

# Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS)

By James K. Walker

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**Founder:** John Y. Barlow and Joseph White Musser

**Place:** Short Creek, Arizona (now renamed Colorado City) and Hildale, Utah

**Date:** 1935

**Publications:** *Truth* magazine (1924-1956), and transcribed sermons of Rulon Jeffs, Scriptures include the Bible and the Book of Mormon

**Unique Terms:** United Effort Plan (all real estate owned by the church), The Law of Placing (all marriages are assigned by the Prophet), The Principle (the doctrine and practice of polygamy), Blood Atonement (for certain sins one's own blood must be shed unto death for forgiveness), Bleeding the Beast (supporting polygamy by draining state resources through welfare, food stamps, and Medicaid) Poofer (a teenage girl who suddenly disappears from her home to become a polygamous wife), Lost Boys (young men ousted by elderly leaders allegedly to reduce competition for young wives).

## HISTORY

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The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) is one of over one hundred different churches and organizations that trace their beginnings to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, first published in 1830. <sup>1</sup> By far the largest of these organizations is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), commonly called the Mormon Church. The FLDS is one of numerous splinter groups that broke away over the controversial doctrine of "plural wives" or polygamy. In the early years of his movement, the Prophet Joseph Smith introduced the controversial practice of Mormon men receiving multiple wives. <sup>2</sup> The practice was later adopted as a doctrine of the Church. After Smith's death in 1844, his prophetic revelation concerning plural wives was eventually canonized in LDS Scripture as an "everlasting covenant" in Doctrine & Covenants (D&C) section 132. <sup>3</sup>

Most LDS followed Brigham Young to the Utah Territory following Smith's death. By the late 1800s, Mormon dominated Utah was vigorously pursuing statehood – a move that was strongly opposed by Congress largely based on the Church's well-publicized and highly criticized practice of polygamy. In a move to pave the way to statehood, the fourth LDS Prophet, Wilfred Woodruff, issued an official declaration published with the Doctrine & Covenants since 1908. This Manifesto was widely regarded as ending the practice of polygamy.<sup>4</sup> The eventual rejection of the decades-long practice created a backlash among small groups of "fundamentalist" Mormons. Steven Shields explains:

Although the Mormon Church's official public sanction of polygamy was repealed with the Manifesto of 1890, many faithful to that doctrine continued on in its practice. These people, who today are generally excommunicated from the Mormon Church, number several thousand and are located in many areas, mainly in the western United States and Mexico.... These faithful believe they have been chosen as a select group to carry on the practice of plural marriage and some other doctrines, namely the Adam-God doctrine and exclusion of blacks from the priesthood, all of which have been publicly renounced by the LDS church leadership in Salt Lake City. <sup>5</sup>

In 1935 the LDS Church excommunicated a number of polygamist leaders in the Utah border town of Short Creek, Arizona, who refused to sign an oath renouncing the practice. These dissidents formed the basis of the FLDS, which became the largest sect of polygamist Mormons, led by John Y. Barlow and Joseph White Musser.<sup>6</sup>

The United Effort Plan (UEP) was established by the FLDS in 1942 as a religious charitable trust owning virtually all of the land in the area. Members are allowed to build on the land in exchange for 10% of their total income. Because the title to the land remains with the UEP, dissidents who leave the church cannot continue to live on the property nor can they sell the homes, which revert back to the trust. Within two years of the establishment of UEP, the Mormon Church cracked down by ousting hundreds more who refused to sign loyalty oaths and renounce polygamy.<sup>7</sup>

In 1953, Arizona state authorities, under orders from Governor Howard Pyle, conducted an infamous raid on Short Creek arresting hundreds of polygamist men on charges of bigamy, adultery, and rape. Women were taken into state custody and children were placed in foster care. The raid was highly publicized, including a cover story in *Life* magazine.<sup>8</sup> The raid became a public relations disaster, however, when the media published photos of babies being ripped from their father's arms by state police.<sup>9</sup>

Within two years, the cases were dropped and eventually the families began to return to Short Creek. By 1960, Short Creek was renamed Colorado City under the leadership of then FLDS president, Leroy Johnson, who had split with Musser about a decade earlier.<sup>10</sup> Musser's faction was later headed by Rulon C. Allred, who was shot to death as part of a "blood atonement" execution by rival sect leader Ervil LeBarron of the Church of the Lamb of God.<sup>11</sup> Johnson controlled the Colorado City faction and solidified his control and spiritual authority over the next several decades until his death in 1986. With the death of Johnson, Rulon Jeffs, a retired tax-consultant, became the FLDS Prophet and controlled the FLDS along with his son, Warren. Under their leadership, the community continued to grow.

By 2000, the US Census reported the population of Colorado City at 3,332 in just 444 households. "The average size household was highest in the state at 7.51 people per household; statewide the average size household was 2.64 people."<sup>12</sup>

Also in the year 2000, FLDS members were warned to prepare for a "lifting up," prophesied by Warren Jeffs, who predicted "a mass lifting up in which only the most devout will rise to heaven." This FLDS "rapture" was supposed to have occurred at "the community garden in the center of town, which dissidents call the 'launching pad.' Warren Jeffs is said to have named several dates that have come and gone..."<sup>13</sup> Earlier that year, on July 7, 2000, one of Jeff's wives had given birth to a daughter. The mother, Millie Annie Jessop, was a minor at the time of conception.<sup>14</sup>

Rulon Jeffs, 92, died on September 8, 2002 and was survived by an estimated "75 wives and more than 60 children. His house... had 23 bedrooms, two kitchens and 10 bathrooms." His son, Warren Jeffs, became the next prophet of the church.<sup>15</sup> Within weeks of Rulon's death, an internal memo was leaked to the *Phoenix New Times*, allegedly from the special investigative unit of Arizona Attorney General's office, warning of a "Waco-level" threat in Colorado City involving "rape, incest, assault, kidnapping, forced marriages of underage girls, weapons violations and welfare fraud."<sup>16</sup> The authenticity of the internal memo, which criticized Arizona Attorney General Janet Napolitano for not taking appropriate action, was questioned by Napolitano's office. Her office claimed the memo itself was fraudulent but they did acknowledge an ongoing investigation of Colorado City and said that the information in the memo was accurate, addressing legitimate concerns.<sup>17</sup>

In early 2004, the 48 year-old Jeffs, who was living "with at least 14 wives," excommunicated 21 men including his own brother and longtime Colorado City Mayor Dan Barlow "apparently because he felt that his authority as leader of the church's estimated 8,000 members was being threatened." Within a week more than 10 Colorado City teenagers fled their homes.<sup>18</sup> In 2004 Jeffs had also turned his attention to his recently-purchased 1,691 acres of land outside of Eldorado, Texas. Perhaps in anticipation of a major relocation, Jeffs' followers had already constructed:

...three multistory houses, each with 21,600 square feet of living space, about 10 times the size of most single-family homes. A massive meeting hall with more than a dozen industrial air-conditioning units.... [and] an enormous barn and several other smaller structures. And just last month [October 2004], work began on what Texas residents say will be a 150-foot limestone temple....<sup>19</sup>

## **DOCTRINE**

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Though both groups claim to follow Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, the FLDS and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints differ on many doctrines. Two of the most important are Polygamy and Individual Blood Atonement.

**Polygamy:** Like many fundamentalist Mormon groups, the FLDS believe that the Salt Lake City-based LDS Church fell away from the *true* teachings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young when the church abandoned polygamy in the 1890s. The problems of polygamy transcend the obvious moral and legal concerns. FLDS teaches that polygamy is necessary for complete salvation. Polygamy is also used by FLDS leaders as a tool of spiritual abuse<sup>20</sup> to exact obedience and submission from their followers.

The FLDS members call their leader the Prophet, and he controls the members' lives by allocating wives. The more wives and children a man has, the greater his stature in the community, and in heaven, so this is a big deal. The Prophet assigns a wife to a man without regard for her wishes. He also can remove wives and children from a man who disobeys the Prophet, and reassign them to someone else. (Spiritual control — you can't get to heaven without the Prophet's help.) Members believe that the Prophet has direct communication with God, and they treat him like God. He controls all levels of local government, plus the public school system, and most of the land in town....

FLDS girls rarely get more than an eighth-grade education.... They typically marry as teenagers and have 8 or 10 kids by the time they're 30 – and a bloated body. Some are not eager to marry, but a father can ask the Prophet to assign his daughter to a husband anyhow, which may help that father get another wife for himself.<sup>21</sup>

**Individual Blood Atonement:** FLDS leaders also allegedly preach the doctrine of "Individual Blood Atonement." Based on sermons by the second Mormon Prophet, Brigham Young,<sup>22</sup> the FLDS teach that for certain sins one's own blood must be shed unto death in order to gain forgiveness and eternal life. Sins warranting "blood atonement" may include the crime of flagrant apostasy. According to one report:

There is a hard-core FLDS fringe, estimated by several different sources at about 10 percent of the men, who would be willing to kill to protect the Prophet and the religion. "There was a time I would have killed if asked to by the Prophet," says historian [and former FLDS spokesman Ben] Bistline. During their interviews with witnesses, state investigators expressed serious concern about the potential for violence.... "That's one thing we've been concerned about a... Waco-effect," state investigator Ron Gibson said during the interviews with Jason Williams. For several years, Warren Jeffs has been preaching the doctrine of "blood atonement" – where it is the righteous person's obligation to kill a sinner to gain salvation. While rumors abound concerning the practice, there is no evidence that blood atonement has been carried out. But there is fear that it will be applied, particularly to apostates."<sup>23</sup>

## **CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

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While there are many important distinctions between the FLDS and the much larger Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), they do hold some beliefs in common. These include the beliefs that Joseph Smith was a true Prophet and that the Book of Mormon is the Word of God. For a Christian response to these and related LDS doctrines, please see Watchman's supplemental resources: *Testing the Mormon Prophets* and *Witnessing to Mormons with the Book of Mormon*.<sup>24</sup> Evangelical Christians have rejected the claims of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon based on concerns documented there and from many other evidences. Thus, the validity of any church built on their teachings would be dubious from a traditional Christian perspective.

Like early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mormonism, the FLDS will often try to support the practice of polygamy by citing biblical examples such as Abraham, King David, and Solomon. Abraham did not actually practice polygamy. He never married any other woman until after the death of his wife, Sarah. He did have an illegitimate son by Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden, but that was never endorsed by God. While the Bible honestly reports the practice of polygamy by some Old Testament patriarchs, the Bible never endorses polygamy and certainly never commands it. In fact, David and Solomon were in violation of God's commandment for all future kings of Israel: "I will set a king over me.... Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away" (Deut. 17:14, 17). The Bible records the heartbreak and family tragedy that accompanied David's polygamy and in the New Testament "one wife" is an explicit requirement for church leaders including bishops (elders) and deacons (1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:6).

The FLDS doctrine of Individual Blood Atonement is based on a misunderstanding of some Old Testament laws that mandated the death penalty for certain sins. Never did the Old Testament imply that capital punishment would impart forgiveness or impute righteousness. God forgives all sins by His grace (undeserved kindness) through faith (not one's works). The blood of Christ alone paid for all the sins of all His people. Forgiveness for all sins is available because of Christ's own blood, his death, burial, and resurrection. One receives forgiveness not by having one's own blood shed, but by putting one's trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross ( Eph. 2:8-9, Titus 3:5, 1 John 1:7, Rom. 3:23-25, Rom. 5:6-11, 1 Pet. 1: 18-19, Heb. 13:20, Col. 1:14-20, 1 Cor. 15:1-4, Rom. 1:12).

### Notes

- 1 Stephen Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration, A History of the Latter Day Saint Movement*, (Los Angeles: Restoration Research, 1990), 11-12, 105.
- 2 One website lists and documents over 30 wives that Joseph Smith took in addition to his first wife, Emma Hale: <http://www.wivesofjosephsmith.org/home.htm> (accessed 12/15/2004). See also: Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Signature Books, 1997).
- 3 The current introduction to D&C 132 acknowledges Joseph Smith's familiarity with the doctrine of plural wives long before the revelation was recorded. "Revelation given through Joseph Smith the Prophet.... relating to ... the eternity of the marriage covenant, as also plurality of wives.... Although the revelation was recorded in 1843, it is evident from the historical records that the doctrines and principles involved in this revelation had been known by the Prophet since 1831."
- 4 Wilfred Woodruff, Official Declaration - 1, Doctrine & Covenants (<http://scriptures.lds.org/od/1>, accessed 12/15/04).
- 5 *Divergent Paths*, 104.
- 6 Other polygamist leaders of rival fundamentalist groups include Ervil M. LeBaron, Rulan C. Allred, and Dan Lafferty. The latter was the focus of a recent best-selling book that recounted the grisly murders committed by the Prophet Lafferty, who claimed that God commanded him to kill. See: Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven, A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
- 7 Patti Epler, "An Abbreviated History of Polygamous Communities," *Phoenix New Times*, October, 3, 2002. (<http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/issues/2002-10-03/news/sidebar.html>, accessed 11/10/2003).
- 8 Mary Mackert was 15 months old when the raid took place and was pictured with her family on the cover of *Life* magazine (September 14, 1953). As an adult, Mackart became the sixth of her husband's seven wives before rejecting polygamy. She is now a born-again Christian and has an outreach to former and current polygamists. See: <http://www.watchman.org/lds/mackert.htm>.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Divergent Paths*, 105.
- 11 Garn LeBarron, Jr., "Mormon Fundamentalism and Violence: A Historical Analysis," (1995, <http://www.exmormon.org/violence.htm>, accessed 12/15/04).
- 12 "An Abbreviated History of Polygamous Communities."
- 13 Susan Green, "Polygamy prevails in remote Arizona Town," *Denver Post*, March 4, 2001. (<http://helpthechildbrides.com/stories/laurachap.htm>, accessed 12/11/04).
- 14 Eric R. Johnson, "Trouble Brewing in Controversial Polygamist Group," *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2004, p. 9.
- 15 "An Abbreviated History of Polygamous Communities."
- 16 John Dougherty, "Arizona faces a 'Waco-level' threat from Mormon fundamentalists," *Phoenix New Times*, October, 3, 2002. (<http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/issues/2002-10-03/feature.html>, accessed 11/10/2003).
- 17 *Cultic Studies Review*, American Family Foundation, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2003 p. 60. (This is a summary of: John Dougherty, "Writer of Memo Alleging Criminal Activity Sought," *Phoenix New Times*, October 24, 2002.
- 18 "Trouble Brewing in Controversial Polygamist Group," pp. 6-8.
- 19 Joseph A. Reaves, "State enters polygamy area," *The Arizona Republic*, Nov. 28, 2004 (<http://www.azcentral.com/12news/news/articles/1128polygamy28-CP.html>, accessed 12/14/04).
- 20 For an explanation of and helpful resources on the phenomena of spiritual abuse, see: <http://www.watchman.org/spiritualabusetools.htm>.
- 21 Al Herron, "Religious sect's Prophet wields absolute control," *The (Prescott, Arizona) Daily Courier*, July 22, 2003. (a copy of this article can be accessed at: <http://helpthechildbrides.com/articles/prescottcourier.htm>, accessed 12/12/04).
- 22 Traditional Latter-day Saints often deny that Young taught the "Individual Blood Atonement" doctrine saying that he was either misquoted or was speaking hypothetically. For a brief survey, including full-page scans, citing Young and other LDS General Authorities, see: *Mormons in Transition*, <http://www.irr.org/mit/WDIST/wdist-blood-atonement.html>, (accessed 12/14/04).
- 23 John Dougherty, "Bound by Fear: Polygamy in Arizona," *Phoenix New Times*, March, 13, 2003. ([http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/issues/2003-03-13/news/feature\\_10.html](http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/issues/2003-03-13/news/feature_10.html), accessed 11/16/2004).
- 24 Both resources consist of photocopied documentation manuals and audio teaching (CD or cassette). These are available at <http://www.watchman.org/ldstools.htm>. Also, see Watchman's previously published *Profile* on the LDS church at <http://www.watchman.org/profile/ldspro.htm>.



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