

## Response

Rev Mashangu Harry Maluleka  
Academic Dean, Nazarene Theological College, Muldersdrift;  
Pastor, Mothutlung Church of the Nazarene, South Africa

Thesis: God's original plan about marriage is the answer to all marital problems including polygamy, divorce, and remarriage.

Objective: To expose polygamy, divorce, and remarriage as the result of the hardness of the sinful human hearts.

### Introduction

It is important that the author of the paper, "Is Polygamy Sin?" be commended for having the courage to discuss an issue that is so real to the Christian church in Africa. While the author highlights his thesis at the beginning of the paper, this paper raises many very important questions around the issue of marriage. Here are some of the questions raised by this paper:

- a. Should people who were polygamists before they found Christ be accepted into full membership with their polygamists' status or not?
- b. Should Christian monogamists be allowed to become Christian polygamists?
- c. Is it Biblically correct to encourage a polygamist who becomes a Christian to send some of his wives away and only remain with the first wife before they are accepted into full membership?
- d. Is the position of the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene, paragraph 35:4, not biased by accommodating those who remarry after divorce into its clergy and yet refusing to accept polygamists with full membership rights?

We will be depriving ourselves and failing the African church if we can approach this paper with the suspicion that the author's intention is to introduce polygamy into the church. As a divinely designed institution, the Christian marriage is currently facing challenges from different cultures. Polygamy, divorce, and living together are some of the symptoms reflecting the problems facing the Christian marriage today. The best way to respond to the paper on polygamy, I believe, is to clarify the biblical

principles of the Christian marriage as a true reflection of God's purpose for marriage.

I classify marriage into three categories, namely: Western, Non-Western, and Christian marriage. By Western I mean the kind that believes in a wedding gown, a legal document and a church ceremony. This kind of marriage includes as part of the ceremony the exchanging of vows. In those vows the words "till death do us part." are repeated and yet western culture accommodates serial monogamy, a direct violation of the same vows, but condemns polygamy.

By non-Western I mean any cultural marital arrangement that fails to meet the Western expectations of marriage. It mostly stigmatises divorce yet embraces polygamy.

A Christian marriage is the kind that is based on the agape type of love, and sticks to the biblical principles of marriage. From the outside it has a lot of common things with the Western type. However it sees marriage as a life-long relationship that is sustained through love, forgiveness, and lots of sacrifices for the benefit of all stakeholders and for the glory of God. Many people, even Christians, confuse the Western marriage to be the same as the Christian marriage. The Western marriage is influenced by popular opinion (hard hearts) while the non-Western is driven by what is culturally acceptable; meanwhile the Christian marriage is driven by God's initial purpose for marriage.

### **Setting The Record Straight**

While the author correctly indicates that the Bible does not speak for or against polygamy, the tone of his paper seems to suggest that God was in favour of the practice. Nothing could be further from the truth. First, it is a fact that most of the great men of the Old Testament who were polygamists could be said to have somehow been cornered into such arrangements by situations or people. Abraham was in that situation because he and his wife thought it would be the best way to hasten God's promise. Jacob was tricked into that situation. We also need to emphasise the fact that there are many heroes of faith who were monogamists as compared to those who were polygamists.

Secondly, the Bible states facts as they are. What happened to the relationship of Sarah and Hagar, the relationship of descendants of Ishmael

and of Isaac? What about the relationship of the wives of Jacob, though they were sisters. Would Joseph have received such treatment from his brothers if they had the same mother? What about the household of David? Can we say polygamy resulted in a happy family? Think of the raping, hatred, and killing that went on in his household. Eventually one of his sons slept with his father's wife. So whenever we want to talk about the Old Testament's position on polygamy we need to look at the whole picture.

From Genesis to Revelation whenever the Bible speaks about marriage, a monogamous relationship is assumed. Genesis 2:21-25, Matthew 19:4-6, and Ephesians 5:28-31 are some of the examples to that effect. One common message found in all three portions says: "for this reason **a man** will leave his father and mother and be united to **his wife**, and the **two** will become one flesh." Whenever Paul spoke about marital relationships again monogamy was assumed as the normal marriage. Jesus in Matthew 19:8 says, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. **But it was not this way from the beginning**".

Divorce, remarriage, and polygamy all fall short of God's original plan for marriage, and they are the result of hearts that are hard. Like the ancient Moses, if the church eventually accepts the victims of such practices it should not be partial in its approach. The church should teach, preach, and encourage believers to live marriage according to the teachings of the Bible. However the position that the church has taken towards those who practice serial monogamy in the church should be extended to the polygamists or else the whole issue should be revisited.

Much as it was wrong for the Jews to expect the gentiles to be circumcised first before they could become Christians, it is wrong for the church to expect the polygamists to become divorced monogamists before they can be accepted into the body of Christ. While I believe polygamy to be contrary to God's number one plan for marriage, I feel that the church needs to have a different attitude towards those who were polygamists before they knew the Lord. We also need to deal with the double standard that we are practising on this issue. Both polygamy and serial monogamy fall short of God's original plan for marriage, and both of them should be treated as being the products of hard human hearts. It is not right to think of polygamy as only an African issue because many nations have and are

still practising polygamy.

God designed marriage to be between one husband and one wife. Polygamy contradicts that. God designed marriage to be a lifelong relationship, and serial monogamy contradicts that.

It is dangerous to assume that since the Pastoral Epistles deal with monogamy regarding leaders it means that it was acceptable for the laity to be polygamists. The general tone of the Bible does not give us that impression. Paul also says that an elder must see that his children obey him with proper respect. Will we be right to take that to mean that Paul says all elders must have children? Will it be right to say that Paul is saying that only married men can be elders? We cannot say that because the Bible is silent about a particular issue it therefore supports that issue.

I believe that Paul set a standard for both elders and deacons in the church not because he expected them to have a different level of holiness than their congregations, but for them to be a living example of what God wants from Christians. I believe that Paul expected all Christians to live up to the expectations of the gospel. Paul once said that those who found it hard to follow Christ should follow him because he followed Christ. That verse tells us about Paul's philosophy of leadership. Nowhere in the Bible is there proof that God was happy with the laity being polygamists; much as there is no proof that God was ever happy with the laity being serial monogamists.

We need to be careful as a church not to fall into the trap of thinking that everything that is said to be legally acceptable is therefore morally acceptable. There is a thin line between allowing the mercy of God to reach the polygamists and giving them all the rights and privileges of being members of the body of Christ, and promoting polygamy in the church.

However, the same could be said about the problem of serial monogamy. As a denomination we are becoming softer and more sympathetic on serial monogamists at the expense of the polygamists. We cannot practice double standards on the same issue.

As we attempt to reflect holiness and the sanctity of marriage, what is going to inform us - popular opinion or God's original intention about marriage? What informed our decision to change our position about the marital positions of those we allow as pastors of the flock? If the same

standard is used, will it not lead us to accommodate polygamists as pastors? If not, why accept the former but not the latter? If the same criteria is applied, what is going to stop us from shifting from our position on the issue of gay and lesbians in the ministry and in the pastoral positions?

Jesus said: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.” I believe He challenged his listeners to choose between listening to their stubborn hearts and doing it the Moses way, or listening to God’s Spirit and doing it God’s original way. Far be it from us to fall to the level of operating from the hardness of the heart!