

CHAPTER 38

PLURAL MARRIAGE

Moral purity is required of all Latter-day Saints. Men must be as clean as women, and both must be free from any violation of the moral law. That is the requirement of all marriages performed under the authority of the restored gospel in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Church solemnizes two kinds of marriages: first, those that unite husband and wife for the duration of mortal life; second, those that continue the family relationship after death, in the hereafter. The latter are known as eternal or celestial sealings or marriages.

Faithful members of the Church hope to enjoy celestial marriage. They wish to be wedded for time and eternity, that is, to continue their wedded associations forever. To be able to do this is one of the happiest privileges of Church membership. Such marriages, properly called sealings, must be performed in the temples, whenever they exist.

Several approaches to eternal marriage may be made. Two living persons may be sealed to each other for time and eternity. A living man may be sealed for eternity to a dead woman or a living woman to a dead man. Two dead persons may be sealed to each other for eternity. It is also possible, though the Church does not now permit it, to seal two living persons for eternity only, with no association on earth.

Further, under a divine command to the Prophet Joseph Smith, it was possible for one man to be sealed to more than one woman for time and for eternity.¹ This sealing of husbands and wives is one of the important rituals of temple service. It is an earth ordinance since there is no marriage or giving in marriage in heaven.

¹*Doctrine and Covenants* 132:61-62.

The remarkable and soul-stirring doctrine of eternal or celestial marriage came as the result of a question presented to the Lord, as to how the early patriarch, Abraham, was justified in having more than one wife. In the revealed answer came also the principle of plural marriage among the Latter-day Saints. By another divine command to Wilford Woodruff, a successor to Joseph Smith, this order of marriage was withdrawn in 1890. Since that time the Church has not sanctioned plural marriages. Anyone who enters into it now is married unlawfully by persons who have no authority, and is excommunicated from the Church.

Nevertheless, almost the first question asked by strangers to the Church is about the practice of plural marriage in the early days of the Church. The young people of the Church likewise ask why the Lord authorized his Church to practise a principle obnoxious to many in the world.

In the absence of the revealed answer to the question, it may be suggested that the philosophy of the Church implies an answer.

Those who live faithfully to the Lord's commandments may receive the sealing blessings of the gospel. They are then wedded for time and for all eternity. They and their children are then the ones who in the eternal ages will constitute eternal families, and will increase in the eternal years toward the very likeness of God. It becomes therefore a priceless privilege to be born into such a family, sealed for eternal existence in the holy temples of God. The waiting spirits destined to come on earth, and understanding the vast meaning of the gospel, perhaps asked, perhaps pleaded to come through such a worthy lineage, even if the man, the coming father, had to assume the responsibility of a plural household. Perhaps in that manner came the practice on earth of plural marriage. Moreover, the practice is Biblical. It is in line with the fundamental gospel doctrine of eternal progression, and provides for the use of man's free agency. Thus the prac-

tice of plural marriage takes its place with the spiritual gifts of the gospel.

Looked upon in this light it becomes a glorious privilege of begetting bodies for the waiting spirits.

It is granted that this or any other explanation carries along with it many unanswerable questions. Certainly, however, plural marriage did not come because of economic or social reasons as some have suggested.

The principle and the practice came to the Prophet through revelation from the Lord. Its practice was always permissive. Plural wives could be taken only under severe restrictions and upon the recommendation of bishops, stake presidents, General Authorities, and finally by the President of the Church. The man who entered plural marriage must be fitted in every way for this holy privilege.

The divine purpose of plural marriage, since the Lord has not explained it, is but dimly understood by man.

That Joseph Smith actually was the person who introduced plural marriage into the Church and that he practised it himself are amply proved by existing facts.

The revelation known as Section 132 in the Doctrine and Covenants, which contains the doctrine of celestial marriage and also the permission to practice plural marriage, was dictated to his scribe, William Clayton, by Joseph Smith on July 12, 1843, a year before the martyrdom of the Prophet. It had been received by the Prophet some years before and taught to many, but was not reduced to writing until 1843.²

The evidence seems clear that the revelation on plural marriage was received by the Prophet as early as 1831. A sermon delivered by Joseph F. Smith, then a counselor in the First Presidency, later the President of the Church, was reported as follows:

Here the speaker said, perhaps for the first time in public, that the women who entered into plural marriage with the Prophet

²*History of the Church*, vol. 5, p. 501; Andrew Jenson, *Historical Record*, pp. 224-226.

Joseph Smith were shown to him and named to him as early as 1831, and some of them were given in marriage to him as early as that date, although it was not then prudent, under the circumstances, to make these facts public. And when the Lord showed those women to Joseph some of them were not even acquainted with the Church much less him. God knew their hearts, as is proved by the fact that they have been true and faithful through all the trying vicissitudes through which they have passed, and that too in the face of a frowning world; they have endured it all, and are today examples of womanhood and purity.³

It seems that Fannie Alger was one of Joseph's first plural wives. She lived many years after the Prophet's death and never denied her relationship to him.⁴ There were other noble, pure women who gave like testimonies.

William Clayton lived as an honorable citizen of the highest character. On December 4, 1879, thirty-six years after the revelation was written he died. He never wavered in his simple declaration that the revelation as now found in the Doctrine and Covenants was dictated to him, sentence by sentence, by the Prophet. He adds that "after the whole was written, Joseph asked me to read it through, slowly and carefully, which I did, and he pronounced it correct."⁵

On the day the revelation was written, or the day after, Joseph C. Kingsbury was asked to make a copy of it. This copy was carefully compared with the original by Bishop Newel K. Whitney and preserved by him. Elder Kingsbury, of unblemished character and reputation, lived fifty-five years after this event (he died October 5, 1898), and always bore solemn testimony to the written origin of the revelation in 1843 through the lips of the Prophet. In further corroboration of the claim that the revelation came from the lips of the Prophet are the statements of numerous men and women, then living, who either saw the revelation or heard it read. In fact, the document was read to the high council and presidency of the stake of Nauvoo⁶ on August 12, 1843, a month after it had been

³*Journal History*, February 17, 1882; *Deseret News*, February 17, 1882.

⁴Andrew Jenson, *Historical Record*, pp. 233, 942.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 227.

reduced to written form on July 12, 1843.⁷ Many of the council members testified that the revelation was read at that time.⁸

In 1886, President Smith of the Reorganized Church attempted to secure from Leonard Soby, estranged from the Church, but a member in 1843 of the Nauvoo high council, a statement to the effect that the revelation was not read at the said high council meeting. This Soby refused to do, but volunteered to testify that the revelation was actually read at that meeting in his hearing.⁹

A number of men, who in their lives proved themselves honest, have testified that they actually performed the ceremonies that united Joseph Smith to plural wives. Among these were Joseph B. Noble, Hyrum Smith, James Adams, Newel K. Whitney, Willard Richards, and others.¹⁰ Several of these men lived long after the Prophet's death and always declared that they officiated in marrying the Prophet to a plural wife, giving place, date, and the witnesses present.

Many of the women who were thus sealed to Joseph Smith lived long after his death. They declared that they lived with the Prophet as his wives.¹¹ These women were of unblemished character, gentle and lovely in their lives, who understood this to be a righteous principle as revealed to their Prophet-husband. They always spoke with loving respect of their martyr-husband and they substantiated in detail the statements of those who performed the ceremonies.

Many of the elders in Nauvoo entered into plural marriage under the authority of Joseph Smith while he was living, as certified to by the men and their wives. Among these were William Clayton, Orson Hyde, Hyrum Smith, John Smith, Erastus Snow, Lyman Wight, James J. Strang, Gladden Bishop, William Smith, Heber C. Kimball, and

⁷George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith*, p. 412.

⁸George Q. Cannon *op. cit.*, p. 413; Andrew Jenson, *Historical Record*, p. 227.

⁹*Journal History*, January 6, 1886, p. 4; *Deseret Evening News*, January 6, 1886.

¹⁰Andrew Jenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-233.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 233, 240.

Brigham Young.¹² These men and their wives who survived the Prophet made affidavits of their marriages in Joseph's day in answer to the charge by enemies of the Church that plural marriage was not instituted nor practised, neither authorized by the Prophet. These men and women who assisted in the sealings or were sealed to plural wives, were good citizens, so well-known over such long periods of time that their concordant declarations cannot be gainsaid.

The Nauvoo Temple records, which are in the possession of the Church, likewise furnish evidence that Joseph Smith practised plural marriage. Before the completion of the temple, sealings were usually performed in dedicated rooms in the home of the Prophet. When the temple was dedicated in 1846 for such ceremonies, the plural marriages of Joseph were given temple sanction, and where the original marriages were for time only, they were often later performed as sealings made to continue through eternity.¹³

This was done within a year and a half of the assassination of the Prophet. Later, many more received plural wives in the Nauvoo Temple. It is utterly improbable, if not impossible, that such a new doctrine could have been conceived and carried out immediately by the men who succeeded the Prophet. There would have been a serious resentment among those who entered the temple if the teachings of the Prophet had been violated. Such criticism would have overflowed to the outside.

After the death of the Prophet, women applied for the privilege of being sealed to him for eternity. They felt no doubt that in the eternal ages they would share the companionship of the Prophet. They wanted to share eternity with the man whom they revered as one chosen of God to open the last dispensation of the gospel on earth. To these requests, assent was often given. Such action by women who lived in the days of the Prophet implies a

¹²There can be no question about the matter since the written records are so extensive as to places, dates, and witnesses. See the records in the Historian's Office, L.D.S. Church Office Building, Salt Lake City, Utah, also the Nauvoo Temple Records.

¹³See Nauvoo Temple Records.

belief in plural marriage. These women, who were not in any sense earthly wives of the Prophet, have been counted by uninformed or antagonistic writers as wives of the Prophet.¹⁴

Women no longer living, whether in Joseph's day or later, have also been sealed to the Prophet for eternity. The request for such unions has usually come from relatives or friends who would have their loved ones share eternity with the Prophet rather than with anyone else. Unscrupulous and unreliable writers have even added such marriages to the list of Joseph's wives.

Another kind of celestial marriage seems to have been practised in the early days of plural marriage. It has not been practised since Nauvoo days, for it is under Church prohibition. Zealous women, some of them married as well as unmarried, loving the cause of the restored gospel, considered their condition in the hereafter and asked that they might be sealed to the Prophet for eternity. They were not to be his wives on earth, in mortality, but only after death, in the eternities. Such marriages led to much misunderstanding by those not of the Church and unfamiliar with its doctrines and practices. To them marriage meant only association on earth. Therefore any ceremony uniting a married woman, for example, to Joseph Smith for eternity seemed adulterous to such people. Yet in any day, in our day, there may be women who prefer to spend eternity with another than their husband on earth.

Such cases, if any, and they must have been few in number, gave enemies of the Church occasion to fan the flaming hatred against the Latter-day Saints. The full truth was not told. Enemies made the most of untruth. They found it difficult to believe that the Church rests on truth and virtue.

The existing literature dealing with plural marriage in Nauvoo in the day of Joseph Smith is voluminous. Many affidavits on the subject are in the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City. Many of the books and news-

¹⁴*Nauvoo Temple Records.*

paper and magazine articles on the subject are found there also.¹⁵

A clinching proof that the Prophet had taught plural marriage is found in his journal under date of October 5, 1843. He writes:

Gave instructions to try those persons who were preaching, teaching, or practicing, the doctrine of plurality of wives; for, according to the law, I hold the keys of this power in the last days; for there is never but one on earth at a time on whom the power and its keys are conferred; and I have constantly said no man shall have but one wife at a time, unless the Lord directs otherwise.¹⁶

The careful study of all available information leads to but one conclusion. Joseph Smith received the revelation in question and practised plural marriage. This issue is not one of doctrine but of history. No honest student can declare the host of witnesses, hundreds of them, from Nauvoo days, Mormon and non-Mormon of various residence, pursuit, and temperament to have united in lying about the matter. The evidence is confirmed by those who place the introduction of plural marriage on others, for they seek feeble, unworthy shelter in the statement that Joseph Smith did practise plural marriage but later repented of it.¹⁷ That is throwing dust in the eyes of seekers after truth.

The case is clear. Authentic history says that plural marriage originated with Joseph Smith, the Prophet. So it did. The apparent denials by Church leaders in early Nauvoo days that the Church practised plural marriage were correct. At that time, the Church members as a whole had not heard the revelation nor had they been given an opportunity to accept it. But many of the leaders knew of it and were polygamists under Joseph's authority.

The chaotic conditions of the years immediately following the Prophet's death delayed the formal presenta-

¹⁵For a fairly condensed but complete discussion consult Andrew Jenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-236; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage*, pp. 67-94; *Women's Exponent*, volumes 13 and 14; *Deseret News*, especially in 1886.

¹⁶*History of the Church*, vol. 6, p. 46.

¹⁷*Saints' Herald*, vol. 1, pp. 9, 26, 27.

tion of the revelation to the whole Church. That explains the statement of 1838 in answer to a question whether the Mormons believed in having more than one wife. The principle of plural marriage had not at that time been presented to the Church.¹⁸ Soon after the Church was established in the Great Salt Lake region, at the conference in 1852, the doctrine of celestial and plural marriage was accepted by the Church as a whole. During the intervening years, however, it was taught and practised.

¹⁸*Elders' Journal*, vol. 1, p. 3.