

Chapter 6

Early Efforts to Eradicate Polygamy

From the very beginning, the Lord gave warnings against the invasion of polygamy into the Church. As early as 1831 He warned the Saints:

And now I show unto you a mystery, a thing which is had in secret chambers, to bring to pass even your destruction, in process of time, and ye knew it not, but now I tell it unto you And again I say unto you, that the enemy in the secret chambers seeketh your lives. . . . And that ye might escape the power of the enemy, and be gathered unto me a righteous people, without spot and blameless: wherefore, for this cause I gave unto you the commandment, that you should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto you my law. (RLDS DC 38:4, 6–7; LDS DC 38:13–14, 28, 31–32; italics added)

Polygamy was the “thing” about which the Lord warned the Saints. It was “had in secret chambers” among the Cochranites at the time of the Church’s beginnings. Also, it almost brought the Church to “destruction, in process of time.” No other factor nor problem has been so devastating to the Lord’s work in these latter days. Some of the apostles and their friends began to practice it secretly in the early 1840s (in “secret chambers”), and they knew it had to be denied and covered with falsehoods. Therefore, the polygamists banded together and conspired more and more to cover their secret acts.

In 1831 the Lord commanded the Saints to leave New York State and move to Ohio, promising that there He would give them the law by which the Church and Zion would be governed. There Joseph Smith received the revelation of February 9, 1831, which is known as the “Law of the Church.” And what was the

law of the Church concerning polygamy? The revelation included the commandment:

Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else; and he that looketh upon a [another] woman to lust after her, shall deny the faith, and shall not have the Spirit; and if he repents not, he shall be cast out. (RLDS DC 42:7d; see also verses 20a–c, 22a–e; LDS DC 42:22–23)

In August 1831 God warned the Saints further:

I, the Lord, am not pleased . . . I gave commandments and many have turned away from my commandments and have not kept them. *There were among you adulterers and adulteresses; some of whom have turned away from you, and others remain with you. . . . And verily I say unto you, as I have said before, He that looketh on a woman to lust after her, or if any shall commit adultery in their hearts, they shall not have the Spirit, but shall deny the faith.* (RLDS DC 63:4–5; LDS DC 63:12–16; italics added)

So God prohibited polygamy and like practices as early as 1831.

There has never been a greater “mystery” in the Church than the mystery of polygamy. During Joseph’s lifetime writers of books and reporters throughout the civilized world gave space to the question of whether or not polygamy was practiced in the Church. At Nauvoo Joseph stood firmly with his brother, Hyrum, against polygamy. In contrast, Brigham Young and his brothers, other relatives and loyal friends, practiced polygamy secretly until it became deeply rooted in the Church at Nauvoo.

When the extent of the polygamous practices of these brethren became known to Joseph, he went to Stake President William Marks and explained to him that charges must be brought against the offenders so they could be tried before the Standing High Council, over which Marks presided. But Joseph was martyred before these trials could take place.

The Article on Marriage Was Adopted at Kirtland to Thwart Polygamy

Though most polygamous activities occurred at Nauvoo, a few cases had happened earlier at Kirtland. That was one reason why Joseph and the committee which published the Doctrine and Covenants at Kirtland in 1835 included the article on “Marriage,” which said: “Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband” (DC [1835 Kirtland Edition] CI [101]: 4). In the 1844 Nauvoo Edition the “Marriage” article is CIX (109), and in the Liverpool Edition, published by Brigham Young, Jr., it is CIX (109). The “Marriage” article is Section 111 in the 1950 printing of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants. Under Brigham Young’s administration in Utah, it was deleted from that church’s Doctrine and Covenants at the time the document commanding the practice of polygamy (Section 132) was inserted.

At Kirtland the Seventies Took Action against Polygamy

Polygamy in the Church prompted the Quorums of Seventy at Kirtland to publish a statement against that doctrine. The seventies adopted a resolution which stated, “That we will have no fellowship whatever with any Elder belonging to the quorums of the Seventies who is guilty of polygamy or any offence of the kind, and who does not in all things conform to the laws of the church” (*Messenger and Advocate* 3 [May 1837]: 511).

The Solomon Freeman Case at Kirtland

There are several examples of a person leaving his or her spouse when gathering to Church headquarters, and marrying again without a bill of divorcement. On November 29, 1837, the Quorum of Elders met at Kirtland and charged Elder Solomon Freeman with the crime of polygamy. Freeman, who was living

with a wife at Kirtland at the time, denied that he had two wives until he was confronted by witnesses. He then admitted that he had left a wife in Massachusetts without divorcing her, and had married another woman (*Kirtland Elders' Quorum Record* [January 15, 1836–October 5, 1841], 35).

The Strange Case of High Priest Aaron Lyon at Far West

The separation of husbands and wives gave rise to some strange events, as is shown in the case of High Priest Aaron Lyon and Sarah Jackson. Mrs. Jackson and her husband planned to gather to the Far West area while the Church was headquartered there. Brother Jackson was detained at Alton, Illinois, but sent his wife to be with the Saints, after promising that he would join her as soon as possible. Sister Jackson made her home in the area of Salemtown, a newly organized community between Far West and Haun's Mill. It was located on Log Creek, a tributary of Shoal Creek, two and one-half miles southeast of the present town of Kingston, Missouri. Prominent in this settlement were three brothers—Aaron, Charles, and Windsor Lyon, who, after having been driven from Jackson County in 1833, had founded the village. They had built three cabins, a blacksmith shop, and a water mill. Soon other Saints moved to the "Lyon settlement." First it was named Jerusalem; then the name was shortened to Salem or Salemtown.

Sarah Jackson attended the local branch of the Church where High Priest Aaron Lyon was pastor. Soon Lyon, whose wife was deceased, decided that Sister Jackson should be his wife. Therefore, he gave false revelations to her, which declared that her husband was dead, that it was God's will for Sarah to marry him, and that she would be miserable if she did not. Brother Jackson arrived before the wedding date, however, and the irate husband, upon finding what had happened, preferred charges against Lyon before the High Council. The record shows:

Lyon . . . was their Presiding High Priest, and had gained

to himself great influence in and over that Branch; and it also appears that this man had great possessions, and . . . was in want of a wife . . . consequently he set his wits to work to get one. He commenced, (as he said), by getting a revelation from God that he must marry Mrs. Jackson, or that she was the woman to make his wife; and it appeared that these revelations were frequently received by him, and shortly introduced to Mrs. Jackson. It was also manifested that the old man had sagacity enough to know that unless he used his Priestly office to assist him in accomplishing his designs, he would fail in the attempt; he therefore told Mrs. Jackson that he had had a revelation from God that her husband was dead . . . and that she must consent to marry him, or she would be for ever miserable; for he had seen her future state of existence, and that she must remember that whomsoever he blessed would be blessed, and whomsoever he cursed would be cursed, influencing her mind, if possible, to believe his power was sufficient to make her for ever miserable, provided she complied not with his request, &c. Accordingly they came to an agreement, and were soon to be married; but, fortunately or unfortunately for both parties, previous to the arrival of the nuptial-day, behold, to the astonishment of our defendant, the husband of Mrs. Jackson arrived at home, and consequently disannulled the preceding contract. . . .

[The High] Council decided, that . . . he should give up his license as High Priest, and stand as a member in the Church; and this in consequence of his being considered incapable of magnifying that office. (*Millennial Star* 16 [March 11, 1854]: 148–149; *Journal of History* 15 [July 1922]: 336–338)

This is an example of how men like High Priest Aaron Lyon practiced priestcraft—they used their priesthood offices and power to claim they had revelations from God, in order to lead trusting, undiscerning Saints such as Sarah Jackson into unlawful marriages.

Joseph Published That the Church Did Not Believe in Polygamy

There were so many different groups practicing polygamy

in America and so much speculation about the doctrine, that nonmembers assumed that the newly organized Church over which Joseph Smith presided also practiced it. While Joseph and other Church leaders were journeying from Kirtland to Far West in the fall of 1837, they were continually asked by nonmembers if the Church believed in polygamy. Joseph listed twenty “questions which are daily and hourly asked by all classes of people whilst we are traveling.” One question was, “Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one?” (*Elders’ Journal* 1 [November 1837]: 28). Joseph answered, “No, not at the same time. But they believe, that if their companion dies, they have a right to marry again” (*ibid.* [July 1838]: 43). Joseph was the editor of the *Elders’ Journal*, so this statement came directly from him in 1838.

Joseph Denounced Polygamy While Imprisoned in Liberty Jail

While Joseph was imprisoned in jail at Liberty, Missouri, reports were circulated by his enemies that he and other imprisoned Church leaders were polygamists. From the prison dungeon Joseph wrote a letter on December 16, 1839, “To the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Caldwell county,” in which he denied the polygamy charges. Joseph wrote:

Know assuredly Dear brethren, that it is for the testimony of Jesus, that we are in *bonds* and in *prison*. . . .

Was it for committing adultery? We are aware that false and slanderous reports have gone abroad, which have reached our ears, respecting this thing, which have been started by renagadoes, and spread by the dissenters, who are extremely active in spreading foul and libilous reports concerning us; thinking thereby to gain the fellowship of the world. . . . Some have reported that we not only dedicated our property, but likewise our families to the Lord, and Satan taking advantage of this has transfigured it into lasciviousness, a community of wives [polygamy], which things are an abomination in the sight of God.

When we consecrate our property to the Lord, it is to

administer to the wants of the poor and needy according to the laws of God, and when a man consecrates or dedicates his wife and children to the Lord, he does not give them to his brother or to his neighbor; which is contrary to the law of God, which says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not covet thy neighbors wife." "He that looketh upon a woman to lust after her has committed adultery already in his heart."—Now for a man to consecrate his property, his wife and children to the Lord is nothing more nor less than to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the widows and fatherless, the sick and afflicted; and do all he can to administer to their relief in their afflictions, and for himself and his house to serve the Lord. In order to do this he and all his house must be virtuous and shun every appearance of evil. Now if any person, has represented any thing otherwise than what we now write they have willfully misrepresented us. (*Times and Seasons* 1 [April 1840]: 82–85)

Joseph and Hyrum Forbade the Separating of Spouses When Gathering

The problems occurring as a result of husbands and wives separating from one another when one of them gathered, continued to plague the Church. The problem escalated at Nauvoo where thousands from across America, Canada, the British Isles, and other European countries converged in that city. So many English Saints migrated that the problem was acute among them. Joseph Fielding, a convert from England who gathered to Nauvoo, wrote a letter in which he addressed the problem of English women gathering to Nauvoo without their husbands. Fielding wrote to Apostle Parley P. Pratt, president of the English Mission. The letter revealed:

There is one thing, in particular, I wish to caution the church against, namely this: some women, whose husbands persecute them for their religion, desire to come here; now, if such would lay their case before a council of the church and get a written statement from the presiding elder of their situation, so that the church here might know it, they might learn whether it would be lawful for them to be married again.

There has been a case or two of this sort here, which has been a source of trouble. I would advise no one to come in such a case without such certificate. (*Millennial Star* 3 [August 1842]: 78–79)

The *Millennial Star* soon published a letter from Hyrum and Joseph Smith, which gave an official ruling on this serious problem. The letter read:

ADDRESS FROM THE FIRST PRESIDENCY.

Nauvoo.

To our well beloved brother, Parley P. Pratt, and to the elders of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in England, and scattered abroad throughout all Europe, and to the Saints,—Greeting:

Whereas, in times past persons have been permitted to gather with the Saints at Nauvoo, in North America—such as husbands leaving their wives and children behind; also, such as wives leaving their husbands and children behind; and such as women leaving their husbands, and such as husbands leaving their wives who have no children, and some because their companions are unbelievers. All this kind of proceeding we consider to be erroneous and for want of proper information. And the same should be taught to all the Saints, and not suffer families to be broken up on any account whatever if it be possible to avoid it. Suffer no man to leave his wife because she is an unbeliever, nor any woman to leave her husband because he is an unbeliever. These things are an evil and must be forbidden by the authorities of the church, or they will come under condemnation; for the gathering is not in haste nor by flight, but to prepare all things before you, and you know not but the unbeliever may be converted and the Lord heal him; but let the believers exercise faith in God, and the unbelieving husband shall be sanctified by the believing wife; and the unbelieving wife by the believing husband, and families are preserved and saved from a great evil which we have seen verified before our eyes.

Behold this is a wicked generation, full of lyings, and deceit, and craftiness; and the children of the wicked are wiser than the children of light; that is, they are more crafty; and it seems that it has been the case in all ages of the world.

And the man who leaves his wife and travels to a foreign nation, has his mind overpowered with darkness, and Satan deceives him and flatters him with the graces of the harlot, and before he is aware he is disgraced forever: and greater is the danger for the woman that leaves her husband. The evils resulting from such proceedings are of such a nature as to oblige us to cut them off from the church.

There is another evil which exists. There are poor men who come here and leave their families behind in a destitute situation, and beg for assistance to send back after their families. Every man should tarry with his family until providence provides for the whole, for there is no means here to be obtained to send back. Money is scarce and hard to be obtained. The people that gather to this place are generally poor, the gathering being attended with a great sacrifice; and money cannot be obtained by labour, but all kinds of produce is plentiful and can be obtained by labour; therefore the poor man that leaves his family in England, cannot get means, which must be silver and gold, to send for his family; but must remain under the painful sensation, that his family must be cast upon the mercy of the people, and separated and put into the poorhouse. Therefore, to remedy the evil, we forbid a man to leave his family behind because he has no means to bring them. If the church is not able to bring them, and the parish will not send them, let the man tarry with his family—live with them—and die with them, and not leave them until providence shall open a way for them to come all together. And we also forbid that a woman leave her husband because he is an unbeliever. We also forbid that a man shall leave his wife because she is an unbeliever. If he be a bad man (*i. e.* the unbeliever) there is a law to remedy that evil. And if she be a bad woman, there is law to remedy that evil. And if the law divorce them, then they are at liberty; otherwise they are bound as long as they two shall live, and it is not our prerogative to go beyond this; if we do it, it will be at the expense of our reputation.

These things we have written in plainness, and we desire that they should be publicly known, and request this to be published in the [Millennial] STAR.

May the Lord bestow his blessing upon all the Saints richly, and hasten the gathering, and bring about the fulness of the everlasting covenant are the prayers of your brethren.

Written by Hyrum Smith, patriarch, by the order of Joseph Smith, president over the whole church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. HYRUM SMITH. (*Millennial Star* 3 [November 1842]: 115; RLDS *History of the Church* 2:640–641)

Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, and other members of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles did not heed the direction given by Joseph and Hyrum in the above letter. They not only separated wives from husbands, but they took some of the women for their own plural wives. In fact, at the time Hyrum penned his letter, Brigham Young had already plurally married two other men's wives. They were Lucy Ann Decker Seely, who was still married to William Seely; and Augusta Cobb, as previously noted. Soon other apostles who had served in England and Europe, along with their relatives and close friends, joined Brigham in secretly practicing polygamy. Apostle Parley P. Pratt was among them. After returning to Nauvoo, he secretly married his first plural wife, Elizabeth Brotherton, on July 24, 1843. She was a twenty-six-year-old convert from Manchester, England. All together Apostle Pratt married a total of twelve plural wives—four were from England and one from Scotland (Pratt, *Autobiography*, 462–464).

Whitehead Testified about Joseph's Conflict with Pratt

Joseph Smith's private secretary at the time of the martyrdom (June 1844) was High Priest James Whitehead, a convert from England. He testified that Joseph made a public statement against Apostle Pratt while preaching from the "Stand." Elder Whitehead had Joseph's private papers in his possession at the time of Joseph's death, and he delivered the records to the Twelve at Winter Quarters in December 1847, as instructed by the administrator of Joseph's estate (*Complainant's Abstract of Pleading and Evidence* [Temple Lot Case], 31). While at Winter Quarters near Omaha, Brother Whitehead saw the depravity which the polygamous apostles had brought upon the Saints. Therefore, he took his family to Alton, Illinois, and held himself

aloof from all groups until he joined with the RLDS Church under Joseph III's administration. In a sermon he declared:

Did Joseph [Smith] say anything about the church being led away into this terrible condition [polygamy and other evils]? He did, and I heard him. One Sunday afternoon after partaking of the sacrament, Joseph got up and spoke and said, "Brothers and sisters, I am going to warn you today of things to come. Do not let these things overthrow you, but be faithful and cleanse yourselves from filthiness and everything corrupt. Beware of all kinds of iniquity, for it is in high places."

He then turned around to Parley Pratt, and pointing to him, said, "Brothers and sisters, if that brother knew what I know, he would turn around and want my life." ("Supplement," *Lamoni Gazette* [January 1888], 7; *Autumn Leaves* 1 [May 1888]: 203)

What secret had Joseph discovered—a deed so dark that Parley would want to take Joseph's life? The dark secret could have been that Joseph had learned that Parley had taken Elizabeth Brotherton as his plural wife.

Joseph Called upon Marks to Help Expel the Polygamists

Joseph was determined that polygamy was not going to continue in the Church. He was standing firmly between the polygamous conspirators and the Church. Standing with the Prophet were Emma, Hyrum, William Marks, and a few others. Most of the Saints were unaware of the deadly struggle going on behind the scenes. Both sides were growing more determined. When Joseph warned the Saints of iniquity in high places, and turned and spoke against Parley, he was aware that a conspiracy existed—that several apostles and others were planning to make polygamy a practice of the Saints and a doctrine of the Church. However, Joseph was determined to eradicate polygamy, even though he realized that his lack of cooperation with the polygamists could cost him his life.

The struggle between the pro-polygamists and Joseph became

more and more severe. A few weeks before Joseph's death it became apparent to him that polygamy could not be eradicated without bringing the struggle into the open. Therefore, Joseph went to High Priest William Marks, the president of the Nauvoo Stake and president of the High Council, as previously noted. He told Brother Marks that he would bring the polygamists to trial before the High Council, and that President Marks must expel them from the Church. Elder Marks later testified:

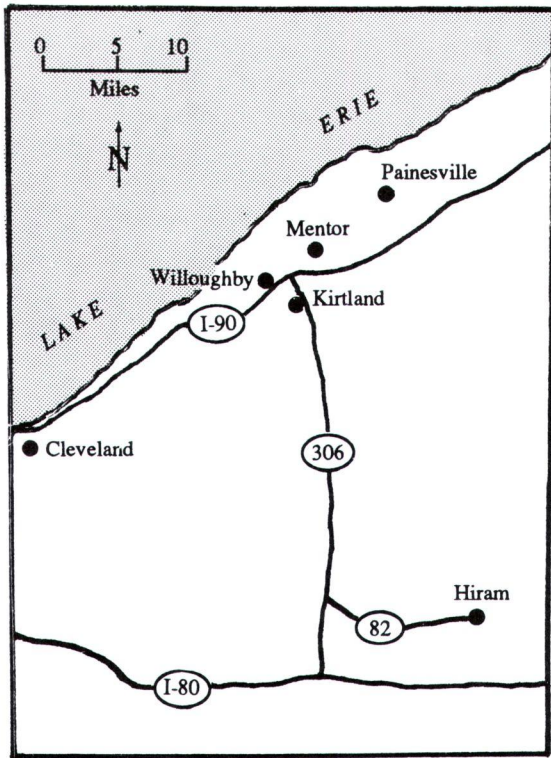
I met with Brother Joseph. He said that he wanted to converse with me on the affairs of the church, and we retired by ourselves. I will give his words *verbatim*, for they are indelibly stamped upon my mind. He said he had desired for a long time to have a talk with me on the subject of polygamy. He said it eventually would prove the overthrow of the church, and we should soon be obliged to leave the United States, unless it could be speedily put down. He was satisfied that it was a cursed doctrine, and that there must be every exertion made to put it down. He said that he would go before the congregation and proclaim against it, and I must go into the High Council, and he would prefer charges against those in transgression, and I must sever them from the church; unless they made ample satisfaction. There was much more said, but this was the substance. The mob commenced to gather about Carthage in a few days after, therefore there was nothing done concerning it.

After the Prophet's death, I made mention of this conversation to several, hoping and believing that it would have a good effect; but to my great disappointment, it was soon rumored about that Brother Marks was about to apostatize, and that all that he said about the conversation with the Prophet was a tissue of lies. (RLDS *History of the Church* 2:733)

A few weeks after this consultation with Elder Marks, Joseph was killed and the pro-polygamist apostles gained control of the Church. They continued their polygamous practices in Nauvoo, and later in Utah, where in 1852 they publicly proclaimed that Joseph had left a polygamous revelation commanding the Church to practice polygamy. They produced a document, now Section 132 in the LDS Doctrine and Cove-

nants, and declared it to be Joseph's revelation—but it will be seen in later chapters that Joseph had no part in producing it.

If the apostles who went on missions to Europe had stood with Joseph against polygamy, that doctrine would have been kept out of the Church. Instead, they were the vehicle through which it entered—which caused the “mystery which is had in secret chambers” to almost destroy the Church in the “process of time.”



Richard Price

The Kirtland area, showing the close proximity of Willoughby (where Dr. John Bennett resided) to Kirtland, where the Church leaders lived.