The Evangelical Mind

A Modest Defense of Polygamy
By Richard Mouw

For almost four decades in the 19th century, the Mormon community officially sanctioned polygamy—the more common term among Mormons is "plural marriage." The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) finally banned the practice in the 1890s, a decision that paved the way for Utah to be granted statehood. But Mormon polygamy never really disappeared. Splinter groups of Mormon "fundamentalists" have continued to practice plural marriage. And now the subject is in the news because one of these dissidents—an outspoken husband of at least five wives—is being tried as a criminal for his polygamous lifestyle.

There aren't too many folks willing to defend the rights of the Mormon dissidents. Mainstream LDS members would rather not have the spotlight aimed at their own past sanction of plural marriage. Many feminists, inspired by reports about abuse of women in plural marriages, have portrayed polygamous wives as victims of "enslavement." Nor have the leaders of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups been quick to defend the rights of polygamists.

For what it is worth, I want to offer a modest defense of the right to practice polygamy in our pluralistic society. Let me make it clear right off, however, that I do not believe that polygamy is a good thing. It goes against some of my deepest evangelical convictions about marriage and family life. As I read the New Testament, monogamy is the pattern that God has willed for the marital relationship. To put it bluntly, I believe that polygamy is sinful. But I also believe that not everything that is sinful should be viewed as illegal. In our pluralistic society, where people of various worldviews and value systems are attempting to live together with some semblance of harmony, we need to tolerate many things we consider morally wrong. We should only legislate against those practices that pose serious threats to the fundamental rights of other human beings. This means, as I see things, that we ought to go out of our way to tolerate practices based on the sincerely held convictions of people with whom we disagree.

For example, I believe that Jehovah's Witnesses are wrong to refuse blood transfusions, but I want to respect their views on the subject. I do favor having the state declare the child of a Jehovah's Witness family a temporary ward of the court when a blood transfusion is necessary to save the child's life. But even in such extreme cases, I regret the need to violate sincerely held convictions.

My bias, then, is in favor of the Mormon polygamists—unless, of course, it can be demonstrated that their marital practices are a significant threat to the social fabric. And while I do want to take seriously the reports of spouse abuse in those settings, I think we can deal with that problem without simply banning all plural marriages. I also take reports of spouse abuse seriously in monogamous marriages, but this certainly doesn't lead me to oppose monogamy as such.

Actually, for our present society to single out Mormon polygamy for special legal censure strikes me as profoundly hypocritical. Think of related practices we do not treat as criminal. "Serial monogamy" is a long established pattern in contemporary life; many popular leaders in our culture have gone through multiple marriages and divorces, sharing parental responsibilities with a variety of former partners. In some urban subcultures, teenage males have fathered children with several different single mothers, often without acknowledging any serious sense of parental obligation. And none of this is illegal. Indeed, the promiscuous behavior of many well-known folks in the entertainment business is itself the stuff of our own entertainment.

In comparison with these other departures from the norms of monogamous family life, Mormon plural marriages—for all my disagreement with the religious and moral assumptions they take for
manifest some values I admire. There is at least an emphasis on stable community and a commitment to hands-on parenting.

I have never talked to a Mormon polygamist, nor do I have any inclination to do so. But my hunch is that if I ever were to engage in such a conversation, I would not be nearly as irritated as I have been when talking to people—as I often do—who seem to make light of their commitments as spouses and parents. In these latter conversations, I often express my disagreements with such folks with considerable passion. But I have never thought to have them thrown in jail because of what I take to be their irresponsible patterns of behavior. I see no reason why I should be harsher with Mormon practitioners of plural marriage.