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The Anomaly of Tony Alamo
Christian Ministries

A New Testament-based Call for
Christian Polygamy

Spencer L. Allen

ABSTRACT: Currently serving a 175-year prison sentence for transporting underage girls across state lines for sexual purposes, new religious movement leader Tony Alamo (b. 1934) of Tony Alamo Christian Ministries contends not only that Christian men should be polygamous but that they actually are commanded to be by Old Testament polygamy laws. Alamo bases this interpretation primarily upon Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:17 that he came to fulfill the law, not abolish it. Numerous other New Testament passages regarding marriage and the law are likewise reinterpreted through a polygamous lens, and the Old Testament’s “Holy Men of God” (e.g., Abraham, Jacob and David) are provided as role models. This article examines Alamo’s unique exegetical approach to justify Christian polygamy in twenty-first-century America; further, it compares his methods of maintaining his legitimacy among his followers with those of another modern American proponent of polygamy, the also-imprisoned leader of the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints, Warren Jeffs.

KEYWORDS: polygamy/polygyny, Tony Alamo (Bernie LaZar Hoffman), Old Testament Laws, Fouke (Arkansas), Warren Jeffs, Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints, Yearning for Zion

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My introduction to polygamy began in June 2009, when the secretary for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Arkansas forwarded to me an email from a lawyer seeking a biblical scholar as a consultant for an upcoming case. When I called, he explained that his defendant was Tony Alamo (b. 1934) of Tony Alamo Christian Ministries (TACM). Alamo had been charged with ten violations of the Mann Act for allegedly taking child brides across state lines for sexual purposes, and his federal case would begin the following month in Texarkana, Arkansas. Alamo’s defense team, the attorney said, needed a biblical scholar, a church historian, a Talmudic scholar and a scholar of Islam to explain that polygamy was a biblically mandated historical norm. The attorney wanted the scholars to claim that polygamy should be legal in the United States. The lawyer asked if I would testify as an expert in court and explain that biblical Israel and numerous other premodern cultures encouraged the marriage of pubescent girls as young as 13 or 14. I agreed to do the relevant research and prepare for court, knowing that the Old Testament nowhere declares polygamy to be a law or presents it in a truly positive light, and that nothing I could present would undermine the fact that Alamo had violated federal law. After I produced a preliminary write-up, Alamo’s defense team determined that my services were not needed.

Nine months earlier, more than one hundred federal and state authorities executed a raid on properties associated with TACM in the small town of Fouke, Arkansas, approximately 15 miles southeast of Texarkana, purportedly in search of child pornography. In a town of some 800 residents, these properties represented a relatively large swatch of residential land, including more than twenty-five living quarters, about twenty duplexes and thirty water meters, indicating that Alamo’s followers comprised a significant minority of the local population. While the TACM community in Fouke likely included no more than a couple hundred people, more precise estimates have proved difficult to find in either TACM literature or news reports. TACM also holds property in Fort Smith, on the western Arkansas border, and in the Canyon Country section of Santa Clarita, California, near Los Angeles. Other followers are known to reside in Texas and Oklahoma.

Alamo and his followers represent a small polygamous movement compared to the 10,000-plus followers of polygamist and imprisoned Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) leader Warren Jeffs (b. 1955). Because of national media attention Jeffs and the FLDS Church received after his 2006 arrest for sexually assaulting his 12-year-old and 15-year-old wives, the 2008 raid at the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints’ Yearning for Zion Ranch in Texas in response to allegations of sexual abuse, his 2011 conviction that resulted from his 2006 charges, and shows such as HBO’s *Big Love* (2006–2011) and TLC’s *Sister Wives* (2010-), American polygamy often is thought of in terms of
fundamentalist Mormons. As Alamo and his followers demonstrate, however, within American Protestantism are polygamists who justify their practice by appealing to legalistic material in the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, narrative episodes about the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob in Genesis, and New Testament rhetoric rather than the more immediate nineteenth-century traditions embraced by FLDS Church members and their desire to mimic the biblical patriarchs’ behavior. In contrast to their fundamentalist Mormon counterparts but comparable to mainstream Christianity, Alamo and his followers have not elevated post-biblical texts (e.g. The Book of Mormon) to canonical status, nor do they appeal to modern prophets. Rather, they derive their view of Christian polygamy from Alamo’s interpretation of the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:17 and Paul in Romans 3:31 to suggest that New Testament Christians are expected to keep “Old Testament Law” (the first five books of the Old Testament are referred to as the Torah in Judaism, which literally means “instruction” or “law” in Hebrew). Further distinguishing Alamo and his followers from Jeffs and the FLDS Church is the fact that Alamo claims that all Christians are obligated to keep all of the laws in the Old Testament, whereas Jeffs shows little interest in expanding the practice of polygamy to the outside world. In theory, Alamo’s exegetical analysis and conclusions represent an anomalous—if fascinating and demonstrably controversial—reading of New Testament texts, early Christian practices and their modern application.

As can be the case in transition from theory to real-world implementation, the consequences of Alamo’s exegesis are not pleasant, ethical or legal. This is why my introduction to Alamo’s biblical interpretation occurred in a forensic context. I examined Alamo’s exegetical methodology as presented in TACM religious literature and compared his defense of polygamy with statements given by and reports about his current and former followers. Because I have never met Alamo or any of his followers, my analysis is based upon Alamo’s own writings and the articles published in the Texarkana Gazette in the months and years following the 2008 raid in Fouke. Together these sources provide an incongruous picture of Alamo and the polygamous world that he worked to establish. This picture becomes clearer through comparisons between Alamo and the better-known Jeffs. I have found that despite Alamo’s unique biblical exegetical methodology and distinctive theological justifications for Christian polygamy, he maintained religious legitimacy among his followers by using techniques resembling those practiced by Jeffs.

AN EARLY BIOGRAPHY OF TONY ALAMO

Tony Alamo (pronounced uh-láh-mo) was born into a Jewish family in the Missouri Ozarks on 20 September 1934 as Bernie LaZar Hoffman.
He claims to have grown up surrounded by intolerant Christians, so his “not particularly religious” family taught him to downplay or deny his Jewishness and play up his Romanian heritage to avoid being harassed as a Christ-killer. He relocated to Los Angeles in the early 1960s, aspiring to be a singer and music producer but quickly settling into the health club business. Believing that his birth name did not fit his ambitions (or perhaps simply wanting to downplay his Jewishness as he had as a child), he first took the name Marcus Abad but ultimately adopted the Italian-sounding crooner name Tony Alamo. According to his own testimony, as Tony Alamo he became successful in the health club business, built up a large entourage and occasionally worked with members of the motion picture and music industries. But after a life-altering vision of Jesus, he reluctantly began to attend church services and Bible studies. Prior to this, Alamo had no Christian education, familiarity with the Bible or interest in religion, suggesting that his later interest in the laws of the Old Testament was not dependent upon his Jewish heritage or childhood observances. Rather, his interest seems to have begun after his 1964 vision of Jesus and the influence of his future wife Edith Opal Horn (1925–1982). He later denied that she inspired this change, insisting instead that he became a believer in response to his vision. He first met Horn in California and had known her a few years, but she refused to speak with him until he begged her to read and explain the Bible to him after his vision. The two married in 1966, after he finished serving time for a weapons charge, and she took the name Susan Alamo. If we can trust these autobiographical moments in Alamo’s tracts, the basics of his theology appear to be rooted in Susan’s early exposure to evangelical streams of Christianity in rural Arkansas and southern California.

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CALL FOR CHRISTIAN POLYGAMY

Alamo, like Warren Jeffs, was incarcerated for sexually abusing underage girls rather than polygamy. The following analysis, however, focuses more on the polygamy issue for two reasons. The literature I received from Alamo’s legal team focused more generally on polygamy and less on underage marriage. Moreover, Alamo’s argument for marrying pubescent girls to adult men seems derived largely from his polygamous interpretation of scripture. Just as a husband needs more wives to be a more successful multiplier, a wife needs more time and must start multiplying as early as possible. When conclusions are based upon the group’s literature, the child-bride phenomenon at TACM appears to be the natural other side of the polygamy coin.

As a man who believes he is “in prison for preaching the King James Version of the Bible,” Alamo bases his exegetical method on three
interrelated principles. The first is a very Christian idea: Jesus proclaimed himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) who alone can grant salvation. Alamo quotes or alludes to this verse throughout his literature, and it plays an important role in his confessional prayer that closes each of his essays and newsletters. The second principle is that “Christ did not come just to procure a pardon for us. He came to restore His lost holiness in us.” He often cites Romans 3:24-25, 6:18-22, which are closely associated with the so-called “Roman Road,” a series of verses that, taken together, lay out the road to salvation. The former verse serves as evidence that people are justified or redeemed by Christ’s grace, and the latter explicitly promises this holiness for God’s people. For Alamo, this holiness has restorative benefits for true Christians, who regularly experience it as a blessing.

Mainstream Christianity, however, does not teach Alamo’s third principle: the true Christian must be a polygamist, because to be holy one must keep God’s law. He reinforces this principle with several proof texts, notably Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one title shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18). Jesus told his followers to keep all of God’s law, but the Church has rejected this since the first century. Rather than permit Christians to abandon the law as they have done for two millennia because of Paul’s arguments in Galatians, Alamo quotes Romans 3:31, where Paul asks rhetorically, “Do we then make void the law through faith?” and immediately answers, “God forbid: yea, we establish the law.” Because Jesus declared that all of the law must be fulfilled and Paul claimed “we establish the law,” Alamo concludes that today’s true Christians must fulfill all of the laws contained in the Old Testament to ensure their salvation.

Alamo further maintains that Jesus’ statement encompasses polygamy, which he says was practiced in biblical Israel and was still endorsed and practiced in New Testament times. The fact that the Old Testament nowhere commands Israelite men to marry multiple wives simultaneously is not a problem for Alamo. Nor is the fact that scholars of early Christian history can offer no evidence of polygamy among the early Christian communities, much less in the New Testament itself, a problem. For Alamo, a lack of negative evidence is proof of positive evidence:

Negative doctrine against polygamy would certainly have been preserved in the New Testament and shown to be unlawful in the early Christian communities, if the problem had ever arisen in their own moral life. But polygamy was never even mentioned once as being negative, illegal, unlawful, or changed, with the exception of the bishops and deacons in Greece and Rome by Paul. It shows that the question did not arise among...
the Jewish or Gentile communities to whom the Gospel was addressed, because there was no question of its godly legality in God’s government.\(^{30}\)

Had polygamy been contrary to Christian belief and practice, Alamo argues, New Testament texts would have openly condemned it. He does not consider it negative evidence when Paul comments in 1 Corinthians 7:7–8 that ideally no Christian man should touch a woman, much less multiple women, or various early Church movements’ promotion of celibacy (e.g., The Acts of Paul and Thecla 10:15). Rather, he focuses on Paul’s brief statement restricting bishops and deacons to one wife (1 Timothy 3) and concludes that all other men were encouraged to take more than one wife.\(^{31}\) He notes that some men would have been obligated by some Old Testament laws to take a second wife:

Although a man might wish to remain monogamous, yet God’s law of Levirate inheritance might easily convert him into a bigamist, if he were already married, by God’s law of right and wrong commanding him to marry his brother’s widow, if the brother had died without leaving a son. Among the Hebrews, this was a frequent cause of polygamy.\(^{32}\)

Alamo appeals to the levirate (Latin, “brother-in-law”) marriage law requiring a man to father a child with his deceased brother’s childless widow as evidence that polygamy was common in ancient Israel. If he was unwilling to marry his sister-in-law, Deuteronomy 25:5–10 prescribed a ritual in which the widow could remove his sandal and spit in his face (vv. 7–10), ending his duty (although tarnishing his name). The possibility that the brother could back out of his levirate obligation intrigues Alamo, who interprets the ritual both literally and typologically in order to apply it both to ancient Israelites and today’s Christian men.\(^{33}\) Alamo berates the unwilling brother—as well as today’s Christian man who refuses to take multiple wives—as “a man who doesn’t walk in the shoes of God’s commandments. . . .” An “ungodly man who will not perform polygamy” will “surely spend eternity in Hell.”\(^{34}\) In addition, Alamo claims that today’s “apostate churches” are “wolves in sheep’s clothing” because they oppose the marriage of young girls to practicing polygamists.\(^{35}\) He counts these churches among the hypocrites prophesied by Paul:

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, [and] to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth (1 Timothy 4:1–3).

For Alamo, this passage is prophetic because it anticipates those who reject his modern-day interpretation and application of levirate
marriage (and presumably his other non-mainstream interpretations). Today’s apostate churches speak lies and forbid polygamous marriage, whereas true Christians—Alamo and his male followers—maintain their holiness because they keep God’s laws and are willing to take another wife.

The phrase “take another wife” also is significant for Alamo’s understanding of divorce and its inherent sinfulness. Jesus said that if a man divorces his wife (for any reason other than sexual immorality) she becomes an adulterer when she remarries (Matthew 5:32), so Alamo concludes that even today a man who divorces his wife makes his wife a sinner. His conclusion is then compounded, because if the husband voluntarily makes his ex-wife a sinner, he too becomes a sinner. Because “divorce is sin,” Alamo asks how a true believer could commit such a grave sin and jeopardize his salvation. He notes, however, that the Bible never says that having more than one wife is a sin or even problematic, “with the exception of the bishops and deacons” in 1 Timothy 3. Rather than divorce, the true Christian man should love and marry a second (or third) wife while continuing to support the unloved wife (or wives) and their children. Slightly modifying a well-known statement from the Sermon on the Mount that a man should pluck out his eye to avoid looking at women with lust (Matthew 5:27–30), Alamo claims “it is much better to stay married than to burn in the Lake of Fire.”

Another law Alamo invokes as evidence for polygamy and marriage to pubescent girls is God’s first commandment to humankind: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Alamo says it is easier for a man to multiply when he has multiple wives. Likewise, women have more time to be fruitful if they start multiplying at an earlier age, and he notes Paul’s claim that women will be saved through childbearing (1 Timothy 2:15). The earlier girls wed, the earlier they attain salvation. He claims that Abraham took his third wife Keturah when she was between 9 and 13 years old (Genesis 25:1–6), and he cites the Book of Jashar 25:40, which states that Rebecca was 10 when she married 40-year-old Isaac (Gen. 25:20). Because God cannot sin or encourage anyone to sin, Alamo reasons, God implicitly approves of such marriages even today. If the Christian male is going to maintain his holiness and salvation, he should follow these exemplars of the faith, marry many wives—some of whom might be young girls—and keep the law as Jesus commanded.

Today’s “apostate churches” that require people to wait until they are older to marry are “forbidding marriage” in the sense that they are delaying a woman’s opportunity to be fruitful. A woman may choose to wait until she is 18, but by making this wait mandatory the world’s churches and governments have undermined God’s command. Marriage-age laws prevent a pubescent girl from fulfilling the Old Testament’s laws just as anti-polygamy laws prevent a man from fathering more children. This is why Alamo felt compelled to break human-made law—or felt justified in
doing so—in order to follow God’s laws, violate the Mann Act several times and, according to numerous allegations, take child brides himself, one of whom was only 8 when she became his bride.\(^{43}\)

**ALAMO’S SOTERIOLOGY AND MAINSTREAM CHRISTIANITY**

Having examined Alamo’s exegetical justification for polygamy and underage brides, we can now compare and contrast his religious literature with the reality that unfolded at Fouke, Arkansas. As noted above, Alamo’s theological resemblance to mainstream Christianity includes his general understanding that a believer gains eternal salvation from Jesus Christ alone. The prayer with which he closes his literature repeatedly names Jesus as the son of God and only source of salvation:

My Lord and my God, have mercy upon my soul, a sinner. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God. I believe that He died on the cross and shed His precious blood for the forgiveness of all my sins. I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit and that He sits on the right hand of God at this moment, hearing my confession of sin and this prayer. I open up the door of my heart and I invite You into my heart, Lord Jesus. Wash all of my filthy sins away in the precious blood that You shed in my place on the cross at Calvary. You will not turn me away, Lord Jesus, You will forgive my sins and save my soul. I know because Your Word, the Bible says so. Your Word says that You will turn no one away, and that includes me. Therefore, I know that You have heard me, and I know that You have answered me, and I know that I am saved. And I thank You, Lord Jesus, for saving my soul, and I will show my thankfulness by doing as You command and sin no more.\(^{44}\)

Of particular interest is the fact that while this prayer suggests that a believer’s salvation is not permanently guaranteed because future sins are not forgiven, Alamo nowhere claims to play a role in determining the believer’s assurance of salvation. However, when his followers’ statements are taken into account, the soteriology presented in his literature does not play out in practice.

In the wake of the 2008 raid on TACM in Fouke, numerous statements revealed that followers believed their salvation depended upon their relationship with Alamo and TACM. For instance, former child-bride-to-be Nicole Farr observed that other girls believed that becoming Alamo’s bride would serve as “their way into heaven,”\(^{45}\) suggesting a works-based rather than the faith-based salvation Alamo espoused in his literature. Her statement also suggests that followers believed it was Alamo himself who determined which of the faithful would be rewarded with salvation. A works-based or Alamo-determined salvation seems to have been an underlying concern of individuals who remained faithful to Alamo and
TACM after his incarceration. Several parents whose children were taken into state custody as a result of the raid sued the state to regain custody. Several parents were told by the courts that they would have to sever all ties to TACM in order to regain custody. In one case, two fathers claimed that if they severed ties they would jeopardize their chances at salvation. They believed that the courts and the state were forcing them to choose between reuniting their families and realizing their eternal destinies.

The apparent contradiction between faith-based salvation through Jesus described in TACM literature and works-based salvation through Alamo assumed by his followers can be readily reconciled. Alamo would undoubtedly appeal to James 2:17, which states that faith without works is dead, and this is precisely the point he makes in one of his tracts: “After salvation, we must do the work of the Lord. If we don’t, we, like the rest of the world, are doing the work of the devil; God’s Word says so. If we do nothing, sitting idle, we’re still doing the work of the devil.” With this in mind, we can understand how the two fathers truly believed that their salvation was at stake if they severed ties with TACM.

Furthermore, because Alamo’s salvation prayer requires the faithful to “sin no more” and does not include promised forgiveness of future sins, Alamo could inform the faithful that their resistance to him indicated their sinful state and rebellion against God. Although the child brides may have believed that marrying Alamo (or another adult male) would have benefited them as part of a works-based salvation, Alamo needed only to hint that by not having sex (or delaying sex until legal marrying age) these girls were willfully breaking God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply.” Likewise, because the fathers believed their salvation depended upon volunteering all of their time, Alamo could counter that they selfishly misplaced their priorities and made their individual families more important than the larger family of God.

Alamo could have argued that believers maintain their salvation by accepting that God’s leader would not steer them wrong and cause them to sin. In practice this likely meant they should trust that Alamo had his followers’ best interests at heart as he helped them keep the Old Testament laws. Using this argument and his believer’s prayer, Alamo theologically recused himself from determining anyone’s salvation and effectively let followers decide what works they should continue. In doing so, he maintained a foothold in mainstream Christianity in regards to Jesus’ unique role in salvation, but in practice his followers pinned their chances at salvation upon him.

**SOTERIOLOGY AND PROPHECY: ALAMO AND JEFFS**

Whereas in his literature Alamo’s soteriology closely resembles that of mainstream Christianity, his followers’ statements suggest that they
give Alamo an important role in determining their salvation. The relationship between Alamo and his followers resembles in many ways that between Warren Jeffs and his FLDS followers.

Jeffs is the son of FLDS prophet Rulon Jeffs (1909–2002), during whose tenure the “one-man rule” doctrine was enacted giving the elder Jeffs full authority over doctrine and other matters. The prophet was perceived as God’s mouthpiece, and opposing him was tantamount to opposing God. Included in this one-man rule was the authority to seal and unseal marriages—that is, he could spiritually marry or divorce anyone at will. According to FLDS doctrine, a man must have at least three wives to reach the highest levels of heaven, and a woman can ascend to heaven only if her husband takes her there. Thus, by deciding how many wives were sealed in celestial marriage to any particular man, Rulon Jeffs effectively controlled the destinies of them all, and they recognized this.

After Rulon’s death in 2002, his son Warren became prophet of the FLDS Church. The younger Jeffs exercised control over his followers’ salvation by reassigning the wives and children of men he considered troublemakers to more submissive males, at the same time ensuring that no other men caused trouble. He labeled his rivals as apostates, stripped them of wives, children and power, and then excommunicated them. This ability to determine who should be married to whom was part of his role as the prophet who spoke God’s desires to the faithful. Theologically, he did not have to be seen as the one who determined followers’ salvation as long as he was seen as the one who related God’s will. In practice, Jeffs determined his followers’ fates both here on earth and in the next world.

Modern prophecy and continuing revelation have long played an important role in the broader Mormon movement; Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–1844) received revelations from God, as has each subsequent prophet in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). In FLDS tradition, prophetic revelation holds scripture-like authority, and prophets see themselves as the true expression of leadership. Warren Jeffs’ word was authoritative because he spoke for God; hence, his followers accepted his control over their marriages.

In contrast, for Alamo there is no modern prophet because no one receives continuing revelation that is as authoritative as Scripture. Likewise, his followers could act according to his will while simultaneously believing that his insights reflected God’s desires. Disobeying Alamo was tantamount to disobeying God, costing them eternal salvation. If he asked men to marry young girls or spend all their efforts volunteering at TACM, then they knew what they must do to stay within God’s graces: obey Alamo.

Alamo proudly admits that he experienced the divine and saw a vision, using language that paints his calling as one resembling Paul’s
on the road to Damascus. He claims he saw the entrance to hell and a multitude of people there, as well as a vision of heaven and “how beautiful, pleasant, and peaceful it is.” He realized he had been saved, and it “felt like a big boulder was removed off of my back.” Elsewhere, he claims that this vision occurred during a business meeting in Beverly Hills, where a voice told him to “stand up on your feet and tell the people in this room about the Lord Jesus Christ, and that he’s coming back to earth again, or thou shalt surely die.” In a moment of divine immanence, he sensed God’s “unspeakable, incredible intelligence.”

This early vision seems to be the extent of Alamo’s prophetic experience—if it can be called prophetic—and it offers no new insights to Christian experience or theology. His account fills about one-third of a standard page and includes several footnotes offering only biblical citations. After describing his vision, he writes, “After God released me from that office, I started asking Him, ‘what do you want me to do? I’ll do anything you say.’ I got no answer. He went to church and started listening to and reading books about God, but this did not satisfy him. Then, he reluctantly read the Bible:

I never thought the truth could be found in the Bible because there were so many of them around. I felt that anything the general public went for couldn’t be smart, since I believed people were all stupid. I finally started reading the Bible and found the plan of salvation in it, and the instructions for eternal life which told how to grow up in Christ and spiritually become a major soul-winner for Him. . . . When I first started reading the Bible, I felt that same power of God pressing down upon me that I felt in that Beverly Hills office.

Apart from his one vision, the only thing that remotely could be considered Alamo’s prophetic capacity is his ability to interpret the Bible. He flatly denies that he ever introduced novel doctrinal truths. Prophetic references in the tract “More Than a Prophet” are said to concern Jesus, not Alamo. His words and his ministry’s literature are not considered continuing revelation by the faithful (as is the case with Jeffs in the FLDS Church community), but they are authoritative because Alamo claims to understand what God intends as the Bible’s true meaning. With his claim to be an interpreter of Scripture rather than a new voice for the divine, Alamo resembles many evangelical ministers and other evangelical Christians who believe that the Holy Spirit assists the faithful as they read the Bible, a tradition many might trace back to Martin Luther (1483–1546) or John Wesley (1703–1791) and his fellow Pietists. If all believers have different talents as Paul claimed in 1 Corinthians 12, interpretation would not be unique to Alamo; however, he likely would claim that his talent is better than that of others. Still, he is no self-professed prophet.
Unlike Jeffs, whose legitimacy is based upon his own prophetic nature and revelation as well as his line of prophetic succession, Alamo bases his legitimacy upon his biblical interpretation, which is not that different from many evangelicals who believe their own interpretation of the Bible should be preferred. Essentially, Alamo’s theology can be described as *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) with a high Christology. This description is reinforced by footnotes and parenthetical citations permeating his personal letters, newsletters and literature, and his 1980 book. Like many evangelicals, Alamo primarily is interested in and dependent upon the Pauline corpus (both the authentic and Deutero-Pauline letters), the Pentateuch (especially the Ten Commandments) and the Gospels (especially the Sermon on the Mount).

Of course, just because Alamo denies possessing prophetic abilities does not mean his followers do not consider him a prophet. Indeed, one former child bride said, “Everybody thinks he’s a prophet here.” Another girl, who left the community at age 11, contrasted her own opinion with the rest of Alamo’s followers. “I didn’t think he was a prophet,” she said, suggesting that the others did. In a series of interviews after Alamo’s arrest, one woman likened his persecution to that of the biblical prophets: “If you read the Bible, you’ll see the same thing happening over and over again to every prophet.” Alamo downplayed his role as a prophet who determined others’ salvation, but his followers embraced it. In this regard, Alamo’s roles closely resemble those of Jeffs.

**JEFFS’ ISOLATIONISM AND ALAMO’S OUTREACH**

Another way in which Alamo resembles Jeffs is his relationship with the outside world and mainstream Christianity. By the beginning of the twentieth century, fundamentalist Mormon groups (including the religious movement that eventually became the FLDS Church) were already exclusive groups with their own leaders and practices, largely because they had splintered away from the mainstream LDS Church in response to the Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) Manifesto in 1890 renouncing polygamy. In 2000, before his father Rulon’s death, Warren Jeffs and select followers relocated from Salt Lake City to the FLDS Church community in the Colorado City/Hildale area on the Arizona-Utah border. According to the Utah attorney general, the location in remote Colorado City/Hildale allowed the FLDS Church to “be isolated in a way where they could practice their religion and kind of be left alone and unmolested.” After his father’s death in 2002, Jeffs and his followers again turned increasingly inward, and the next year Jeffs relocated part of the FLDS Church members and their families to a settlement near Eldorado, Texas called Yearning for Zion Ranch. To rationalize this
move in 2003, Jeffs cast himself as a “persecuted’ prophet” surrounded by “apostates and troublemakers” who needed to be free from his detractors. To prevent the faithful remnant from becoming apostates and protect them from the outside world, Jeffs further isolated them by restricting their access to information. He told them to avoid television, newspapers and the Internet, and the local radio station “shunned popular songs with lyrics, broadcasting mostly upbeat, patriotic instrumentals.”

Jeffs’ demand for such far-reaching control highlighted his exclusivist view of “us” versus the rest of the world. Because of his interest in the coming end of the world and salvation for the elect, Jeffs eventually became so focused on himself and his followers that the remainder of the world had to be excluded to ensure the movement’s well-being and its members’ eventual salvation.

Another benefit of exclusivity at Yearning for Zion Ranch was that Jeffs could more easily cover up his own and other men’s sexual relationships with underage girls.

In contrast, even as Alamo limited his followers’ exposure to the very outside world they sought to evangelize, he dedicated his ministry to outreach and bringing people in to help spread his message. He even claimed that it was his wife Susan who started the Jesus movement in the late 1960s when, at the beginning of their ministry together, she testified to hippies on Hollywood Boulevard. From 1973 to 1982, he and Susan hosted a nationally broadcast television show that included gospel singing, testimonies and a “spirit filled message.” Alamo wanted everyone to hear his words of salvation. To this end, his followers still occasionally place religious tracts under windshield wipers in parking lots throughout western Arkansas and neighboring regions. Moreover, despite his incarceration his followers maintain the TACM website containing his literature, testimonies, newly published essays and letters. He still wants to get his message out and for more people to join his church and volunteer their time, money and property.

As has been made clear, Alamo’s message by no means espouses universal inclusivism: not everyone receives salvation, especially backsliders or those who testified against him as part of what he perceived as the government’s conspiracy. Apart from these exceptions, however, the thrust of his literature is that everyone is potentially eligible for salvation. In his desire to minister beyond the faithful, Alamo resembles his mainstream and evangelical counterparts but is quite distinct from Jeffs. Yet, as Jeffs did with his FLDS followers, Alamo intentionally limited his followers’ access to the outside world. Prior to the 2008 raid in Fouke, he and other TACM members regularly exhibited an us-versus-them mentality. Security guards were employed to keep the public away from properties in Fouke, and members were not allowed to interact with outsiders unless actively evangelizing. This limitation extended to children, who did not attend public schools. TACM-based instruction included
teaching children to fear police, and if questioned by workers with the Arkansas Department of Human Services they were to give predetermined answers. Just as Jeffs physically assaulted potential apostates, Alamo and his alleged enforcer John E. Kolbek (d. 2011) sometimes used physical punishment—whether ordered by Alamo or requested by parents themselves—to discipline troublesome children. Disciplinary actions included “diesel therapy,” making a child ride with a TACM trucker for weeks at a time; forcing a fast for three to seven days; and demoting Alamo’s own child brides from his residence to the “green house” or “house of scorn.” Another intrusive technique resembling Jeffs’ reassignment of wives and children and his excommunication of apostate members was Alamo’s alleged control of where individual families lived in the community. Just as Jeffs’ isolationist tendencies helped him shield his illegal activities—namely polygamy and sexual abuse—from the government, Alamo’s helped prevent, for a while anyway, public reports of sexual and physical abuse of children.

As the TACM website and his nearly forty years of ministerial outreach demonstrate, Alamo wanted to be a well-known public figure, especially in the evangelical world. Widespread knowledge of his illegal acts, however, would damage his own and the ministry’s image and curtail any outreach abilities. Precisely for this reason, he and his followers isolated themselves from the outside world in a way comparable to Jeffs and the FLDS community.

CONCLUSION

Legally, Tony Alamo and Warren Jeffs have much in common. Both are serving long prison sentences for sexually assaulting young girls. In 2011 Jeffs was sentenced to life in prison plus 20 years for sexually assaulting his 12- and 15-year-old wives, having fathered a child with the latter. In 2009 Alamo began serving 175 years for violating the Mann Act, and several girls came forward at his trial with reports that he molested, married and raped them. In early 2014, Nicole Farr and six women who had been Alamo’s child brides were awarded more than a total of $500 million dollars in actual and punitive damages because he had physically and sexually abused them. In addition, these two polygamous men led their respective communities in such a way that their followers believed that salvation ultimately depended upon their leaders. Both sought to isolate and physically intimidate their followers to enhance group cohesion and cooperation. The real difference between Jeffs and Alamo is that Jeffs recognized he was not a member of mainstream America and never tried to act like one; Alamo, in contrast, tried to remain within mainstream Christianity. Whereas Jeffs knew that the outside world would judge him for his non-normative religious beliefs and sexual activities and
so remained hidden, Alamo expected that the world would consider him no different than any other Christian evangelist. He justified his non-normative religious beliefs through his own unique method of biblical exegesis focused on Christians observing all of what he considered to be the laws of the Old Testament with the hope that the larger Christian world would then excuse his sexual activities and praise him as a holy man. Alamo now believes that he is “in prison for preaching the King James Version of the Bible,” but the twelve Arkansas jurors who found him guilty on all counts concluded that he abused his authority to maintain religious legitimacy among his followers and exploit them for his own sexual desires. Alamo and Jeffs had distinct theological justifications for polygamy and child brides, but they used similar techniques to establish their religious legitimacy.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Technically, Tony Alamo’s argument is about Christian polygyny (multiple wives) rather than polygamy (multiple spouses). I use “polygamy” throughout this article because it is popularly used to mean multiple wives and because Alamo uses it in his literature. He makes clear that he endorses only polygyny, not polygamy. See the subsection entitled “Why Men and Not Women?” in Tony Alamo, “The Many Wives of the Holy Men of God (The Polygamists),” April 2010, www.alamoministries.com/content/english/Gospel_literature/many-wives.html.


6 Estimating the population from the number of housing units is problematic because it is impossible to determine any individual household’s size with reliable accuracy. Multiple women and children could have lived in a single residence with one husband. Further complicating population estimates, documents presented by the Department of Human Services listed more than 120 children, supposedly living on TACM-associated properties in Fouke, for removal from parental custody. See Lynn LaRowe, “100-plus Alamo Children Missing: Officials Fear Kids Taken Across State Lines,” Texarkana Gazette, 20 November 2008, www.texarkanagazette.com/news/2008/11/20/100-plus-alamo-children-missing-53.php. Some 126 children were listed simply as unknown juveniles, and fewer than 40 were identified and taken into protective custody. Eighteen were taken from Fouke properties on 18 November 2008, and six more (of the same mother) were found in Indiana about two weeks later. See Lynn LaRowe, “Six More Children in Custody,” Texarkana Gazette, 4 December 2008, www.texarkanagazette.com/news/2008/12/04/six-more-children-in-custody-28.php.


“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.”

“Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.”


Lancaster, “Tony Alamo.” Regarding his name change, Alamo wrote, “I took the name of Tony Alamo a lot of years ago as a professional singer. The Italians were all making it as crooners at that time. (If the craze would have been for Oriental singers, my name would probably be Yak Sukiyaki.)” Alamo, “Signs of the Times.”

Alamo, “Signs of the Times.”


Horn was also of Jewish heritage and from the Ozarks in Alma, Arkansas, 130 miles south of Alamo’s hometown of Joplin, Missouri. Other notable dates in Alamo’s life include the couple’s relocation of TACM from southern California to western Arkansas in 1975; Susan’s death in 1982, after which Alamo placed her body on display for some six months because he believed she would be resurrected; his 1994–1998 incarceration for tax evasion; and the Southern Poverty Law Center labeling TACM a hate group in 2007 for its strong anti-Catholic rhetoric. See Lancaster, “Tony Alamo.”

Having said this, I am certain that psychological and forensic analyses and in-depth interviews with Alamo, his followers and child-bride victims would reveal that, in reality, Alamo’s actions preceded his biblical justification. Unfortunately, these means of examination are not available to me.

Tony Alamo, “A Letter from Tony,” 2010, Tony Alamo Christian Ministries, www.alamoministries.com/content/english/Gospel_literature/letterfromtony.html. Alamo saw a connection between his imprisonment and his biblical exegesis: “As you know, I’m in prison for preaching the King James Version of the Bible, which teaches having more than one wife is not condemned by God (note 1: Ex. 21:10, Deut. 21:15–17, 25:5–6, Judges 8:30, 10:3–4, 12:8–9, 13–14, II Sam. 3:2–5, 5:13, 12:8, Isa. 4:1, Matt. 5:17, I Tim. 4:1–3), and the legal age of marriage is puberty (note 2: I Cor. 7:1–2, 9, I Tim. 5:14).” This persecuted-saint motif was also espoused by his followers after his 2008 arrest. One woman, whose legal custody battle for her daughter was partially paid for by TACM, stated that Alamo had been targeted by the government for truthfully preaching the Bible. See Lynn

21 Because Alamo maintains that the King James Version (KJV) is the only acceptable English translation of the Bible, all quoted biblical texts herein reflect the Authorized King James Version.


23 “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

24 “Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things [is] death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.”

25 For a discussion and sample dialogue presenting how one can use the Roman Road (Romans 3:23; 6:23; 5:8; 10:9, 13) to evangelize effectively, see Darrell W. Robinson, Synergistic Evangelism (Bloomington, Ind.: CrossBooks, 2011), 114–18.


28 Alamo, “True Believers’ Sabbath”; and “Many Wives.”

29 I would like to thank Karen King of Harvard Divinity School for confirming my own research regarding the lack of early Christian polygyny.

30 Alamo, “Many Wives.”

31 Contrary to the majority of New Testament scholars today, but like most Christian readers of the past two millennia, Alamo believes that Paul wrote the two epistles to Timothy.

32 Alamo, “Many Wives.”

33 As an interpretative method, typology partially resembles allegory, wherein the characters and events of a narrative actually represent those of the interpreter’s world. However, unlike allegory, which recognizes the narrative itself as fictional, typology recognizes the narrative as historically reliable while simultaneously foreshadowing the interpreter’s understood meaning. For example, the Puritans saw themselves as the New Israelites conquering a new Promised Land in America; however, they recognized that the biblical Israelites and Israel actually existed. In this way, Alamo understands that the Israelite brother who refuses to marry his brother’s widow to represent both real Israelite men and modern, monogamous Christian men.

34 Alamo, “Many Wives.”

35 Elsewhere Alamo says, “God’s legal marriage age is puberty, and it is legal to have two or more wives if you can support them and the children that evolve


Alamo, “Divorce is Sin.”

Alamo, “Many Wives”; “God Approves”; and “A Letter From Tony.”

Alamo, “Many Wives.”

Likewise, Alamo states that David married Abishag when she was 9 or 10 (1 Kings 1:1–4). See Tony Alamo, “The Proper or Suitable Age of Marriage,” 2010, Tony Alamo Christian Ministries, www.alamoministries.com/content/english/Gospel_literature/properage.html. I have not determined upon which ancient authorities Alamo bases these claims regarding Abraham’s and David’s young wives. Perhaps Keturah’s age was obtained through Alamo’s Spirit-led interpretive capacities. Abishag’s age could have been derived from the fact that she is called a “young virgin” (1 Kings 1:2), but since this term is not limited to specific age groups in biblical Hebrew, it also is an interpretive issue on Alamo’s part.


Alamo, “Many Wives.”

“Witness: Evangelist Took 8-year-old Bride,” NBCNews.com, 15 July 2009, www.nbcnews.com/id/31920103/#.UurFz_bvbQN. Although theoretically this child bride could have reached menarche at such a young age, a recent newspaper article explicitly states that she was “a pre-pubescent girl” at 8. See Lynn LaRowe, “Court Awards More Than $500 Million to Alamo ‘Wives,’” Texarkana Gazette, 27 February 2014, www.texarkanagazette.com/news/2014/02/27/court-awards-more-than-500-million-to-al-578119.php. Alamo’s biblical exemplars, whom he argues had reached menarche before their marriages, do not adequately justify his practices. Neither does his observation that Muhammad married the 6-year-old Aishah while in his fifties, even though the marriage was not consummated until she was 9. See Alamo, “Proper or Suitable.”

Alamo, “Signs of the Times.”


while requiring the families to live apart from TACM-associated properties and give up their volunteer work.


49 LaRowe, “Web Gets a Peek.” According to this article, the 16-year-old girl agrees with Alamo’s assertion that women should marry immediately after menarche in order to “be fruitful” as commanded.


53 Bradley Evans, “Past as Prologue,” 42.


57 Alamo, “I Saw Heaven.”

58 Alamo, “Dry Bones,” 2.

59 Alamo, “Dry Bones,” 2n.12–16.

60 Alamo, “Dry Bones,” 2.

61 Alamo, “Dry Bones,” 2.

62 In this way, Alamo’s vision of himself as a prophet fits easily within the spectrum of orthodox Christianity that evangelical writer Roger Olson lays out in his discussion of divine revelation. See Roger Olson, The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 85.


64 Consider, for example, Mark Noll’s brief discussion on the great variety of interpretations and forms within the eighteenth-century Pietism movement in Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000), 240f.

Lynn LaRowe, “Teens Testify in Custody Hearing,” Texarkana Gazette, 18 November 2008, www.texarkanagazette.com/news/2008/11/18/teens-testify-in-custody-hearing-24.php. The girl stated that when she was 14, Alamo pulled her out of the shower and threatened her with a beating by his enforcer John Kolbek. She later left the community with hopes of living with her mother in another state. They gave her $40 and a bus ticket to get there.

LaRowe, “Teens Testify.” This girl had lived in Alamo’s house but was kicked out and moved into the “green house” or “house of scorn.”


Shurtleff, “Religion and Non-State Governance,” 118; see also Bradley Evans, “Past as Prologue,” 38.

Bradley Evans, “Past as Prologue,” 38.


Bradley Evans, “Past as Prologue,” 42.

Richey, “Prophet to Pedophile.”

Alamo, “Signs of the Times.”


“UPDATE: Feds Raid Alamo.”


LaRowe, “Teens Testify.” See also Lynn LaRowe, “Alamo Loyalists: DHS Acting in Bad Faith,” Texarkana Gazette, 16 September 2009, www.texarkanagazette.com/news/2009/09/16/alamo-loyalists-dhs-acting-in-bad-faith-64.php. In an undated “press release” clearly written after his 2009 sentencing, Alamo mentioned that the Miller family offered to run the church’s trucking company in the late 1980s and accused them of embezzling all the money from this arm of TACM. See Tony Alamo, “Press Release by Pastor Tony Alamo,” Tony Alamo Christian Ministries, www.alamoministries.com/content/english/newsreleases/pressreleasemillers.html, accessed 23 November 2013. Robert Miller, however, claimed it was Alamo who embezzled $100,000 from the company, and Alamo was found guilty in 1990. See Lancaster, “Tony Alamo.” Lancaster notes that in addition to the trucking company, since 1975 TACM has operated or continues to operate 29 different businesses, including a restaurant and grocery store in Alma and a nationwide clothing firm.

Seth Calagna and Spencer Ondrisek were each awarded $15 million in actual and punitive damages because they had been “beaten, starved, and denied an education as children raised in the ministry”; however, Calagna’s mother, maintains that Calagna and Ondrisek deserved to be “spanked” and should not be rewarded. See LaRowe, “Alamo Followers Testify in Hearing over Property Sales.”

Former followers allege that Alamo could and would break up families on a whim. See LaRowe, “Parents Plead”; and “Alamo Loyalists.”

These isolationist tendencies also were meant to keep TACM off the radars of the Internal Revenue Service and the United States Department of Labor. Alamo began battling the IRS over his tax-exempt status in 1985. See Lancaster, “Tony Alamo.”

LaRowe, “Court Awards.” These damages are to be paid from Alamo’s water rights that he allegedly holds in Santa Clarita, which are said to be worth billions of dollars.

Alamo, “Letter from Tony.”