

CONVERTED POLYGAMISTS AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The following article was contributed by one of our Seedbed readers. I can only recall one instance during my ministry in North Africa when we were faced with the potential of this type of crisis. And in that instance, the professed believer who had two wives died before we had to consider the matter of his integration into the emerging church. My impression is that this article may be more applicable to workers in sub-saharan Africa and perhaps other places in the Muslim world than it is to the Arab Muslim world. We invite your feedback as to whether you have grappled with this problem and, if so, how have you dealt with the issue? Ed.

Polygamy in Muslim lands

Mission work amongst Muslims has begun in God's providence to bear considerable fruit in the salvation of many. In societies, still in many respects culturally similar to that of the patriarchs, this can present unusual and complex problems. In the West, our society has generally undergone a dramatic and astonishing slide in moral standards. Our Middle Eastern neighbours look on with pity and disdain. In particular, they lament the break-up of marital and family life, and the easy shamelessness of divorce. Yet it is in Near Eastern and African societies that legal and stable polygamous relationships, while not prevalent, do occur, particularly in rural and agricultural communities. It is difficult for the Western mind to appreciate how such attitudes can coexist in the same community. But there the stricter Muslim authorities express little embarrassment at embracing both the shamefulness of divorce and a firm defense of polygyny's legitimacy.

What is at issue?

The problem the churches face is how to handle converts who are already engaged in a polygamous marriage. The problem is particularly acute when each of the wives expresses a preference to stay with her husband. Do we have scriptural grounds to require, and if necessary to compel, the divorce of these partners against their will? And if so which partners and how?

Guiding scriptural principles.

It is with Christ's own law that we examine the Scriptures, and it is Christ who Himself starts with Moses.¹ We dare not add to or remove from any of God's holy law.² There is grave danger even if we slightly compromise or defile His holy standards. There is equally serious danger if we fall into a state which the Apostle challenges, 'Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?'³ What a daunting task the conscientious interpreter has to face! How scrupulous we must be not

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to inject our presuppositions into the texts! God's explicit declarations are undoubtedly the clearest and best place to found our approach. Yet we should find no real conflict between God's express statements and His actions toward His people in Scripture narrative—indeed there may be a tension temporarily arising between the two as a result of His great patience, but ultimately His acting and His speaking will both reflect His perfect, holy and immutable character. If we do find apparent conflict it should stimulate a careful re-examination of our approach. Additionally to argue as some, that His essential moral requirements have changed progressively with the passage of history does great violence to His consistency and integrity.⁴

Is polygamy sinful?

Genesis 2:23-25 establishes that God's purpose at creation was a monogamous relationship between one husband and one wife. Christ's quotation of this creation ordinance significantly introduces the word 'two' from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament in both Matthew and Mark's accounts. God's plan and ordinance for marriage is monogamous. It was Lamech, a singularly violent and vengeful man, who apparently first introduced a deviation from God's order. 1Corinthians 7:2-4 sets out the New Testament requirements for believers most clearly. How can a woman share joint authority over her husband with another? How can the reciprocal submission here required of each partner ever be engaged in by a man with two

wives? There is an exclusive singularity of relationship intended here, in contrast to the fornication and faithlessness of Corinthian society. So we conclude from these and other texts that polygamy is a deviation from and breach of God's commandment. It is a transgression and is undoubtedly sinful.

Is polygamy equivalent to adultery?

This is the key to the problem in hand. Undoubtedly, polygamy falls into the same family of sins as lustful thoughts and other sexual sins, condemned in the Seventh and Tenth Commandments. It is a breach of God's original ordinance. However although lustful thoughts will earn us God's everlasting punishment if they are not forgiven they do not constitute a sin of sufficient gravity to justify a wife divorcing her husband. They may be in the same family as adultery, but they are not as heinous as the action itself. What about polygamy? Does God regard it as of equal gravity, requiring equal treatment to adultery? Here we must carefully re-examine our primary texts. The sacred relationship established and defined by God in Genesis 2:24 is most certainly defiled and injured by the taking of a plurality of wives. But does it thereby become completely invalidated? The issue is not whether the marriage is corrupted, but whether or not it is thereby destroyed in God's sight. This would undoubtedly be the case if, as has been claimed, God's ordinance of marriage necessarily requires 'the exclusion of all others' not only to comply with His will, but actually to define it as well. But wher

does the text explicitly require this sense? The union of flesh certainly indicates a profound and irreversible bond, but it does not explicitly indicate that its very validity is terminated by a plurality of partners. Likewise with Christ's clear commands about divorce, it is not explicitly clear that the violation of the 7th commandment involved in taking two or three partners is of the same degree of heinousness as putting away one wife to take another. That requires the excision of two clauses from His command, ('who-soever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication') and an injection of meaning into the verse which may or may not be justified. Polygamy falls short of the law but, unlike adultery, it does at least require a faithful maintenance of relationship and care for each partner, and considerate provision for their offspring, as with Abraham's affection for Hagar, or Jacob's to Leah.

One flesh

The use of the term 'become one flesh' itself may seem impressive evidence to hedge around not just the exclusive lawfulness, but also the exclusive validity of singular marital relationship, until we realise that the New Testament itself does not use the term only of marriage. In 1Corinthians 6:15-18, Paul uses the description of the first couple to describe the horrific and damaging effects of fornication. The argument is clear: The members of Christ are united with the members of a prostitute, two become one flesh, joined as one body. This is not a

contrast between the right and the wrong, but a direct attribution of the same irreversible effects entailed in marriage to a casual, thoughtless relationship. Is a casual sexual relationship then equivalent to a marriage? No, the intention is to instill a strong disincentive to sin by showing only that it has similar profound physical consequences. So to summarise, polygamy breaches God's law, but our primary texts themselves do not explicitly clarify that it is legally equivalent to adultery.

The law on adultery

It is to other passages of God's law we must turn to clarify His mind and will on this question. Firstly we must examine what the law required in the case of adultery. Leviticus 20:10 and 19:20 make it abundantly clear that there is only one punishment for adultery between free persons, immediate execution. No subsequent qualification was made to this law. This ongoing requirement provided the sharp barb of the trap set for the Lord Jesus by the Pharisees in John 8:2. No compromise was made with Israel over adultery.

The law on polygyny

Two texts clarify that God regards polygyny as of a quite different gravity to adultery.

Firstly, Exodus 21:8-11, in speaking of a maidservant, 'If she please not her master, who hath betrothed her to himself, then shall he let her be redeemed: ... If he take him another wife; her food, her raiment, and her

duty of marriage, shall he not diminish. And if he do not these three unto her, then shall she go out free without money.' It is clear a marriage had begun from the word 'another' before the term 'wife,' and also from the term 'duty of marriage' from which she is not to be deprived, which the modern translations render more plainly, 'marital rights' (NIV) or 'conjugal rights' (NASB). This explicitly excludes consecutive polygamy, and provides an incontrovertible instance of the toleration of polygyny by Almighty God in His law.

Secondly, Deuteronomy 21:15-17 assures the rights of the firstborn, in the case where there are sons by more than one wife, to the son actually born first, even though he may not be son of the favourite wife. Some suggest this refers only to two consecutive marriages, but there is little contextual support for this supposition. The most natural reading appears to be that it refers to polygamy of a simultaneous kind. It does not sanctify polygamy, but by its very presence it does indicate an altogether different attitude of God to polygyny than to adultery.

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and Leviticus 18:18 contribute less certain weight to the argument, but also indicate that polygyny was explicitly tolerated. The prohibition to future kings against multiplying wives in Deuteronomy 17:16-17 is in itself no more rigorous proof that they were obliged to remain monogamous than that they must possess only one horse or one piece of silver or gold. The greater evils of the

excessive polygamy found in pagan kings, and no doubt the commendation of monogamy as well, was being highlighted to the one person in the kingdom most likely to have more than one spouse.

Polygamy was not merely provided for at Sinai, but explicitly tolerated. It is not commended, but borne with. The law recognises as valid that which it also indicates is not lawful. It does not annul polygamous marriages. Both Genesis and the New Testament indicate that this toleration, as for example was exercised in the grounds for divorce, was because of the 'hard-heartedness' of the people. However it is a toleration no longer open for Christian marriages, since Christ's restoration of the original ordinance. The question before us is however different. What of those who have entered into its obligations, who may have begotten children by their wives, and upon whom their wives are dependent, socially, emotionally and financially? In the maelstrom of Christian conversion from a Muslim background, with intense family and social hostilities, often culminating in banishment or murder, it would not be surprising if a Muslim wife chose to part from her 'infidel husband'. Here we could scarcely intervene with any propriety in the light of Paul's clear command in 1Corinthians 7.15. In other cases, family members may compel a legal divorce from an 'apostate' by a civil action. The real issue applies in the case where a wife or wives are unwilling to part from their

husband. Do we then have scriptural authority for compelling divorce?

The normative value of narrative passages of Scripture

If we interpret God's law so as to put His declarations at variance with His actions it should caution us about our interpretative approach. The narrative passages are certainly to be approached with greater caution than God's forthright declarations, but Christ so used the narrative of David's eating the shewbread to reprove even the Pharisees' direct challenge from the law to highlight their error.⁵ God's response to situations of sin or compromise has a normative value in itself, as Paul plainly reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:6. So when we review the manner of God's dealing with His servants during times of polygamy, we gain important light and help on how He wishes us to approach our problem.

Abraham and Jacob

Abraham's taking of Hagar is a clear example of polygamy. Concubines are sometimes scripturally referred to as wives to indicate how close the two states are.⁶ Whilst we believe this to have been misguided and wrong, would Abraham countenance the description of his action as equivalent to adultery? But those who interpret the 'one flesh' phrase as recognising only a single and exclusive marital relationship as binding and valid would do so. Jacob's situation in having a greater love for his second wife is not unusual in lands where arranged marriages for

family and political reasons are still frequent. It emphasises the considerable anguish potentially caused by those who believe that the chronological sequence of marriage itself dictates the choice of the wives to be divorced. Again the Lord is seen to explicitly favour and hearken to cries from both Leah and then from Rachel for children from within their respective polygamous marriages with Jacob.⁷ God's answer requires a blessing upon the very relationship in which they are each engaged. Yet joyfully they praise Him for unequivocally granting them their desires. Do we ever read of such an extraordinary response for an adulteress? On the contrary, David's first child died as censure for his adultery with Bathsheba, despite his pleas.⁸

David and Solomon

Both David and Solomon were to be blamed not only for their polygamy being dissonant with Genesis 2, but also for their breach of Deuteronomy 17.16-17. Both kings, especially Solomon, did excessively multiply wives to themselves. There is no particular mystery in God's toleration of these events in the context of the rest of God's OT dealings, (although all His grace is most mysterious). But if polygamy is axiomatically equivalent to adultery – then His tolerance is nothing short of being both astonishing and inconsistent.

Nathan's reproof

The sharp gulf of distinction between the sins of adultery and polygamy is particularly conspicuous in Nathan's

reproof of David after the affair with Bathsheba. Here we must be careful that we do not intend either to overturn or reinterpret the moral law, but as is fitting, test the validity of our interpretation of the law, when we hear a prophet expounding it. Firstly, in correspondence with the requirements of Leviticus 20:10, Nathan so accurately depicts the situation in his parable that David pronounces his own worthiness of death. The only basis of the removal of the sentence is Nathan's emphatic assertion that God has mysteriously taken away David's sin (not the law requiring the death penalty). David also acknowledges this later in Psalm 51. Secondly, there is a severe, swift and crushing reproof for his action and the motive that was its spring. How different from the restrained silence of the Scripture on David's polygamy. Thirdly, still more strikingly, David's polygamy is turned against him as an argument to highlight the extremity of his wantonness and ingratitude in 2 Samuel 12:8. God gave into his bosom the wives of Saul. If the term 'into thy bosom' has only the sense of Saul's wives being under David's protection, what place does it have here in reproving the seizing of what was not his to take? If so, it is irrelevant to Nathan's argument. In the context, the phrase is used in the parable, of the poor man, of an intimate, physical affection, v3. Only a strong hermeneutical violence can wrest from this text the sense of an explicit toleration of polygamy.

Compelled divorce after the Exile

Ezra's firm and determined handling of the foreign wives in chapters 9 and 10, by compelling the Israelites to divorce, has been cited as normative for the handling of polygamous converts. This is a serious mistake for several reasons. We remember firstly that the sentence that Israel was commanded to apply to idolaters in Deuteronomy 17:2-5 was crystal clear. Deuteronomy 13:6-9 makes plain that this law applied strictly even to parents. The issue in Ezra is not of polygamy, but the intense and almost engulfing danger of the pollution of Israel's worship by intermarriage with so many pagan wives. Heading off this catastrophe, Ezra takes the most radical action short of widespread execution. He compels divorce from all the foreign wives and separation from their children. There are other considerable differences between the situations; the Jews in Ezra were already under God's covenant, the action in hand was a specific breach of explicit law, and that breach is alleged several times in the parallel passages. Would Ezra have taken such fierce and radical action with Abraham or Jacob, or David, or even Solomon, except on the ground that their wives were foreigners? Nathan's divinely appointed example suggests very much the opposite.⁸ Ezra's situation and that with polygamous converts are in stark contrast. In the latter case they had acted in ignorance. They are married to their own kind, with no prohibitive ethnic divide. They have not c

tracted new obligations but carefully seek to be faithful to God in the old. There is no powerfully undermining threat of slipping into a new idolatry, for they have forsaken their old religion. The ground of the marriage vows they uttered, they have kept intact, nor have they violated their consciences.

Unlawful promises and their consequences.

Should unlawful vows and oaths always be broken? More precisely, what distinguishes a vow to be kept from a vow to be broken, when it becomes apparent that the law is contravened by it? A most significant example is Joshua's treaty to the Gibeonites in Joshua 9, obtained by deceit and in direct contravention of God's commands to utterly destroy the inhabitants of the land. Yet 'the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel.' Joshua 9:18. This promise was subsequently taken so seriously that it formed grounds of defending the Gibeonites against an alliance of their fellow countrymen. Yet more significantly, when centuries later Saul in misguided zeal for the Lord's name slaughtered the Gibeonites, the Lord's fierce anger at the seriousness of the betrayal would not be appeased until seven of Saul's own sons were slain before Gibeon. In Numbers 30:2 the Lord indicates that vows are not to be lightly broken that they might not lightly be made. Is not specific authorisation therefore necessary to breach one of the most important vows of all?

Polygamy is a tainted form of wedlock, disapproved of but recognised and tolerated by the Lord God in the Old Testament in His law and in His acts. It entails lifelong vows and obligations, which Eastern society regard a matter of honour and integrity to uphold. It is a state with profound and lasting consequences for children and wives alike. Since Christ declares that He neither abrogates or violates that which He revealed before through His servants, the default position is that of the law of Moses. Without specific warrant we have no authority to compel divorce, and in doing so are in grave danger of requiring more than the Lord Himself. Not only do we make a very difficult and dangerous situation more explosive, we risk violating the consciences of those we have won, and of those who watch. We may provoke fierce and untempered reactions in young believers and their partners, and supremely hazard the wrath of God for offending them and injuring His name among them. Unless there is clear evidence to the contrary in the New Testament, polygyny should therefore be tolerated in those who sincerely apply to join the church, but only in those who have incurred these obligations prior to conversion.

New Testament law

Luke 16:17-18 and Matthew 5:31-32 both indicate the high and solemn regard the Lord has for marital vows, vows undertaken sincerely but ignorantly in polygamous households. They do not license the imposition of divorce by an external party, given that the law

of God recognises, but does not approve, polygamy as a marital state. Other texts like 1 Corinthians 7:2-4 and Ephesians 5: 33 cast polygamy into a shameful light, and render it unacceptable and inadmissible as a phenomenon in the Church, but they do not validate the involuntary severance of those who have previously taken lifetime pledges to each other, albeit in the darkness of Islam.

The three texts of 1 Tim. 3.2, 1 Tim.3.12, and Titus 1.6, which address the qualifications of an office bearer, confirm that polygamy is to be frowned upon and removed from any place of example or influence in the church, but it would be peculiar to ban polygamists by such an expression.

Calvin's comments on the texts are of particular interest. Summarising his case on Titus, he states, 'Polygamy was so common among the Jews, that the wicked custom had nearly passed into a law. If any man had married two wives before he had made a profession of Christianity, it would be cruel to compel him to divorce one of them; and therefore the apostles endured what was in itself faulty, because they could not correct it. Besides, they who had involved themselves by marrying more than one wife at a time, even though they had been prepared to testify to their repentance by retaining but one wife, had nevertheless given a good sign of their incontinence, which might have been a brand on their good name'.⁹

Comparatively few authorities express an opinion on handling converted

polygamists that dissents from Calvin. There can be very little doubt too that the best authorities concur that polygamy did exist among the Jews and perhaps also the Gentiles in the times of the New Testament.^{10,11} At the least it was a very real potential problem for New Testament pastors.

The 'traditional' view – what was apostolic practice?

There appears to be no universal traditional view among evangelical churches upon this particular question. Our tradition must be apostolic practice. John Calvin was by no means alone in believing that the apostles in the face of a polygamous society admitted them to the Lord's table and fellowship without requiring prior divorce. Matthew Poole¹² Albert Barnes¹³ and Robert Dabney¹⁴ are some of the worthies who took the same position. The steely-backed and uncompromising Wong Ming Dao who was actually faced with the problem of polygamy in pagan China supported the article as apostolic in the face of detractors, and gave gentle counsel to **those polygamists** admitted to the church **who** had to bear the scorn of **opponents** of his policy.¹⁵ None of **the historic** confessions give explicit **guidance** on this question, although **all** testify that monogamy must be regarded as the only proper and lawful form of matrimony.

Conclusions

Polygamy is an evil, but an evil which the **Western mind** too readily equates entirely with outright infidelity. It is an

evil, like divorce, for which the Lord Himself exercised tolerance in a manner which he strictly forbade for adultery. It is never to be tolerated in new marriages in the Church, once light and instruction upon the matter has been given. Yet for those who have already entered into polygamous marriages before conversion, weighty lifelong commitments and obligations have been undertaken, obligations the Lord recognises. The husband has promised not only to protect and provide for wives and children, but also to love and cherish them. One may not be set apart without great social dishonour, shame and grief, especially for the wife and children involved. For those unconverted partners who decide to leave their spouses, we are required by the New Testament to release them without hindrance. But for those who wish to remain together in marriage, we have no scriptural authority to compel a divorce. Salvation from Islam often involves the intense agony and shame of our brothers and sisters, the loss of very close family bonds, employment, and friends. We are under dual obligation to Christ and to them not to modify the Lord's requirements. They already face a baptism of fire. Do we aim to add fuel to the flames? Our overriding concern must be to the glory of God in His church, the purity of His worship and the obedience of His saints. If, by adding to His commands, we impose a yoke on these young saints that we ourselves have not and will not have to bear, there is grave danger of violating all three.

- 1 Matthew 5:19
- 2 Luke 16:17
- 3 Acts 15:10
- 4 Psalm 119:160
- 5 Matthew 12:1-4
- 6 Genesis 37:2 & Judges 19:3-5
- 7 Genesis 29: 31,32. 30:2,6,17,22,24
- 8 2 Samuel 12: 16-19
- 9 Commentary, in loc.
- 10 11th century Takkanah by Rabbi Gershom ben Judah technically outlawed polygamy for the first time.
- 11 Edersheim, A. Sketches in Jewish Social Life.
- 12 Commentary, in loc.
- 13 Commentary in loc.
- 14 Systematic Theology on the 7th commandment.
- 15 The Christian and Marriage, (Hong Kong) is illustrative of his approach.