

# **THE CASE OF TOO MANY WIVES**

**For: Prof. Dr. Colin Blair**

Current Issues in Mission  
Lanka Bible College

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## **The Case of Too Many Wives**

In the Case Study “Too Many Wives”, Amadu, the chief, has decided to become a Christian and be baptized along with his five wives. His first wife was the product of an arranged marriage, and has borne him no children. His second wife bore him three sons and a daughter. Wives three and four were the widows of his brother. By tribal custom they were automatically wed to him as the nearest kinsman of their deceased husband. They came into the relationship with several children, and had several more by Amadu. His fifth wife was a political arrangement to cement relations between clans. This youngest wife is the one caring for him in his old age.

The missionaries in the study know that the official policy of both the Church and the Mission is not to admit polygamists to baptism until they had divested themselves of all but one wife. The wives, on the other hand, could be baptized if they were true converts. This policy dates back to the Lambeth Conference of 1888. In recent years, there has been a move to reexamine the issues presented by polygamy.

The issue is not just that of too many wives. If Amadu “sets aside” all but one wife, what will become of the others; particularly the two widows. Since “setting aside” is a euphemism for divorce, what complications does that bring in terms of the teachings of the Church. What will happen to the children? Will Amadu continue to support them if he divorces their mothers?

There is also the issue of Amadu’s status should he become baptized. As chief, the members of the community would look to him for leadership; but can he lead according to the teachings of the Church?

Finally, there is the issue of the two missionaries, and the duty of obedience they owe to the West Africa Evangelical Church and the African Evangelical Mission.

In order to consider the issues presented, let us first examine the Biblical background to the several issues raised. Let us begin with what marriage is, in order to better understand the issues presented with polygamy.

## The Biblical Background

### Marriage

Jay E. Adams, in “Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible” maintains that God designed marriage as the foundational element of human society.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, only marriage was established as an institution from the Garden of Eden - In Gen 2:24 we read, “A man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

Marriage, however, is more than mating. The propagation of the race is a sub-purpose of marriage, not the major purpose. Adams maintains that marriage must not be equated with sexual relations. It is different from, bigger than and inclusive of sexual union, but the two are not the same. Moreover, it is neither constituted nor dissolved by sexual relations.<sup>2</sup> The reason for marriage, as stated in Gen 2:18, is to solve the problem of loneliness “It is not good for the man to be alone”. Companionship, Adams says, is therefore the essence of marriage.<sup>3</sup>

In Mal 2:14 God denounces husbands who are faithless to their companions - defined as wives by covenant - which Adams takes as support for his contention that marriage is a *covenant of companionship*, in which two people covenant not only to bear and raise children, but to satisfy each other’s sexual needs, and to live together as companion’s to take away each other’s loneliness.<sup>4</sup> This covenant was made at time of engagement; by contract, not sexual union. The couple began to fulfill the covenant only after the marriage ceremony. That marriage is fundamentally a contractual arrangement, not a sexual union, and could be ended by divorce is confirmed in the story of Joseph and Mary.(Mt 1: 18-25).<sup>5</sup>

### Polygamy

Polygamy, which predates Israel by many centuries, is often associated with power and wealth. Ananda Kumar, in an article entitled “Culture and the Old Testament”, defines the social causes of the practice as:

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<sup>1</sup> Jay E. Adams, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 4

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 7

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 8

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 15

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 13

- A desire for numerous offspring, especially powerful among Hebrews
- The barrenness of a wife made the family environment unhappy
- A disproportionate number of females
- The availability of women captives after a war
- Slavery – the master of the house had sexual rights over female slaves
- A number of wives were part of display of wealth among powerful men
- The wife or wives gave their own servants to the husband as concubines – Sarah, Leah and Rachel are examples. ( Gen 16:1-4, 30:9-13)
- Security and safety lay in numbers and a joint-family system
- Cementing of economic and political alliances.<sup>6</sup>

In the Old Testament world polygamy was permitted, but it was never the ideal.

In the New Testament world, a polygamous convert was allowed to enter the body without putting away his wives. The principle applied was stated by Paul in 1 Cor 7:17 - 24 - "... in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God"<sup>7</sup> However, he could not become an "officer" of the church, whose life must be exemplary. As Adams notes, God wanted a model of monogamous marriage held before the church.<sup>8</sup>

Polygamy existed and continued among the Greeks, the Romans, and the Jews. While the *Lex Antoniana de civitate*, in AD 212, made monogamy the law for Romans, it specifically excepted Jews. Indeed, in 393, Theodosius enacted a special law against polygamy among Jews since they persisted in the practice. In fact, polygamy among Jews continued until the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup>

## **Divorce**

The concept of divorce is biblical. In fact, it was already a common practice when Moses wrote the Pentateuch. He regulated it rather than

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<sup>6</sup> S. Ananda Kumar, *Culture and the Old Testament*, in John Stott and Robert T. Coote, editors, *Gospel & Culture*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 59

<sup>7</sup> Adams, 81

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Adams, 81

forbade it.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Adams notes that God himself is a divorced person, having become involved in divorce proceedings ... with Israel. In Jer 3:8 we read "...for all the adulteries which faithless Israel had done, I sent her away and gave her a divorce bill".<sup>11</sup>

God hates what occasions every divorce, and the results that follow, but, he doesn't condemn or hate divorce proceedings *per se*. Nor does he hate divorce obtained according to the principles and regulation laid down in scripture, and which he followed in dealings with unfaithful Israel.<sup>12</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus says fornication is the only permissible grounds for divorce among believers. ( Mt 19:3-9) Even that can be forgiven. The only unpardonable sin is attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to an unclean spirit (Mt 12:31). All other sins can be forgiven. Therefore, Adams notes, divorce can, has been, and will be forgiven by God.<sup>13</sup>

### **Leadership in the Church**

The Bible teaches that some consequences of past sin for eligibility as an officer in Christ's church are lifelong, and others are not. Adams notes that polygamy before conversion doesn't prevent membership in the church; however, it does prohibit one from bearing office.<sup>14</sup> This is not because the sin isn't forgiven by God, but because an office bearer must "be an example in all things" (including monogamous marriage practices). He must be above reproach (1Tim 3:2). He must have good reputation with outsiders (1 Tim 3:7). And, he must be blameless (Titus 1:6).

It should be noted that the office in question is that of bishop. Similar criteria are outlined for deacons in 1 Tim 3: 8-13. There are no similar instructions for lay officers of a church.

### **Application of Biblical Principles**

As has been previously noted, the Lambeth Conference of 1888 established a policy for dealing with polygamy that permitted the polygamist to be accepted as a candidate for baptism, but required him to be kept under

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 27

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 23

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 24

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 25

<sup>14</sup> Adams, 83

instruction until he was in a position to accept the law of Christ. For that to occur, he either had to put aside all wives but one, or wait until God freed him by the death of all but one wife. The wives could be admitted to baptism at the discretion of the local authorities of the Church.

Andy Hickford, in "Essential Youth", notes that the missionary practice of insisting new converts who already had more than one wife keep only one following conversion to Christ wreaked social havoc in villages. It led to the social ostracism many of new converts.<sup>15</sup>

Some missionaries sought another approach. They argued that Christians witness through 2 basic relationships: the church and the family. Culturally appropriate forms of both must be kept as a priority if evangelism was to be taken seriously among the people they sought to serve. The position they advocated did not make polygamy acceptable. It would be allowed for that generation only. It was their hope that faith would change the culture over time.<sup>16</sup> As we have seen, that was the position that was adopted by the first century church also; before bureaucratization resulting from the very growth of the church resulted in the ossification of particular views into dogma.

The missionaries that followed the more enlightened practice found it was a mistake to stop a custom without providing an alternative for the function it provided to society. Polygamy was not necessarily a lifestyle that oppressed women. On the contrary, in certain societies it was the women who encouraged it. The addition of more hands to the household spread the workload also, and provided some respite from the constant demands of children and domestic tasks. It also provided for the care of widows and orphans. It was, perhaps, preferable to the practice in some other societies – Fiji for example – of strangling the widow(s) at the death of the husband.<sup>17</sup>

The example of one Omodo, as described by Walter A Trobisch in an essay entitled "Congregational Responsibility for the Christian Individual" is instructive. Omodo, his wives and children lived in a family compound, that demonstrated cleanliness, order and wealth. Each wife had her own house

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<sup>15</sup> Andy Hickford, Essential Youth, (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publication, 1998), 161

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Alan R. Tippet, Contextualization of the Gospel in Fiji: A Case Study from Oceania, in Stott & Coote, 401-403

and kitchen. Omodu became polygamous at the urging of his first wife, who mocked him for being a 'poor man' because he had only one wife. She drew his attention to his neighbour, whose second wife could care for the children while the other wife prepared the food. Omodu's wife needed help, and she had already picked out a second wife for him. Omodu's third wife, together with her children, were inherited from his brother. It was his societal duty to give security to a widow.

Omodu's wives and children attend church. The senior wife even receives communion. According to the church they attend, the women are considered to be sinless because each has only one husband. Omodu is a polygamist, not they.

Omodu raised two points that are particularly relevant. By refusing to accept all the polygamous men in town as church members, the pastor made his flock poor and dependent on subsidies from America. Furthermore, he told Trobisch, he could not become a church member if it means to disobey Christ. Christ, in his understanding, forbade divorce, but not polygamy. Whereas, in his experience, the church demands divorce and forbids polygamy. Moreover, Omodu regards the church as hypocritical because with a high divorce rate Europeans have successive polygamy, while in his culture polygamy is simultaneous.<sup>18</sup>

Trobisch believes Omodu is right in his criticism of contradictory church policies. He says, "We have often acted according to the statement 'There are three things that last forever: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of them all is church order and discipline.'".<sup>19</sup> William D. Reyburn,, in "Polygamy, Economy, and Christianity in the Eastern Cameroun", notes that polygamy is an institutionalized form of wealth in the Cameroun. In his opinion, preaching against polygamy while at the same-time encouraging the economic buildup of churches is a contradiction the Africans do not comprehend. The native church in the Cameroun is in a dilemma. Money is believed to be so necessary for the continuation of the

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<sup>18</sup> Walter A. Trobisch, Congregational Responsibility for the Christian Individual, in William Smalley, editor, Readings in Missionary Anthropology II, (South Pasadena: The William Carey Library, 1978), 233-235

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 236

church; yet those who can contribute the most – the polygamous men – are excluded from membership.<sup>20</sup>

One fundamental factor that Reyburn illustrates is the necessity for Christian village men to see their wives as partners, and to change their attitude toward work; an attitude that cannot change if the African pastor sees himself as above work. He notes that Christian missions have created a specialized class of African pastors, professional men who do not work in gardens if it can be avoided. Reyburn's belief is that seminaries have failed to take into account the social reality of African life... that seminary students may need to be taught to appreciate physical labour by actually being taught to work with their hands. This, of course, would mean that his teachers – Europeans and Africans – would also have to participate. Pastoral theology, he notes is not enough.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Current Position of the Church**

The Sri Lankan church does not confront this issue to any degree. Monogamous marriages are the norm across its several ethnic groups – Sinhala, Burgher, and Tamil, and across all denominations. It is also the norm among Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim faith groups. To the extent that any position would be taken on the issue it would likely be similar to that taken by the West African Evangelical Church, at least insofar as the Anglican Church – the author's denomination – is concerned.

The Church of Ceylon (Anglican) follows a traditional, formal correspondence model in which the forms of church are highly similar to those across the rest of the Anglican Communion. If anything, the Church is considerably more conservative in its theology than the Anglican Churches of the West – even allowing for some differences between the two Dioceses – supporting Charles Kraft's contention that the missionary founders sought to produce a purer form of church in the receptor culture than was found in the sending church.<sup>22</sup> The position taken by the Lambeth Conference of 1888, which after all was an Anglican Conference, would certainly appear to be the

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<sup>20</sup> William D. Reyburn, Polygamy, Economy and Christianity in the Eastern Cameroun, in Smalley, 270

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 271

<sup>22</sup> Charles H. Kraft, The Church in Culture: A Dynamic Equivalence Model, in Stott and Coote, 287



current approach the Church would take on the issue of polygamy, should they be confronted with it in Sri Lanka.

### **Evaluation**

The West Africa Evangelical Church and the African Evangelical Mission appear to be following a traditional, formal correspondence model of church, just as the Anglicans have done. The policies adopted at Lambeth were promulgated by the foreign church according to the doctrines and customs of that church, based on its appropriate contextualization for the place and people of its origin and experience. They were not policies formulated in a way that was culturally sensitive to an African milieu, nor were they intended to be when they were developed. They were developed from the perspective and experience of the Church of England, within the context of its role as the established Church within the British Empire. Yet, the African Church, and the associated Mission, have adopted them as their own, seemingly without regard for the local cultural norms.

In examining the Biblical Background, it is apparent that polygamy, while not the norm, was not unknown among the Old Testament Hebrews, and also among the New Testament Jews. Indeed, the Church had developed a policy to deal with the matter – the polygamist, and his wives and children, could be baptized - indeed admitted to full communion - just as he was. He just could not hold office in the Church. In the early Church, that meant he could not be a Bishop or a Deacon, and presumably not a Presbyter either. There is no mention in the Biblical record of any restriction on lay leadership.

Should Amadu follow the instruction of the Church, and set aside all but one of his wives, it would appear that he would have to formally divorce them. His first marriage was arranged and would, therefore have been subject to a covenant. The third and fourth wives, his brother's widows, are his obligation by the custom and practice of his community. Breaking that trust could destroy his reputation in the community; and if he did "divorce them, who would provide for them and their children? The fifth wife, being taken to cement relationships between clans, was also likely the subject of some form of covenant agreement. As we have seen in Malachi God denounces husbands who are faithless to their companions - defined as

wives by covenant. Amadu's second wife, who provided him with children, and who was his choice, would not appear to be subject to a covenant, but dispensing with one wife would not be enough, and there are the children to consider.

In the New Testament, as we have also seen, Jesus says fornication is the only permissible grounds for divorce among believers. Arguably Amadu is guilty of fornication, because he has been sleeping, on a regular basis, with more than one woman – and has had children by more than one woman also. The women are “without sin” because they have only slept with one man; and in the case of the widows, they “remarried after their husband had died. There is, however, no indication that Amadu “slept around” outside of his family, or that his love-making was for primarily for self-gratification. He is truly caught on the horns of a dilemma. He, by his customs and background, has been an honourable and good man. To become a Christian, under the West Africa Evangelical Church's rules, he will have to become dishonourable in the eyes of his community.

The Church's position, in this instance, appears to owe more to Victorian social mores inappropriately translated into the mission field, than it does to any teaching in either the Bible or the experience and practice of the Early Church. Its regulations are of man, not of God, and certainly not of Jesus who routinely accepted people where they were and how they were, but with the admonition to ‘sin’ no more. Perhaps this would be a model that would be useful in Amadu's situation.

### **Other Considerations**

Charles H. Kraft, in “ The Church in Culture: A Dynamic Equivalence Model” has proposed a model for church indigenization that may be useful in this context. He notes that the true aim of indigenization should not be formal correspondence but the kind of “dynamic equivalence” sought for bible translation – ie: the result should be the kind of church that produces an impact on the people of the society of which it is a part equivalent to the impact the original church produced upon the original hearers.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Kraft, 304

To illustrate his concept, Kraft considered the Higi people of northeastern Nigeria. As criteria for a leader the Higi would emphasize the family management aspect more strongly than would westerners, or the Greco-Romans. He commented, "In order for such a leader to effectively function in a way equivalent to that intended for the first century leaders, he would not only have to manage his household well but would (as with many Old Testament leaders) have to have at least two wives in that household! "How," the Higi person would ask., " can one properly lead if he has not demonstrated his ability by managing well a household with more than one wife in it?" He also pointed out that The Kru of Liberia, who have a similar ideal state "You cannot trust a man with only one wife."<sup>24</sup>

A dynamically equivalent Higi church would, he maintained, have polygamous leadership. Moreover, Kraft believes, it's likely polygamy would die out in time, just as it died out in Hebrew culture, over the course of a few thousand years.<sup>25</sup>

In the example cited in the study of the Tanzanian Church it would appear that consideration has been given to dynamic equivalence in a way that also meets the need of the Church to express its moral approbation about polygamy in general. The polygamist can be baptized with his believing wives and children with permission of the Bishop, and they can all be received for communion. However he is not to take any more wives.

### **Courses of Action**

The young missionaries face a very real dilemma. Both the Church and the Mission in which they serve would appear to be blindly holding on to a foreign model that is out of context in the communities they serve. The stand they have taken cannot even be supported biblically. The real issue in this case is not one of polygamy, but of authority and obedience.

Should the Wards disagree with their own Church, and do so publicly, their future on that mission field could be very limited. They have a duty of obedience to their superiors. Despite the fact that there is beginning to be discussion among some of the younger church leaders about the validity of

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 309

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 310

its position on polygamy, now would not be the time to fly in the face of current doctrine and baptize Amadu. The Church would be compelled to discipline them for their actions, regardless of their debate or their intention in being disobedient. The greater good of the Church would demand no less.

The situation here is quite analogous to what is currently happening in the Canadian Anglican Church over the issue of same sex blessings. The Church is currently rethinking its policy on the subject, and there have been a number of forums and panels and even formal debate at General and Provincial Synods. As of yet, there is not substantial agreement on the issue. However, some of the more politically active and socially conscious clergy have acted on their own to bless same-sex relationships. Despite the personal feelings and opinions of the various bishops in whose dioceses these blessings occurred – and they have varying points of view, some for the issue, some against and some prepared to be convinced by a good argument – they have all taken disciplinary action against the clergy involved.

The Wards, then, do not have the option of acting unilaterally in this situation. They can, and should, further the debate on this issue by recommending to the Church hierarchy that Amadu be baptized and accepted into full membership in the Church, with the caveat – as mentioned above – that he does not take any more wives. In doing so, the Wards would be asking for Amadu to be treated as I believe Jesus would have treated him – meeting him where he is, forgiving his past, and requiring that he sin no more.

Should the Church reject their proposal, the Wards would be required to accept that decision, and try to see the hand of God working in this situation. The door would be open to them, it is hoped, to continue working within the Church for a change in doctrine and policy on this matter. Should they choose not to accept the decision of the Church, their alternative is to resign their position. Disobeying and trying to stay in the Church must result in discipline. As is mentioned above, for them the issue may become one of obedience.

As to Amadu, in the circumstances described it is not likely that his petition to be baptized will be accepted at the present time – miracles, however, can happen. The Wards will need to be very supportive of him

throughout this episode so that he does not become bitter and turn against the Church he now wants to accept. The Wards need to educate him to an understanding of his playing a part in a larger struggle that may need some years yet to resolve. Inevitably, the changes sought will occur, because it makes eminent sense that they do. However, the time may not yet be ripe. The Christian's task is not always an easy one, as we have seen with the martyrs of the early church. Their faith and commitment resulted in a massive paradigm shift. They received no immediate benefit for their faith. Unfortunately, Mt. Amadu may be in a similar position. It is to be hoped that he has it within himself to rise above it.

S. Ananda Kumar, in "Culture and the Old Testament" says that a proper contextualization of the Bible will take into account the imperfection of men and women in the present state of society. He points to the patience of God seeking to bring us into harmony with his purpose<sup>26</sup>. May God provide that same patience to Amadu and the Wards.

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<sup>26</sup> Kumar, 61

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