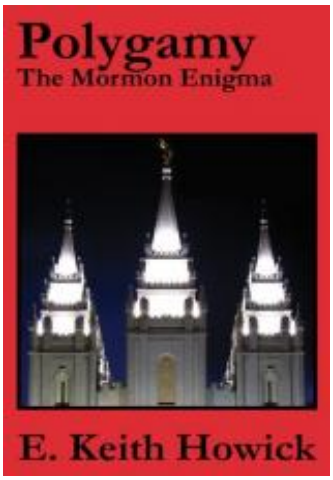
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Polygamy: The Mormon Enigma

by E. Keith Howick



About the Book

Presidential candidate Mitt Romney said, "There is part of the history of the [Mormon] church's past that I understand is troubling to people.... [P]olygamy, which was outlawed in our church in the 1800s, [is also] troubling to me. I have a great-great grandfather [who, with other Mormons, was] trying to build a generation out there in the desert. And so he took additional wives as he was told to do. I must admit, I can't imagine anything more awful than polygamy."*

Between his natural good humor and the strictures of political expediency, Mr. Romney has carefully dealt with the enigma of polygamy that has faced the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for almost two hundred years. It is true that the church banned the practice of polygamy through the Manifestos of 1890 and 1904, and members who entered into the practice thereafter were excommunicated. However, the Church continues to believe in the concept.

Even though the Manifestos eliminated the practice of plural marriage, the LDS Church is generally associated with the issue whenever it rears its controversial head. Inside these pages the Mormon enigma of polygamy is examined from its origin, practice, evolution, and legal entanglements to its present-day status and current political impact.

* *60 Minutes*, Sunday May 13, 2007

Discussion Guide

General Topics

1. What do you believe are the most common abuses of polygamy?

2. What are the most common benefits?

3. Can polygamous relationships survive in today's general society?

4. Does a man's practice of polygamy or belief in it affect his ability to serve his community or country?

5. Is polygamy a political issue only because Mitt Romney is running for president?

6. Why do stories about polygamists always appear on the national news?

7. What personal attitudes would need to be changed to be friends with a polygamist family?

Book-Specific Topics

1. Should Christians use the Biblical practice of polygamy to justify its practice today? (pg 12)

2. Why might Emma Smith have steadfastly denied her husband's marriages to other women? (pg 21)

3. When considering any church that professes modern prophecy, do the three principles of revelation gleaned from Hyrum Smith's remarks justify the public denial of any revealed doctrine? (pg 34)

4. How much tolerance should the general public have for individual or group religious practice? (pgs 44?45)

5. Marriage in the early Mormon church hinged on four principles: authority, timelessness, exaltation, and polygamy. Most people see the value of timeless (eternal) marriage, but refuse the other principles with varying degrees of vigor. Why? (pgs 48?65)

6. Presuming polygamy becomes legalized or decriminalized, what rules of moral conduct (e.g. adultery) should exist? (pgs 48?65)

7. Of all the controversy surrounding Mormon polygamy perhaps none is more controversial than the Law of Sarah. From the perspective of a divine commandment, what relationship should exist between a husband and his first wife? (pgs 66?70)

8. Despite freedoms protected in the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment and other federal laws, the Edmunds-Tucker act violated spousal privilege, invaded rights of inheritorship, revoked women's right to vote, controlled public education, and disincorporated a legally organized religious group. What authority should any national government have over the religious practices of individuals or groups? What kinds of behavior should be protected, tolerated, or prohibited? (pgs 89?92)

9. The Mormon manifestos prohibiting the practice of polygamy did not prohibit the church's belief in polygamy. What are the church's potential reactions to the nearly inevitable decriminalization or legalization of polygamy in Canada and the U.S.? (pgs 98?103)

10. Does your personal opinion of polygamy reflect your opinion of the Mormon Church, or does it reflect the fact that many people other than Mormons have and do practice polygamy? (pgs 125?127)

11. For some years, heterosexual parents have been debating the moral questions surrounding homosexual teachers in public schools. How would you react to polygamous parents teaching in public schools or serving in public office? What options are available to parents raising children in a community where traditional western European marriage is less and less the norm? (pgs 127?129)

12. Professor Jonathan Turley explained that denying the practice of polygamy was "contrary to the spirit of Christianity" and that its practice is "one of the common threads between Christians, Jews, and Muslims." Concluding that since "78% of the world's cultures" practice polygamy, "if we yield to our impulse and single out one hated minority, the First Amendment becomes little more than hope and we become little more than hypocrites." Does Professor Turley's tolerance toward polygamy (despite his personal disapproval of it) reflect an enlightened belief toward religious tolerance? (pgs 140?142)

13. The Mormon Church no longer practices polygamous cohabitation, but it still practices the basic concepts of polygamous marriage through its temple marriages. This has led some people to wonder about polygamy in the afterlife. How could people live polygamously into the eternities? (pgs 149?151)

Author Bio

E. Keith Howick authoritatively deals with Mormon polygamy, its legal history, and the ramifications of modern law on future polygamous practice. He has a Master's degree in Political Science and a Juris Doctor degree in Law from the University of Utah. He has taught classes in American national government and graduate seminars in public law at Pennsylvania State University. He is a student of Mormon history and has given innumerable presentations discussing the history, people, and doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints including presentations at the University of Utah, Brigham Young University, and Montana State University.

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