

## **POLYGAMY: AN ETHICAL CASE STUDY**

Bedru Hussein

### **I. THE POLYGAMY ISSUE AS CONFRONTED BY MESERETE KRISTOS CHURCH**

Evangelist Bekele Tamirat went to the northwestern part of Ethiopia to preach the Gospel. The Lord used him mightily and many persons from the local area accepted the Christian faith. After a few weeks he discovered that many who came to the Lord were practicing polygamy. The Evangelist out rightly condemned the practice and forced the husbands to abandon their wives keeping only their first wives. Consequently, those who were abandoned suffered and even died from starvation. Some polygamists left the church because they wanted to remain as polygamists. It became a scandal for those who abandoned their wives among the rural community.

A report from the field reached the Meserete Kristos Church Conference office about what took place including the hard feelings that had developed in that region. As a result, the leadership was put before a difficult ethical issue. This question was coming not only from this particular region. It is also an issue in the Southern part of the country. If the Gospel spreads among the Muslims, the same ethical question will emerge.

The difficult question is, should they be accepted as members of the church with their polygamous relationship? How can one keep all his wives and be faithful to Biblical Christianity? How can the church maintain its distinctiveness? What should be the ethical response of the church, the Meserete Kristos?

### **II. ANALYSIS OF THE ETHICAL ISSUE**

#### **A. Polygamy. Its Meaning and Occurrence in the World**

The word polygamy comes from a Greek word: polygama, which means plural marriage from polygamos. This form of marriage where a man has more than one wife. Strictly speaking, polygamy, meaning plural marriage, includes polyandry (more than one husband), as well as polygyny (more than one wife). *The New International Encyclopedia* points out that this polygyny has been found among many races ---- Fuegians, Australians, Negritos, India, American Indians, and Africans. It flourished in China and in Turkey, and in former ages it prevailed among the people of Western Asia. It seems not to have been practiced to any extent by

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Greeks or Romans and its occurrence among the Celts and the Germans was occasional. [*The New International Encyclopedia*,14]

### **B. the Issue of Polygamy**

Today, it is still practiced in many countries of the world due to the cultural patterns and for religious reasons. Africa seems today the continent where the practice is most common. This form of marriage has been a difficult problem because, one, it is a traditional custom which clashes with the Christian Worldview; and two, it has Socio-economic functions. Persons after becoming Christians do not want to change, but want to continue with the polygamous practice. As a result, missionaries and local pastors have faced problems in trying to bring one type of solution to this ethical issue.

Quite a number of questions arise when one seeks to develop an approach to resolve this issue of polygamy. Hiebert insists that once the church accepts polygamy, it is very difficult to eliminate it from its community, specifically in the rural regions. [Hiebert, 64] How then can the church be sensitive to the people and be faithful to the Bible? If polygamy is prohibited in the church, who is going to give care for the abandoned wives and their children? When a polygamous husband becomes a Christian does it mean the rest of his household will be lost? Hiebert mentions an experience in one the African countries where a missionary encouraged a polygamist to "free himself" for baptism by putting aside all wives except one. Otherwise, he must wait until God freed him by the death of all but one of his wives." [Hiebert, 63] What do we say to this bold statement of advice, which is almost similar to what Evangelist Bekele Tamirat in the northwestern part of Ethiopia did?

### **C. Supportive Cultural Arguments for Polygamy. An African Perspective**

There are many strong cultural arguments in support of polygamy among African societies from the social, economical, cultural and traditional points of view. Wherever polygamy is a culturally accepted form of marriage, it is preferred over and against monogamy. The following points mentioned by O'Donovan reflect what this custom serves as a dynamic principle of family survival, growth, security, continuity, prestige etc.:

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- 1) Having several wives has been a symbol of power, wealth, and influence in traditional African societies for many centuries.
  - 2) It is important for a man in traditional society to continue his family name into future generations. Having several wives usually ensures that he will have many male children to continue his name.
  - 3) Closely related to the continuation of one's family name is the idea that by having many children and grandchildren, one will be remembered and honored long after his death.
  - 4) In agricultural societies, having several wives is a way to ensure having many children and hence, the necessary laborers for farming, cattle herding and housework. This includes the provision of help when needed, as when some are sick. A larger family community is seen as a sign of strength.
  - 5) Since it is common for many African wives to refuse to have sexual relations with their husbands for up to two years after the birth of a child, having several wives is a way for the husband to avoid sexual immorality.
  - 6) Because African culture has very strong community values, having many wives ensures having a large family, which is seen as the way to increase happiness and meaning to life.
  - 7) If a person has many daughters, his wealth will increase significantly through the bride price at the time of the marriage of such daughters.
  - 8) There is a belief in many tribes that it is very bad to be a single woman and have no children. Because of this, many African women prefer to be one of several wives rather than to be single.
  - 9) Polygamy solves the problem of single parent mothers.
  - 10) To have several wives, and many children, makes a person feel secure about his or her care in old age.
  - 11) Polygamy offers women the security and dignity required for self-realization.
  - 12) The death of a husband whose wife had not passed the age of childbearing or when the deceased has not left a surviving male heir situation, the brother of the deceased is obliged to marry his brother's widow (widow inheritance), resulting in polygamy. [O'Donovan--281-289]
- As these arguments suggest, polygamy makes sense from traditional African points of view. However, the Bible has a different view on this issue.

#### **D. An Overview of Polygamy in the Bible**

##### **1. OLD TESTAMENT**

Lamech, the first polygamist, had two wives ..... Gen. 4:19

Abraham had two wives ..... Gen. 16:3  
Esau had three wives ..... Gen. 26:33; 28:9  
Jacob had four wives ..... Gen. 29:31; 30:3,9  
Gideon had many wives (70 sons) ..... Judges 8:30  
Elkanah had two wives..... 1 Samuel 1:2  
David had eight wives..... 1 Sam. 18:17; 2 Sam-3:2-5  
Solomon had 300 wives and 700 concubines 1 Kg. 3:1;11:3  
Rehoboam had eighteen wives..... 2 Chron.11:12  
Abijah had fourteen wives ..... 2 Chron. 13:21  
Joash had two wives ..... 2 Chron. 24:3

In the Old Testament, there were rules regulating polygamy and limiting its application in certain circumstances. According to Duet. 17:17, Kings of Israel were not supposed to multiply wives to themselves. Just like monogamous marriage (one husband and one wife), bigamy has its fair share of problems and laws of intervention as in Deuteronomy 21:15-17 were intended to make sure that children get what they are entitled to.

In Jewish and many traditional societies, as mentioned earlier (Africa), polygamy is considered to be legitimate marriage not adultery. In God's working with the Jewish people, he never once condemned the practice. However, over the years, God slowly changed his people in the direction of monogamy. [Hillman---140]

## 2. NEW TESTAMENT

### A. The Historical Setting

- a) Polygamy was not practiced in Greek or Roman societies of the time. Hillman points out that "even though we may find numerous traces of polygamy and polyandry in the Greek myths, monogamy predominated in the Greek world in the historical period. Morality within marriage was strict. The Homeric hero had one wife, who was faithful and inviolable, a good manager of the home and mother. Thus, Greek marriage was monogamous." [Hillman--20]
- b) Polygamy was not practiced in the Roman world outside Palestine, though illegal bigamy and certain adultery were.
- c) Polygamy was practiced somewhat in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian Judaism by the governmental/aristocratic leaders: J. Jermias, quoting Josephus the Jewish historical writer, that "it was practiced in two places. However, among the

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Jews, it was not accepted by the prestigious school of Hillel or by the strict Dead Sea Sect (Qumran) and was not wildly practical, especially among the rabbi's. Therefore, it was generally practiced among the aristocratic leaders." [Jermias, 90-96]

#### B. The Teaching of Jesus

It is commonly believed that the teaching of Jesus on the permanence of marriage (Matt. 5:31-32, 19:3-9; Mrk 10:2-12; Lk 16:18) amounts, at least implicitly, to a repudiation of simultaneous polygamy. Hillman presents a quite representative statement of this position: "to cast light on the question of marriage, Jesus refers his hearers to the original prototype presented in the creation narrative (Gen. 1:27 and 2:14): in the Kingdom of God, which he is inaugurating, the institution of marriage regains the perfection which the consequences of sin in human history caused it to lose" (Matt. 19:1-9) [Hillman, 155]

According to Jesus' teaching, the latitude permitted by the ancient law in this respect was "to suit their hard hearts," Matt. 19:8). However, once the Kingdom has been founded, and the economy of grace has been introduced into history, the human couple must return to its primitive rules of conduct, which alone conform to the fundamental intention of the Creator. Further, in his teaching, no reference is made to the problem of polygamy. One can see clearly that the authority of Genesis is taken as being sufficient to dismiss the possibility: **the two are to become one flesh.** From this point of view, the evolution of Jewish customs has already attained a standard which Christ consecrates for all time.

Since Jesus himself makes no explicit reference to the problem of polygamy, this whole argument hinges decisively upon the following assumptions:

- (i) That Genesis evidently depicts **monogamy as divinely willed from the beginning** and
- (ii) That simultaneous polygamy (customary Jewish polygamy) is intrinsically bound up with divorce and remarriage, hence, also with adultery. Such assumptions are highly questionable here, therefore, it should suffice to emphasize that the Lord's reply to the Pharisees (Matt. 10:9:3-9) is limited to the scope of their questions.

Nevertheless, we see Jesus here being more consistent and forcefully eliminating the double standard of the Jews who were allowing a second marriage while the first was still standing: henceforth, a form of polygamy.

#### C. Paul's Teaching

Paul, in Romans 7, actually uses the same principle, but *applies it to the*

wife: "So then if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man." (Rom.7:2-3) We can notice here that a polyandrous relationship would be adultery.

There is another more general argument expressed in Paul's letters concerning the example of godly leaders. In his letter to Timothy 3:2, and Titus 1:6, it is clear that those in church government/ leadership are to be monogamous (the 'husband of one wife' clause shows up in both statements of elder/deacon qualifications. But these leaders are told to be examples to the flock, and the believers are told to follow the example of the apostles, disciples, and leaders. ( Phi1.3:17; 4:9; 1 Thes.1:6,7; 2 Thess. 3:7,9; 1 Tim.4:12; 1 Pet. 5:3; 1 Cor. 4:6; 1 Cor. 11:1)

Therefore, in the absence of other New Testament instructions, all believers are to emulate the purity and scripturally mandated characteristic of their leaders --- including the monogamous one. In fact one measure of 'godliness' of a widow, worthy of welfare support from the church funds, was that she be a "wife of one husband" (the exact same phrase turned around)--1 Tim. 5:9. The reference to polyandry shows that monogamy was important for general believers as well.

#### D. Post-new Testament Church

The Post-New Testament church was anti-polygamy in its stance:

- (i) Justin Martyr (c160) rebukes the Jews for allowing polygamy: He said, "you imprudent and blind masters (i.e., Jewish teachers) even until this time permit each man to have four or five wives. And if anyone sees a beautiful woman and desires to have her, they quote the doing of Jacob." [ANF, Vol. 1, p. 266]
- (ii) Irenaeus (c180) condemns the Gnostics for, among things, polygamy: "others, again, following upon Basilides and Carpocrates, have introduced promiscuous intercourse and a plurality of wives.." [ANF, Vol. 1, p. 353]
- (iii) Tertullian (c207) was also explicit: "...Marriage Lawful, but not Polygamy. We do not indeed forbid the union of man and the woman, blessed by God as the seminary of the human race, and devised for the replenishment of the earth and the furnishing of the world, and therefore, permitted, yet singly. For Adam was the one husband of Eve, and Eve his one wife, one woman, one rib." [ ANF : Tertullian, To his wife]

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(iv) St. Augustine (354-430) explicitly acknowledged the profound influence of the Greco-Roman culture upon the understanding and the structure of marriage among the early Christians. According to Hillman, Augustine, along with other fathers of the church, held that the Christian rule of monogamy was rooted in the teaching of the New Testament. For Augustine, it was rooted precisely in the sacramental significance of marriage. At the same time he argued that polygamy was no longer permitted in New Testament times because of the changed historico-cultural situation, polygamy is no longer allowed. [Hillman, 21-22]

In sum, most churches that followed after continued to maintain the teaching of Jesus on marriage forbidding polygamous practice. However, most Western missionaries (Catholics, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox Christians) who went to other cultures encountered the practice of polygamy and most tried to deal with it in different ways, each claiming to represent "God's will."

#### **E. Synthesis of the Biblical Teachings**

Both from the Old Testament and The New Testament we have seen marriage taking shape in the direction of the original intent of God: "one man and one woman becoming one flesh," which is a monogamous relationship. Karl Barth insists on the difficulty of finding a single text addressing polygamy by saying, "we can hardly point with certainty to a single text of the New Testament in which polygamy is expressly forbidden and monogamous universally decreed" [Hillman, 139]. However, there are implications in the New Testament that stress monogamy: Christ's teaching in Matt. 19:3-9 and Paul's instructions in Rom. 7:3, 1 Cor. 7:2; 1 Tim. 3:2; 1Tim. 5:6 are passages that give us a clue to how the New Testament family relations should be. The New Testament is in fact our lens to observe and interpret God's dealing with humans and spiritual reality in better ways.

Therefore, I would think, we do not have scriptures that encourage polygamy in the New Testament. The greater question is how do we resolve polygamy? What should be the decision of the Meserete Kristos church leadership?

#### **F. Hermeneutical Conclusions**

1. According to the divine institution, lawful marriage consists of one man and one woman (Gen. 2:18, 24).
2. Above all God demands fidelity from his people and this fidelity is reflected by keeping covenant with the monogamous relation (Mal. 2:14-16).
3. Christ recommended or supported monogamy as the only rightful form of marriage (Matt. 19:1-19).
4. In the relevant Pauline passages, as Jean Jacques points out, "marriage is strictly

monogamous, for Jesus has and can have only one 'bride' - a metaphor used to show the relation of himself and the church." In this sense Christian marriage, in advance of the reign of the law, restored the original will of God. [Hillman, 141]

### **III. PRACTICAL APPROACHES**

Different denominations have been making different practical approach to address the difficult issue of polygamy in history and even today. Missionary anthropologist Kraft gives a practical suggestion to missionaries and local pastors concerning making moral decisions on the customs of other people. He writes," before making any moral judgement concerning custom or seek to change it, respect for the people who practice it demands that we make every effort to understand the custom from their point of view." [Kraft, 308] Similar advice is also presented to missionaries by Hiebert which is worth noting: "if the church then forbids polygamy, it must make other arrangements for widows and orphans, since the people can no longer turn to their traditional solutions. Missionaries need to realize that changes they introduce often have far-reaching consequences in other areas of the people's lives, and they must be sensitive to unintended side effects." [Hiebert, 49-50]

Having in mind Kraft's and Hiebert's advice, here in outline are three practical options taken by different African churches. The question to be asked is: did these churches make sound, biblical and ethical decisions to the problem?

*1. Lutherans:* Accept the polygamists as they are and perform all Christian sacraments to them. At the same time the encourage them to develop Christian virtues and practices such as:

- \* Knowing that there is less private time with each individual person, the polygamist husband should be sensitive to time management with his wives so that jealousy and hate might be avoided. Further, the husband is strictly warned not to play favoritism.

- \* Knowing that more cost is involved with more people, the husband should distribute his material and money proportionally to his wives. He must make sure that no one is deprived.

- \* More people means more work to do, therefore, he the husband should be tolerant enough to meet each individual need equally.

- \* The husband should be able to integrate each additional member of the family member joyfully (the new born ones).

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2. *Catholics*: Following the decision made by the Council of Trent (1563), some claim that the particular question of polygamy is still settled along with the divorce issue. But there are still others approving polygamy as a traditional and good institution due to its socio-economic functions but addressing the ethical issue in different ways. As a result, "some missionaries have tried to simply defer the baptism of polygamous catechumens until they are very old or dying, while others deal with the whole problem in an even more negative manner: they avoid presenting the gospel to polygamists." [Hillman, 204]

3. *Other Protestant churches*: Missionaries of other Protestant churches have totally rejected the practice of polygamy. They admit that it is not the Christian solution to polygamy to require a converted polygamist to drive away all but his first wife. That would be unjust and irresponsible behavior from the husband who has made a commitment to care for his wives (Num.30: 1-2,16). Instead a solution consists of supportive prayer and counsel from the pastor and elders of the local church so that God may work things out in his own perfect way. They do provide baptism to the polygamist but do not bring him to leadership.

4. *Meserete Kristos church*: At the beginning it was difficult to deal with. The practical steps taken are:

- (i) to encourage the polygamist Christian to live with his first wife and encourage him to continually assist the divorced wives,
- (ii) to those who insist on staying polygamous not to allow them to come into a leadership position.
- (iii) to teach new Christians to enter into a monogamous marriage relationship and maintain it for life.

#### **IV MY ETHICAL DECISION ON THE ISSUE (for presentation to MKC)**

After having undergone this study, I have reached the following decision, which is slightly different from the previous decision of the church (MKC):

- (i) After encouraging the polygamist to divorce his other wives, unexpected consequences may follow either due to his failure or the church to continually give support to the divorced wives. The question of children being separated from their father is another issue that must be considered. Therefore, I would think that encouraging a polygamist to abandon his wives is not fair. He should stay together with his wives. All must be given baptism.

- (ii) The polygamist should not come to a leadership position.
- (iii) New members who have not entered a marriage relationship should be given continuous learning opportunities on a monogamous marriage relationship and should be guided into it. It may be a matter of one generation that the polygamous relationship will be eventually done away with.

At any rate, this issue will remain with us, and still be open for dialogue and discussion involving practicing polygamists and non-polygamists in the church community in light of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. As Hays recommends, "the church should not abdicate its calling, "to bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal.

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6:2) in being sensitive to the persons involved not only on this particular issue but also on others, because Christ has died for them too. [Hays, 457]

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