseparable does not mean the Church must acquiesce to the negative stereotyping used by its critics. Faithful historians and scholars can and should continue to study the Church's polygamous past in order to help members better understand and appreciate the complex history of Mormon polygamy. By so doing, they will be able to help present and future members trump critics' attempts at malicious manipulation.

Furthermore, the Church must accept that there will always be coat-tail relatives to remind its members of their past. The Church has done a good job of differentiating itself from its Fundamentalist relatives, particularly with renegade groups like the FLDS, who have exemplified the fact that while there are similarities, there are many more differences. The Church should probably highlight the differences when needed and otherwise ignore Fundamentalist groups like the FLDS as much as possible.

Whether or not the particular suggestions in this essay are adopted, the goal of leaders and defenders of the Church should be to aim for a more knowledgeable membership who thereby exhibit less discomfort and embarrassment about the Church's past relationship to plural marriage. Ultimately, the hope for Saints who struggle emotionally and spiritually with plural marriage is that a better understanding of the history

69 For examples of Mormon polygamy defining western polygamy, see Jessica Ravitz, "Sister Wives' explained: A fundamentalist Mormon polygamy primer," CNN Belief Blog, October 25, 2010, (accessed February 22, 2014); <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/10/25/sister-wives-explained-a-fundamentalist-mormon-polygamy-primer/>; Michael E. Price, "Are People 'Naturally' Polygamous?" *Psychology Today*, August 18, 2011, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/darwin-eternity/201108/are-people-naturally-polygamous-0> (accessed February 22, 2014); and W.W., "Polygamy Now!" *The Economist*, June 28, 2013, (accessed February 22, 2014), <http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2013/06/slippery-slopes>.

and doctrine of plural marriage will encourage greater faith and bring solace to the soul.

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Craig L. Foster earned a MA and MLIS at Brigham Young University. He is also an accredited genealogist and works as a research consultant at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. He has published articles about different aspects of Mormon history. He is the author of two books, co-author of another and co-editor of a three volume series discussing the history and theology of plural marriage. Foster is also on the editorial board of the John Whitmer Historical Association Journal.

