

POLYGAMISTS IN THE CHURCH

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“Will God accept believing polygamists?”¹ asked Charles Kraft, while working in Nigeria, Africa, as a missionary. This is the question that concerns church leaders today, in similar societies, which practise polygamy. Although it is a concern, and although the church, and its leaders, and various societies that practise polygamy, have their views, God’s attitude towards sinners, such as harlots, in the New Testament, should give some guiding principles, which the church can use to help polygamists, and their family problems, in the church today.

To begin, let us consider the church leaders’ questions on polygamy. The first question for examination is of accepting believing polygamists into membership. Kraft, in his book, *Christianity in Culture*, said that he was daily faced with people, apparently sincere in their faith in Christ, but who would not be allowed to join the church, because they were polygamists.² Hillman, in his article, “The Polygamy Debate”, deals with the same question of multiple marriages in Sahara, Africa, where multiple marriages are accepted. Hillman works with the Catholic church to find ways the church can help polygamists.³

¹ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1979, p. 10.

² Ibid.

³ Eugene Hillman, “The Polygamy Debate: A Progress Report”, in *Missiology: An International Review* 10-2 (April 1982), pp. 161-165.

Kraft, in his book, *Christianity in Culture*, said that his Western theology did not say anything about polygamy. In fact, Western theology has said a lot about monogamy and adultery. He said that he was struggling, in his mind, with the theological aspect of polygamy.⁴

Hillman said that he attended bishops' meetings, and went to the theologians, even to superiors of the church, concerning the theological aspect of polygamy. The Second Council mandated that polygamy should be tolerated, by sending one wife away. Scholars in the Catholic church prohibited baptising persons in a polygamous union. Michael G. Kriwen, a leading Catholic theologian today, said that there is no theological solution to the practice of polygamy. Finally, Pope Paul II, in one of his addresses, said that God never said that two women and one man became one flesh but the two shall become one flesh. Divorce and polygamy is totally prohibited in holy matrimony in the church.⁵

The second consideration is the church's stand on polygamy. The Catholic's stand is against polygamy. The Protestant stand is also against polygamy. Because of the theological aspects, as presented above, both Catholics and Protestants take a strong stand against polygamy.

The third consideration is the society's view on polygamy. The societies, which practise polygamy, have cultural reasons. Midas, in his book, *Christians and Culture*, reasons, "Why do people act the way they do?", and gives three points:

1. Earlier members in society acted;
2. Situation dictates;

⁴ Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, p. 10.

⁵ Hillman, "The Polygamy Debate", pp. 161-165.

3. Biological capacities and psychological capacities of one.⁶

African culture accepts polygamy. But polygamy is only one form of marriage, accepted in their culture. Polygamy is practised in many parts of Africa. Both Mbiti and Hillman report on it in their books. Chiefs in Africa have many wives. It is a standard for a deceased person's wife to marry the brother of the deceased. It is all right for one man to marry another woman's parents.⁷

Melanesian cultures accept polygamy. There are a lot of similarities in the two cultures, but with some differences. Therefore, what is true of Africa, in some sense, can be true of Melanesian culture as well. Since the Melanesian cultural emphasis of marriage is on establishing relationships between two or more tribes, polygamy is accepted.⁸ Furthermore, polygamy is a cultural practice that is being encouraged by family members, and that has been passed down through the generations.

The societies, which practise polygamy, have justifiable reasons. Africans and Melanesians have their own separate reasons. However, some of the reasons are held in common. Kraft said that it is adultery if one of the polygamist's wives goes off with another man. Polygamy is not considered adultery, but, if the husband goes off with another woman, or the wife goes off with another man, then that is considered adultery.⁹

Ethically, it is not wrong to marry many wives, according to both African and Melanesian cultures. There are other common needs for practising polygamy. These reasons are sexual,

⁶ Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Culture*, New York NY: Harper & Brothers, 1954, p. 104.

⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London UK: Heinemann, 1969, pp. 114-191.

⁸ Mantovani, Ennio, "Traditional Values and Marriage", in *Marriage in Melanesia*, Point 11 (1987), p. 19.

⁹ Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, p. 11.

economic, social, sterility, and strength. Sexual reasons were defined as a man's sexual appetite being more than the woman's. Ignorance is one reason that encourages polygamy. Men are not allowed to sleep with wives during their monthly periods, during pregnancies, and during the time of breast-feeding, until the child is weaned. This can last from two to three years. That makes way for the man to marry many wives. If the wife is sterile, the man may marry another woman, to bear children, in order to carry on the family name. Economic reasons are defined as the man marrying many wives so that, through their hard work, he accumulates possessions, and, in turn, his social status is raised.

The fourth consideration is the divine concern about polygamy. God's attitude is seen in the Old Testament. Kraft said:

God, who was patient with Abraham and David, would be patient, today, with Nigerians, who, though chronologically AD, were BC, in their understanding of God, and His works. Perhaps there is a range of behaviour, within which, God is willing to work, even though it is less than ideal. Perhaps God wants us to seek to understand, and, in love, to accept people, within their cultural context, rather than to simply impose what we have come to understand, from within our cultural context, to be the proper rules.¹⁰

Harding also suggests that the church could allow a second wife, in exceptional cases, such as Abraham's case, where a man is urged, and forced by his environment, because of sterility.¹¹ God, who was patient with Abraham, can give the same grace to polygamists today. Mantovani, in his *Traditional and Present-day Melanesian Values and Ethics*, said that God uses culture to reveal Himself, so, if He had revealed Himself to Abraham and David, in

¹⁰ Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, p. 10.

¹¹ Hillman, "The Polygamy Debate", pp. 161-165.

the Hebrew culture, He surely can reveal His grace, love, and patience, in the polygamist cultures today.¹²

Smedes, in his book, *Mere Morality*, said that God's justice gives more than ordinary justice can give. God's ideal is monogamy, of which Abraham and David fell short, and were open to God's punishment, or justice, but, when they deserved to be punished, God gave His mercy.¹³

Today, Jesus is God's justice to mankind.¹⁴ Jesus' attitude is seen in the New Testament. He was gracious to the woman caught in adultery. According to John 8:4, Moses' law, as stated by the accusers, demanded that she should die. They wanted to get Jesus' approval on passing judgment upon the woman. Jesus, instead, was gracious to her, by not condemning her. He forgave her, and ordered her not to sin, but live a godly life. A truth here is that God gives grace to those, who do not deserve it; but upon receiving God's grace, they must live godly lives, within the boundaries of justice. Polygamists do not deserve God's grace. They deserve God's condemnation, but God can give them His grace, and they can continue to live in His grace, by not taking another wife. Jesus was loving, when He was accused of associating with tax collectors and harlots, in Matt 11:17. When the eyes of the church leaders were upon Jesus, for doing the opposite to them, Jesus showed love to the unloving. He is full of understanding, even of the people's point of view, like the Samaritan woman. He accepted sinners as they were. Not only did Jesus accept sinners as they were, but He forgave them their terrible evils. Jesus' attitude should be the church's attitude, today, even to the polygamists, who do not deserve God's grace.

¹² Mantovani, Ennio, *Traditional and Present-day Melanesian Values and Ethics*, Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute 7, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1993, pp. 25, 26, 28.

¹³ Lewis B. Smedes, *Mere Morality*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983, p. 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

A final consideration is the church's ministry to polygamists, and their families. The church can minister to the polygamist. Lovett, in his book, *The Compassionate Side of Divorce*, said that the principle of love, in Rom 7:6, is the principle, by what the church should operate.¹⁵ Love is what polygamist husbands need. The wives also need love and acceptance by the church. Hillman, in his article, said that the Second Vatican Council mandated that polygamists should send one wife away.¹⁶ This seems to be unfair. Lovett says that, in Rom 7:2, Paul does not talk about divorce, but desecration and bigamy. If the wife wishes to remain married to the polygamist, living with the rest of the other women, it should be fine.¹⁷ David had many wives. When he slept with any one of his wives that was not adultery. But, when he slept with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, that was adultery. According to Paul, if a wife leaves her polygamist husband, and, if she can remain unmarried, she can still be a Christian.

The church can minister to the children's needs also. They all want their father's love, but the father cannot give adequate love to them all. The church needs to give love to the children of polygamous families.

These considerations of the church leaders' questions, on whether to accept believing polygamists into church membership, are seen as the church leaders questioning themselves, and trying to find ways to help polygamists. However, the church's stand is firmly against polygamy. The polygamist societies' views are for polygamy. But God's attitude, and Jesus' attitude, gives the church some guiding principles to help the church polygamist, and their families, find acceptance in the church, just as much as they find God's acceptance and love.

¹⁵ C. S. Lovett, *The Compassionate Side of Divorce*, Baldwin Park CA: El Camion Press, 1978, pp. 75, 76.

¹⁶ Hillman, "The Polygamy Debate", pp. 161-165.

¹⁷ Lovett, *The Compassionate Side of Divorce*, p. 75.

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