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Plural Marriage

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Brigham Young and Some of His Plural Wives

At present, the LDS Church does not endorse the concept of plural marriage. In fact, before 1841, LDS scripture forbade plural marriage. The pre-1876 editions of the Doctrine and Covenants included the following passage: “Inasmuch as the Church of Christ has 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, except in the case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again.”¹ Also, D&C 49:16, given by Joseph Smith in 1831, reads, “Wherefore, it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh, and all this that the earth might answer the end of its creation.” Similarly, Jacob 2:27, in the Book of Mormon, instructs, “Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none.” Thus, before the revelation concerning plural marriage in 1843, the practice of plural marriage was officially forbidden among the Saints. Not only did LDS scripture forbid the practice of plural marriage; Illinois, the

¹ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1948), 2:257.

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state in which plural marriage was begun, made plural marriages illegal. February 12, 1833, saw the enacting of a state law that banned bigamy. Those convicted of the crime faced a fine up to \$1,000 and up to two years in prison.²

Joseph Smith and Plural Marriage

Those items found in holy writ and state law did not stop early Latter-day Saints from entering into plural marriages. Beginning as early as April 5, 1841, Joseph Smith began entering into plural marriages in Nauvoo, Illinois. According to one demographic study, Smith eventually entered into forty-two plural marriages (not including his first marriage to Emma Hale) and fathered at least five children before his death on June 27, 1844.³ Smith was not the only Latter-day Saint who had more than one wife. According to the same demographic report, 153 families were involved in plural marriage in Nauvoo, which increased to more than 4,000 families during the westward trek, climaxing in approximately 50,000 families in the late 1800s in Salt Lake City.⁴

Interestingly, Smith began his venture into plural marriages more than two years before issuing the revelation allowing the practice. Again, Smith entered his first plural relationship on April 5, 1841, but the revelation was not issued until July 12, 1843. Was this idea of plural marriage Smith's invention, or were others around Nauvoo engaging in the practice during the Saints' time in Illinois? Richard S. Van Wagoner stated that LDS plural marriages resulted from the influence of "restoration Protestant sectarianism" and "flourishing contemporary social experiments."⁵ Historian George D. Smith noted, "In 1837, when Mormon headquarters was located in Kirtland, Ohio, a Cleveland newspaper

² "Bigamy consists in the having of two wives or two husbands at one and the same time, knowing that the former husband or wife is still alive. If any person or persons within the State, being married, or who shall hereafter marry, do at any time marry any person or persons, the former husband or wife being alive, the person so offended shall, on conviction thereof, be punished by a fine, not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisoned in the penitentiary, not exceeding two years." *Revised Laws of Illinois* (Vandalia: Greiner and Sherman, 1833), 198–99.

³ George D. Smith, "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841–46: A Preliminary Demographic Report," *Dialogue* 27 (1994): 123–58, https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V34N0102_?135.pdf: 138. These are the avenues through which one could enter into a plural marriage: A couple could be married for time only, meaning their time spent together on earth. A couple could also be married for eternity only, meaning their time spent together in the afterlife. Or, a couple could be married for time and eternity, the current practice of the LDS Church's monogamous system.

⁴ Smith, 158.

⁵ Richard S. Van Wagoner, "Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo," *Dialogue* 18 (1985): 67. Van Wagoner noted that Smith was probably influenced by the communitarianism of the Shakers of Ann Lee, the Harmonists of George Rapp, and Robert Owen, the teacher of Joseph Smith's closest friend, Sidney Rigdon. This communitarian understanding of material possessions also included the communitarian sharing of wives.

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fifteen miles away printed a letter which argued for polygamy as a remedy for the 'distress' of 'so many old maids.'⁶ So the practice was already taking place around the early Saints and was not purely an invention of Smith's, but an adaptation.

After two years of debates, public outcry, and threats, Joseph Smith issued a revelation on July 12, 1843, that made plural marriage a religious practice of the early Saints. McConkie commented, "In the early days of this dispensation, as part of the promised restitution of all things, the Lord revealed the principle of plural marriage to the Prophet."⁷ This revelation is still contained with the Doctrine and Covenants. Section 132:61 reads, "And again, as pertaining to the law of the priesthood—if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are virgins, and have vowed to no other man, then is he justified; he cannot commit adultery for they are given unto him; for he cannot commit adultery with that that belongeth unto him and to no one else." Thus, all previous revelations banning the practice of plural marriage were nullified.

Theology of Plural Marriage

President Brigham Young first discussed the doctrine of plural marriage, initially practiced by Joseph Smith in the early 1830s, publicly in 1852. In August 1852, Young chose Apostle Orson Pratt to offer the first theological defense of the practice. Pratt, speaking to the gathered congregation of Latter-day Saints in the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, made an impassioned plea not only for the constitutionality of the practice, but also for the strict religious nature of the practice. Pratt's defense served as a foundation for all subsequent apologetic attempts.

First, Pratt argued that plural marriage had indeed been given by revelation from God. Pratt said, recalling the questioning of some nonmembers, "But, says one, how have you obtained this information [concerning plural marriage]? By new revelation."⁸ With reference to the reasoning behind plural marriage, historians Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton noted, "The motivation behind the introduction of a practice shocking to Gentiles and Mormons alike can scarcely have been as trivial as the usual anti-Mormon explanation suggests—Smith's personal lust. The standard Mormon explanation is simply that God chose to introduce the practice, as he had in ancient Israel, and he

⁶ George Smith, "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841–46," 126.

⁷ Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 578.

⁸ Orson Pratt, "Celestial Marriage," in *Journal of Discourses*, comp. G. D. Watt (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854), 1:64.

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therefore made his will known to his spokesman on earth.”⁹ They commented further, “In short, there were practical, sociological, and theological predisposing tendencies within the new movement that required only a word from God, a revelation, to initiate the practice of plural marriage.”¹⁰ Likewise, while some nonmembers have argued that Smith’s personal sexual desires inspired his want for a system of plural marriage, Arrington and Bitton argued, “It is far from likely that [Smith’s] personal sex drive was the motivation. If he had been unprincipled, motivated solely by a desire for sexual gratification, there were tried and proven ways of satisfying such desires in American society without the burden of providing for additional families. Whatever the ultimate explanation of the reinstatement of polygamy, if Smith’s religious sincerity is conceded, then he would naturally see the whole idea in religious terms.”¹¹

Second, Pratt argued that plural marriage was necessary for exaltation in the highest realm of the celestial kingdom. He said, “In reply we will show you that [plural marriage] is incorporated as a part of our religion, and necessary for our exaltation to the fullness of the Lord’s glory in the eternal world.”¹² Of who would reject the doctrine of plural marriage, Pratt said:

Now, let us enquire, what will become of those individuals who have this law taught unto them in plainness, if they reject it? I will tell you: they will be damned, saith the Lord God Almighty, in the revelation He has given. Why? Because where much is given, much is required; where there is great knowledge unfolded for the exaltation, glory, and happiness of the sons and daughters of God, if they close up their hearts, if they reject the testimony of His word, and will not give heed to the principles He has ordained for their good, they are worthy of damnation, and the Lord has said they shall be damned.”¹³

Pratt further explained that those who refused to accept and practice plural marriage, after hearing of the doctrine, would have no chance of exaltation in the celestial kingdom. He argued:

Let us inquire after those who are to be damned, admitting that they will be redeemed, which they will be, unless they have sinned against the Holy Ghost. They will be redeemed, but what will it be to? Will it be to exaltation, and to a fulness of glory? Will it be to become the sons of God, or Gods to reign upon

⁹ Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 195.

¹⁰ Arrington and Bitton, 196.

¹¹ Arrington and Bitton, 197.

¹² Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” 54.

¹³ Pratt, 64.

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thrones, and multiply their posterity, and reign over them as kings? No, it will not. They have lost that exalted privilege forever.¹⁴

Pratt concluded that those who were upstanding Latter-day Saints, but who also refused to accept and practice plural marriage, would be the eternal servants of those who did accept the practice. He contended, "What will be their condition? The Lord has told us. He says these are angels; because they keep not this law, they shall be ministering servants unto those who are worthy of obtaining a more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."¹⁵

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Third, Pratt argued that plural marriage was not a new doctrine; it was a reintroduction of the Old Testament way of life in latter days. He said:

Why not look upon Abraham's blessings as your own, for the Lord blessed him with a promise of seed as numerous as the sand upon the seashore; so will you be blessed, or else you will not inherit the blessings of Abraham. How did Abraham manage to get a foundation laid for this mighty kingdom? Was he to accomplish it all through one wife? No. Sarah gave a certain woman to him whose name was Hagar, and by her a seed was to be raised up unto him. Is this all? No. We read of his wife Keturah, and also of a plurality of wives and concubines, which he had, from whom he raised up many sons.¹⁶

Pratt also believed the blessings of Abraham would be removed from any person not participating in the practice of plural marriage. He alleged:

I think there is only about one-fifth of the population of the globe, that believe in the one-wife system; the other four-fifths believe in the doctrine of a plurality of wives. They have had it handed down from time immemorial, and are not half so narrow and contracted in their minds as some of the nations of Europe and America, who have done away with the promises, and deprived themselves of the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹⁷

Fourth, Pratt underscored the need for plural marriage because of the necessity of bringing more of God the Father's spirit children to earth. According to Pratt, the spirit children brought to earth through a plural marriage had been reserved for just such a

¹⁴ Pratt, 64. A few paragraphs later, Pratt returned to this same line of thinking: "There will be many who will not hearken; there will be the foolish among the wise, who will not receive the new and everlasting covenant in its fulness; and they never will attain to their exaltation." Pratt, 65.

¹⁵ Pratt, 65.

¹⁶ Pratt, 60.

¹⁷ Pratt, 60–61.

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relationship. Those spirits deemed most noble and intelligent by God the Father were reserved for plural marriages. It is worth quoting Pratt at length here:

Very well; if this be the case, that the righteous are gathering out, and are still being gathered from among the nations, and being planted by themselves, one thing is certain—that that people are better calculated to bring up children in the right way, than any other under the whole heavens. If you are under the influence, power, and guidance of the Almighty, you must be the best people under heaven, to dictate the young mind ... I have already told you that among them are many spirits that are more noble, more intelligent than others, that were called the great and mighty ones, reserved until the dispensation of the fullness of times, to come forth upon the face of the earth, through a noble parentage that shall train their young and tender minds in the truths of eternity, that they may grow up in the Lord, and be strong in the power of His might, be clothed upon with His glory, be filled with exceeding great faith; that the visions of eternity may be opened to their minds; that they may be Prophets, Priests, and Kings to the Most High God. Do you believe, says one, that they are reserved until the last dispensation, for such a noble purpose? yes; and among the Saints is the most likely place for these spirits to take their tabernacles, through a just and righteous parentage. They are to be sent to that people that are the most righteous of any other people upon the earth.¹⁸

He argued further:

The Lord has not kept [intelligent and noble spirits] in store for five or six thousand years past, and kept them waiting for their bodies all this time to send them among the Hottentots, the African negroes, the idolatrous Hindoos, or any other of the fallen nations that dwell upon the face of this earth. They are not kept in reserve in order to come forth to receive such a degraded parentage upon the earth; no, the Lord is not such a being; His justice, goodness, and mercy will be magnified towards those who were chosen before they were born; and they long to come, and they will come among the Saints of the living God; this would be their highest pleasure and joy, to know that they could have the privilege of being born of such noble parentage.¹⁹

There was, then, a set of extremely complex theological justifications offered for the practice of plural marriage. First, the practice was based on a revelation given to Joseph Smith by God. Second, plural marriage was believed to be a parallel of plural marriages in the Old Testament. Third, for a person to achieve exaltation in the celestial kingdom,

¹⁸ Pratt, 62–63.

¹⁹ Pratt, 63.

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practicing plural marriage was necessary. Fourth, the need was great to provide physical bodies for the most noble and intelligent of God's spirit children. Although intelligent Latter-day Saints, such as Orson Pratt, staunchly defended this doctrine, cultural and political circumstances were not dictated by their arguments. The groundwork would be laid over the next four decades for the issuing of the manifesto by Wilford Woodruff in September 1890.

Plural Marriage after Joseph Smith

The practice of plural marriage continued after Smith was murdered on June 27, 1844, and the Saints took the idea with them through Missouri, on to the Idaho territory, and eventually to the Great Salt Lake basin, currently known as Salt Lake City, Utah. Arriving in the Salt Lake valley during 1847, the Saints began to rebuild their lives and continue their religious practices, including plural marriage. The year 1847, though, marked the beginning of the downfall of one of the most infamous religious teachings in American history, namely, Latter-day Saint plural marriage.

The years 1847 to 1850 proved substantial for the politics of the Utah territory. The LDS pioneers formed a territorial legislature, installed Brigham Young as governor, suggested the area be granted statehood, and requested the name Deseret for the state.²⁰ Though the name request was rejected and the name Utah was given to the territory, the LDS played a vital role in the formation of the territory's laws.

From 1850 to 1861, the Salt Lake Saints fought battle after battle over the issue of plural marriage. While all other territories of the United States adopted American common law, Brigham Young denounced it, saying, "Those who attempted to fasten their peculiar dogmas upon all succeeding generations although thought to be men of legal learning, were instead profound ignoramuses" and that the United States would not "shine forth in her true colors until they should divest themselves of tradition and ignorance."²¹ Put simply, the acceptance of common law by the territory of Utah would have outlawed plural marriage; therefore, Young rejected every attempt by the federal government to enforce it in the territory.

²⁰ Michael W. Homer, "The Judiciary and the Common Law in Utah Territory, 1850–61," *Dialogue* 21 (1988): 97–108. The word deseret reportedly means "honeybee" in the language of the Jaredites, a people group in the Book of Mormon. The Saints have always viewed themselves as honeybees, workers who never rest. Hence, the Saints requested the name of the new state to reflect their religious heritage and work ethic. Interestingly, local LDS bookstores are called the Beehive.

²¹ Homer, 97.

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The year 1854 also held profound significance for the practice of plural marriage. Homer noted:

On 14 January 1854, the legislature obediently passed a measure, unprecedented elsewhere in the United States, which provided that “no laws nor parts of laws shall be read, argued, cited, or adopted in any court ... except those enacted by the Governor and Legislative Assembly.” Thus, the Mormons hoped to finally establish by statute their long-argued position that the common law, both criminal and civil, did not apply in Utah and that the judiciary could not apply common-law precepts. In so doing, they arguably overrode the provision of the Organic Act, by which Congress created Utah Territory, providing that the Supreme Court and district courts of the territory “shall possess chancery as well as common law jurisdiction.” The First Presidency urged the Saints to carry on all of their activities.²²

With that action, Latter-day Saints offered their disapproval of the federal government and continued their practice of plural marriage, though the federal government attempted to stop them through every available avenue, unofficially.²³ It was not until the Utah War of 1858–59 that the federal government, under the leadership of President James Buchanan, would officially interfere in the government of Utah by replacing sitting governor Brigham Young with Buchanan’s handpicked alternate, Alfred Cumming.²⁴

The next few decades, the 1860s through the 1890s, saw the rise and fall of the United States Civil War (1861–65), Reconstruction in the eastern United States, and the fall of plural marriage in the western United States. In 1862, the United States Congress passed the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, making bigamy a crime in the territories, punishable by a fine of up to \$500 and up to five years in prison. This action angered the people of the Utah territory and eventually led to a court trial, climaxing in the case of Reynolds v. the United States, an 1879 United States Supreme Court case. George Reynolds, personal secretary to Brigham Young, and an advocate of plural marriage, was the voluntary defendant for the test case “to determine the constitutionality of the Anti-Bigamy Law of 1862, in which case he was found guilty in a lower court.”²⁵ The Supreme Court upheld the anti-bigamy law, and Reynolds was forced to pay a \$500 fine and spent two years in prison. Three years later, in 1882, the United States Congress passed the Edmunds Act,

²² Homer, 102.

²³ Kenneth W. Godfrey, “The Coming of the Manifesto,” *Dialogue* 5 (1970): 12.

²⁴ Richard D. Poll, “The Utah War,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 1994, <https://heritage.utah.gov/history/uhg-ut-war>.

²⁵ ¹¹² Perry Porter, “A Chronology of Federal Legislation on Polygamy,” [xmission.com](http://www.xmission.com/~plporter/lds/chron.htm), January 4, 1998, <http://www.xmission.com/~plporter/lds/chron.htm>.

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making plural marriage a felony, disenfranchising polygamists of their right to vote, banning polygamists from holding public office and from jury duty, removing their civil rights, and declaring open all representative and elected offices in the territory of Utah.²⁶ As the tension continued to build in the Utah territory and continued calls for statehood were made to the federal government by the Latter-day Saints, the practice of plural marriage continued, and Church president John Taylor, and later Wilford Woodruff, purportedly received numerous revelations stating God would protect the institution of plural marriage from the federal government.²⁷

Seeing that the Edmunds Act was not stringent enough, the United States Congress passed a tougher law, the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887. This act unincorporated the LDS Church and the LDS Perpetual Emigration Fund because the two entities encouraged plural marriage.²⁸ The Edmunds-Tucker Act also authorized the federal government to seize Church real estate (valued at approximately \$800,000) and freeze Church assets. The federal government then leased the property and assets back to the LDS at a substantially higher cost. Also, because the Morrill Act imposed a fine of \$500 on any convicted person engaged in plural marriage, the federal government imposed a \$50,000 fine on the Church for the more than 1,300 convictions of LDS men.²⁹ Leaders of the Church became extremely frustrated with this strict law and, three years after the act was passed, took the United States government to court again in the case of *The Late Corporation of the Mormon Church v. the United States*. As had happened in the previous case, the Supreme Court upheld the Edmunds-Tucker Act and called for the Church to ban plural marriage.

Finally, after years of battle with the federal government, Church leaders began to give up their defense of plural marriage. Godfrey noted, "By 1886 it was becoming more obvious that something would have to be done regarding either the law or plural marriage, or both, or the Saints would have to leave the United States."³⁰ Thus, "because of such stringent law which sought to circumscribe the Saints, President Woodruff, as early as 1889, secretly ceased giving permission for plural marriages to be solemnized."³¹ Also, "as pressure from the United States government continued in some quarters, at least a few of the Saints argued that if plural marriages had in fact been discontinued in secret

²⁶ Porter, "A Chronology."

²⁷ Godfrey, "The Coming of the Manifesto," 15.

²⁸ The Perpetual Emigration Fund was started in 1849 as a monetary source to help Latter-day Saints move from Nauvoo, Illinois, and Great Britain to the Salt Lake basin. See James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1976), 282; and Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 130–32.

²⁹ Porter, "A Chronology of Federal Legislation on Polygamy." Why the federal government did not impose the full fine of at least \$650,000 on the Church is unknown.

³⁰ Godfrey, "The Coming of the Manifesto," 14–15.

³¹ Godfrey, 18.

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that a public declaration of such a policy should indeed be given so that the effects could be fully utilized.”³² Feeling the pressure building to an insurmountable level, President Woodruff, on September 24, 1890, issued an official declaration of a new revelation from God, a declaration known as the Manifesto. This declaration “confirmed that it was right to prohibit the further contracting, publicly at least, of plural marriages.”³³ Concerning the issuing of the Manifesto, Woodruff wrote in his personal diary:

I have arrived at a point in the History of my life as the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints where [sic] I am under the necessity of acting for the Temporal Salvation of the Church. The United States Government has taken a Stand & passed Laws to destroy the Latter day Saints upon the Subject of poligamy [sic] or Patriarchal order of Marriage. And after Praying to the Lord & feeling inspired by his spirit I have issued ... [a] Proclamation which is sustained by my Councillors and the 12 Apostles.³⁴

Thus, the practice of plural marriage was officially declared anathema in September 1890. Six years later, the territory of Utah was granted statehood on January 4, 1896.

Contradiction of Previously Received Revelation?

Some Latter-day Saints saw Woodruff’s Manifesto as nothing more than a politically motivated move. The Utah territory had requested statehood on a number of occasions, but the practice of plural marriage kept statehood at bay. Before the Manifesto was issued, another bill, the Cullom-Struble Bill, was introduced on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. This bill, upon passage, would have disenfranchised all members of the LDS Church in order to take all political power within the Utah territory away from the Church. Church leaders dispatched a delegation from Salt Lake City to Washington to lobby against the passage of the bill. Historians James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard noted, “The Utah delegation to Washington met with little encouragement, and returned to Salt Lake City confident that nothing short of a declaration by the Church that plural marriage had ended would prevent approval of the Cullom-Strobbel [sic] Bill or assure statehood for Utah.”³⁵ The issuing of the Manifesto prompted some Latter-day Saints to see it as nothing more than a political move. However, Allen and Leonard commented:

³² Godfrey, 19.

³³ Godfrey, 20.

³⁴ Thomas G. Alexander, “The Odyssey of a Latter-day Prophet: Wilford Woodruff and the Manifesto of 1890,” *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991): 170.

³⁵ Allen and Leonard, *The Mormon Experience*, 413.

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The Manifesto was not simply a political document. In many ways it represented other deep-rooted religious principles, some of which were much more important to the Saints than the principle of plural marriage. One of these was millennialism. The Latter-day Saints firmly believed that through Joseph Smith the Kingdom of God had been established in preparation for the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the Millennium. In preparation for that event, they had tried to establish a political as well as an ecclesiastical kingdom. The political kingdom was no longer functioning, but to allow the spiritual kingdom, the Church, to be destroyed would be, in President Woodruff's opinion, the great failure of all. Obviously, the Church must be preserved to meet the Savior when he came, even if it meant withdrawing approval of plural marriage. In this sense, preparation for the Millennium was a factor in producing the Manifesto.³⁶

Although the Saints were given continual reminders that President Woodruff had received the idea for the Manifesto from God, "a few members could not accept [the Manifesto] as revelation, for it seemed to contradict an earlier command."³⁷ Church leaders attempted to salve the situation by arguing that God would not have the Saints keep His commands in the event of cultural and political problems. Allen and Leonard recorded, "These few were not even persuaded by President Cannon's powerful sermon on October 6 reminding them that the Lord had said through Joseph Smith that He would not require the Saints to fulfill a command that became impossible because of persecution from their enemies."³⁸ Similarly, President Woodruff, speaking to a group of Latter-day Saints in Utah in 1891, said:

The Lord showed me by vision and revelation exactly what would take place if we did not stop this practice. He has told me exactly what to do, and what the result would be if we did not do it. I have been called upon by friends outside of the Church and urged to take some steps with regard to this matter. They knew the course which the government was determined to take. I saw exactly what would come to pass if there was not something done. I have had this spirit upon me for a long time. But I want to say this: I should have let all the temples go out of our hands; I should have gone to prison myself, and let every other man go there, had not the God of heaven commanded me to do what I did do; and when the hour came that I was commanded to do that, it was all clear to me.^{39 40}

³⁶ Allen and Leonard, 413.

³⁷ Allen and Leonard, 415.

³⁸ Allen and Leonard, 415.

³⁹ Allen and Leonard, 416.

⁴⁰ Kerns, T. (2018). *The Saints of Zion: An Introduction to Mormon Theology* (109–121). B&H Academic.

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