

Polygamy

An American brother who has been evangelizing in a Third World country where polygamy is still a part of their culture wrote me asking, "What do you do about polygamists who come to faith in Christ as polygamists?" He offered some insightful thoughts. As I had never been asked that question directly before, I had to give it some special thought. Let me share my thoughts with you.

Due to parochial inbreeding of traditions and concepts, the first inclination is to outlaw the very thought of one being accepted by Christ who has more than one wife. But that concept may be based more on culture than Scriptural evidence. Some of God's principles may be applied differently in different cultures.

From the beginning of our history in Genesis, it seems that God's intention was that a man have only one wife. Yet in history, we see that God sometimes condoned, or allowed without reproof, men having a plurality of wives and concubines. Where is that law stated that limits a man to one wife? Such a perceived law is derived only from our legalistic logic.

On what grounds would you condemn polygamy? Fornication? Adultery? Try again! Those answers do not fit. Fornication is sexual relations of two unmarried persons. Sexual relations outside of marriage between two people, with one or both being married, is adultery. Neither of those definitions fits the polygamist, for he is married to the women involved. A man cannot commit adultery with his wife.

If their acceptance of each woman in addition to the first wife is adultery, then Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David were all adulterers openly, unashamed, and without censure!

Under the Law of Moses, God provided that, if a man died childless, his brother should accept his wife and bear children for the dead brother (Deut. 25:5; Matt. 22:23-24). It seems strange that no case is made against receiving such a man when he wished to accept the Gospel. And no preacher or writer of New Testament record registers disapproval or rejection of such a person having the two wives. They had no case against such a person! In your deductions you may claim that the repentance demanded at conversion would include the breaking up of polygamous marriages, but that is not a necessary deduction, for it was not a sin in the first place.

Yes, the Scriptures generally assume that a man should have only one wife, just as they assume that every person has the right to be free. Yet, slavery was condoned and regulated with divine sanction in cultures accustomed to slavery. Cultures, like individuals, must grow into maturity. Though the mature principles of love, mercy, and justice are intended to guide us socially as individuals, God has been forbearing toward our slowness of development. We trust that to be true in regards to our Christian forefathers in America who owned slaves.

In writing about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul actually uses slavery as a parallel illustration. Slavery was not of God's intention from the beginning but he did not condemn it in cultures later where slavery had come to be accepted. Paul's parallel is fitting because Abraham, the father of the faithful, was both a polygamist and slave holder. One of his wives was a slave-woman!

In his discussion of marriage, Paul instructs, "*Only, let every one lead the life which the Lord assigned him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the*

churches. Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised, etc.... Every one should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.... So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God” (7:17-24).

There is no New Testament record of a preacher or writer demanding the breakup of a pre-conversion marriage in order for those involved to be acceptable to Christ!

If the demands of a perceived law violate love, mercy, or justice, then a review of what is thought to be a legal demand is certainly in order. God’s laws are intended to uphold the higher principles of love, mercy, and justice. The demand that in conversion a polygamist destroy his family might show respect for perceived law, but it would show utter disregard for the higher principles the law is intended to promote. It would be a sort of backhanded way of doing evil (destroying a family) that good (salvation) may come!

Does this concept being proposed cast undue reflection on the Patriarchs as being immature in concepts about monogamy and slavery? I can only answer that they were not called because of perfection of character.

Am I seeking to license polygamy in our society? No more than I am giving you license to buy a slave or to capture a person for enslavement. You, and our society, I trust, have moved on to the higher principles, but that is still not true in cultures worldwide. []