Understanding Plural Marriage

Plural Marriage

"Latter-day Saints believe that the marriage of one man and one woman is the Lord's standing law of marriage. In biblical times, the Lord commanded some to practice plural marriage—the marriage of one man and more than one woman. By revelation, the Lord commanded Joseph Smith to institute the practice of plural marriage among Church members in the early 1840s. For more than half a century, plural marriage was practiced by some Latter-day Saints under the direction of the Church President" ("Plural Marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Gospel Topics, lds.org/topics).

A Difficult Commandment

Eliza R. Snow (1804–87), the second Relief Society general president, was sealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith. She recorded the following experience in which the Prophet Joseph taught the principle of plural marriage to her brother Lorenzo Snow.

"The Prophet Joseph unbosomed his heart [to Lorenzo Snow], and described the trying mental ordeal he experienced in overcoming the repugnance of his feelings, the natural result of the force of education and social custom, relative to the introduction of plural marriage. He knew the voice of God— he knew the commandment of the Almighty to him was to go forward—to set the example, and establish Celestial plural marriage. He knew that he had not only his own prejudices and prepossessions to combat and to overcome, but those of the whole Christian world stared him in the face; but God, who is above all, had given the commandment, and He must be obeyed. Yet the Prophet hesitated and deferred from time to time, until an angel of God stood by him with a drawn sword, and told him that, unless he moved forward and established plural marriage, his Priesthood would be taken from him and he should be destroyed! This testimony he not only bore to my brother, but also to others—a testimony that cannot be gainsayed [contradicted]" (*Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* [1884], 69–70).

A Test of Faith

Many who struggled with the principle of plural marriage were blessed with a confirming spiritual witness of the truth of the principle.

"According to Helen Mar Kimball, Joseph Smith stated that 'the practice of this principle would be the hardest trial the Saints would ever have to test their faith.' Though it was one of the 'severest' trials of her life, she testified that it had also been 'one of the greatest blessings.' . . .

"Lucy Walker recalled her inner turmoil when Joseph Smith invited her to become his wife. 'Every feeling of my soul revolted against it,' she wrote. Yet, after several restless nights on her knees in prayer, she found relief as her room 'filled with a holy influence' akin to 'brilliant sunshine.' She said, 'My soul was filled with a calm sweet peace that I never knew,' and 'supreme happiness took possession of my whole being' " ("Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," Gospel Topics, lds.org/topics).

Joseph Smith and Plural Marriage

Many women were sealed to Joseph Smith, but the exact number is unknown.

"During the era in which plural marriage was practiced, Latter-day Saints distinguished between sealings for time and eternity and sealings for eternity only. Sealings for time and eternity included commitments and relationships during this life, generally including the possibility of sexual relations. Eternity-only sealings indicated relationships in the next life alone.

". . . Some of the women who were sealed to Joseph Smith later testified that their marriages were for time and eternity, while others indicated that their relationships were for eternity alone.

"Most of those sealed to Joseph Smith were between 20 and 40 years of age at the time of their sealing to him. The oldest, Fanny Young, was 56 years old. The youngest was Helen Mar Kimball, . . . who was sealed to Joseph several months before her 15th birthday. Marriage at such an age, inappropriate by today's standards, was legal in that era, and some women married in their mid-teens. Helen Mar Kimball spoke of her sealing to Joseph as being 'for eternity alone,' suggesting that the relationship did not involve sexual relations. . . .

". . . Joseph Smith was sealed to a number of women who were already married. Neither these women nor Joseph explained much about these sealings, though several women said they were for eternity alone. Other women left no records, making it unknown whether their sealings were for time and eternity or were for eternity alone.

"There are several possible explanations for this practice. These sealings may have provided a way to create an eternal bond or link between Joseph's family and other families

within the Church. These ties extended both vertically, from parent to child, and horizontally, from one family to another. Today such eternal bonds are achieved through the temple marriages of individuals who are also sealed to their own birth families, in this way linking families together" ("Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," Gospel Topics, lds.org/topics).

After the Prophet's death, many women were sealed to him who had no mortal relationship with him.

Opposition to Plural Marriage

Many religious and political leaders in the United States opposed the plural marriage system, which they considered immoral and uncivilized. Latter-day Saints were ridiculed in public speeches, books, magazines, and newspapers. The United States Congress passed laws that limited Church members' freedom and hurt the Church economically by restricting the amount of property the Church could own. "This legislation ultimately caused officers to arrest and imprison men who had more than one wife and to deny them the right to vote, the right to privacy in their homes, and the enjoyment of other civil liberties" (*Our Heritage: A Brief History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [1996], 97). By 1890, hundreds of faithful Latter-day Saints had served time in prison. Others went into hiding to avoid arrest and imprisonment. In these conditions, many families suffered from stress, grief, poverty, and hunger.

Although the world ridiculed them for practicing plural marriage, many faithful Latter-day Saints defended the practice and testified that they knew it had been revealed by God through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

These difficult circumstances led President Wilford Woodruff to prayerfully seek the Lord's guidance concerning the Saints' practice of plural marriage. In 1889, President Woodruff instructed Church leaders to discontinue teaching the principle of plural marriage. By 1890, very few plural marriages were performed, and these were done against the counsel of President Woodruff. However, some people published reports that the Church was still promoting the practice of plural marriage. These reports brought further opposition against the Church. In September 1890, President Woodruff issued a Manifesto, which is now known as Official Declaration 1 in the Doctrine and Covenants.

The Second Manifesto

"The Manifesto [Official Declaration 1] declared President [Wilford] Woodruff's intention to submit to the laws of the United States. It said nothing about the laws of other countries. Ever since the opening of colonies in Mexico and Canada, Church leaders had performed plural marriages in those countries, and after October 1890, plural marriages continued to be quietly performed there. . . . Under exceptional circumstances, a smaller number of new plural marriages were performed in the United States between 1890 and 1904, though whether the marriages were authorized to have been performed within the states is unclear" ("The Manifesto and the End of Plural Marriage," Gospel Topics, lds.org/topics).

"At the April 1904 general conference, President [Joseph F.] Smith issued a forceful statement, known as the Second Manifesto, making new plural marriages punishable by excommunication" ("Plural Marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Gospel Topics, lds.org/topics).