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### **Is Polygamy Sin?**

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Thesis: God's attitude towards polygamy as opposed to divorce.

Objective: To show that God's attitude towards polygamy is redemptive.

#### **Introduction**

The practice of the Church of the Nazarene not to accept polygamists into full membership, at least in South Africa, has given the implication that polygamy is sin. This is the understanding of some ministers as indicated by their preaching and/or teaching and the laity in general. This has resulted in polygamists being lost not only to the church but even to God. This loss is sometimes experienced by whole households. While it is true that the church recognizes marriages between one man and one woman (*Manual*), I believe that we need to develop an attitude and policies that will be redemptive even to the polygamist in order to stop this loss. This paper is an attempt to help change this attitude by briefly reminding ourselves of the biblical understanding of sin, the biblical portrayal of polygamy and God's attitude towards polygamists.

#### **Institution of Marriage**

God instituted marriage in the Garden of Eden when He first created man and woman. He stated that man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. This implies that God's ideal is for marriage to be between one man and one woman only, thus the general perception that anyone who marries more than one wife is a sinner. However, those who marry only one wife among the Africans, do so due to the influence of Western culture, that which is taught by believers to be God's expectation for them, because they are poor or because they cannot handle more than one wife without discrimination. It is true that in our age marrying one wife has become such a norm that becoming a polygamist will make news headlines.

In the Christian culture marrying more than one wife has been classified as

sin or unacceptable. People who are polygamists are not accepted into the membership of the church especially in the Church of the Nazarene. This practice of regarding polygamists as sinners has led the Church to challenge them to divorce all but the first wife in order for them to be saved or accepted into membership of a Church. This practice raises the following questions: Is a person saved by divorcing the extra wife/wives or by having faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Does God consider polygamy as sinful? If sinful, does it mean that those who were polygamists in the Bible times were sinners?

### **What is Marriage?**

Marriage is defined by Herbert Lockyer as the union between a man and a woman as husband and wife, which becomes a foundation for a home and family.<sup>1</sup> Isaac K Funk defines marriage as a mutual and voluntary compact properly based on mutual regard and affection and suitably ratified, to live together as husband and wife until separated by death.<sup>2</sup> The two definitions above do not include polygamy as a marriage. It is concluded that marriage is limited to only one man and one woman. This raises the question as to what must be said about the relationships where more than one spouse is involved. Are they marriages or not?

### **What is Polygamy?**

Polygamy refers to a marriage between one man and more than one wife (polygyny),<sup>3</sup> a marriage between one woman and more than one husband (polyandry),<sup>4</sup> and a marriage between one man and a series of wives and vice versa (serial polygamy)<sup>5</sup> as it happens in divorce and remarriage. In countries like Tibet and some parts of India where there are fewer women than men, a woman would be a wife to more than one husband in a rotational manner. Usually brothers would marry the same woman. In our discussion I will use polygamy in the place of polygyny since it is a term which is in use in most parts of Africa.

### **What is Sin?**

Sin is defined as a voluntary violation of a known law of God by a moral responsible person.<sup>6</sup> James 4:17<sup>7</sup> defines sin as failure to do the good that one knows he should do. It is a sin of omission. The epistle to the Romans 14:23<sup>8</sup> regards sin as anything done outside faith in God. I conclude that this definition emphasises the relationship between God and man in day-to-day dealings. These definitions will guide our discussion in this paper.

### **What Does the Bible Teach Regarding Polygamy?**

Looking at polygamy from this understanding of sin, it is clear that the Bible does not specifically teach against or for it. It is silent or neutral.

In Deuteronomy 17:17<sup>9</sup> God gave the command to those who would be kings in Israel not to multiply wives lest they lead their hearts away from God. This is not a command to all the Israelites nor is it to all the males. It is to the kings of Israel. This command as it is does not forbid polygamy since “to multiply wives” may mean to marry many wives rather than a few. So this command does not forbid or promote polygamy. One may choose to use it either against or for polygamy. Some people well known to us today, practised polygamy in Bible times.

The Bible regards some of the polygamists, like Abraham, Jacob, and David as heroes of faith. Solomon is the only person whose life ended in disgrace. However, before his fall he was regarded as a man who was full of wisdom and one who pleased God. It is only in his old age that his many wives led his heart astray as God said.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise no one ever denounced him for marrying hundreds of wives.

The Church regards some of these people as examples of faith. Today Solomon is regarded as an example of a person who was loved by God and who sought the best gift from God. His state of polygamy is disregarded.

### **What Are Some of the Problems in a Polygamous Marriage?**

Three examples of problems in a polygamous marriage will be cited. Abraham had two wives, namely Sarah and Hagar. The two wives failed to live in peace. Hagar despised Sarah because she was pregnant while Sarah was barren. Abraham had to divorce Hagar later in his life to bring about peace in his family.

The next example is the family of Jacob who had four wives. There was jealousy between the two sisters, Leah and Rachel. Because of their jealousy and competition, their maids were made to become his wives too. This jealousy and the failure of Jacob to distribute his love equally amongst his sons led to the slavery of Joseph, his beloved son.

David on the other hand had many wives, possibly more than twelve plus concubines. He failed to balance discipline amongst his sons although he was a good judge when it involved people in his kingdom. This boils down to failure to distribute his love equally amongst his wives; hence it affected

his sons too.

Yes! Polygamy has its problems and therefore cannot be promoted.

### **Can God Accept a Polygamist?**

Since polygamy is problematic, does God accept a polygamist? The answer to this question is very important, because it is either a polygamist cannot be saved in his state or he can. In looking back to the three families we have just mentioned, one may conclude that God does accept polygamists unto Himself or to a living relationship with Him. Abraham is called a friend of God,<sup>11</sup> while David is called a man after God's heart.<sup>12</sup> God called the descendants of Abraham after Jacob as Israel rather than calling them after Isaac who was not a polygamist. The fact that the Bible writers regarded Abraham and David as the examples of faith shows very well that God accepts polygamists.

### **Is Polygamy Sin?**

Now the question is, is polygamy sin? We have already seen that God accepts polygamists. How can that which God regards with a favourable attitude be sinful?<sup>13</sup> The Word of God does not strictly forbid polygamy except in the following instances:

- a. God commanded the kings of Israel not to multiply wives for themselves lest they lead them astray as it happened with King Solomon.
- b. In the First Epistle to Timothy, Paul forbids church leaders from marrying more than one wife.<sup>14, 15</sup>

Apart from these instances, polygamy is not forbidden nor promoted. It is implied in Deuteronomy and the Pastoral Epistles that polygamy was not forbidden but accepted amongst the laity. The Bible does not go into detail as to why it was accepted for the laity. The fact is, it is not sinful though not the best idea!

Although the matter of polygamy is a repulsive thing to many believers, serial polygamy is generally accepted amongst believers even in the Church of the Nazarene. This is seen by accepting divorced pastors behind our pulpits and also by the provision made in the *Manual*. What is more surprising, in comparison to polygamy, is that the Bible clearly states that God hates divorce.<sup>16</sup> In the New Testament Jesus allowed remarriage of a divorced person if such a divorce was a result of unfaithfulness in marriage

and if such a person was an innocent partner. Otherwise there is no remarriage for any person whose divorce was not the result of unfaithfulness! What is more challenging is that Jesus regards those who marry after divorce where unfaithfulness is not involved, to be living in adultery.<sup>17</sup> In short he says that they are living in SIN!

The main question then is what should be done with those polygamists who come to put their faith in God through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord? Shall they be accepted into the membership of the church, or shall they be required to divorce their wives first, an act hated by God,<sup>18</sup> before they can be accepted? Or shall they be refused membership in the church because they are polygamists? What is it that makes it acceptable to God but repulsive to man? How can something be acceptable to God but sinful to man (Acts 10:9-16; 15:8-9)? **What shall the church do with the polygamists?**

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