

A Biblical Response to the Practice of Polygamy in Eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT—Since the advent of the missionary churches to Eastern Nigeria, such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the practice of polygamy has created problems because monogamy is taught as the form of marriage acceptable to the church. For this reason, people who practice polygamy are denied membership into the church through baptism. This paper seeks to inquire into the Biblical teaching concerning polygamy in an attempt to solve or minimize the clash between Christian Polygamists and Christian anti-polygamists against the materials available in the Bible as it concern the practice of polygamy. Beginning from Old Testament, the paper shows that polygamy was practiced but was not God's original plan for Marriage. It argues further that the texts where marriage is mentioned in the New Testament does not support polygamy. The paper therefore recommends that Seventh day Adventist Church in Eastern Nigeria and other Churches in Nigeria need to reappraise their stand and accept that Polygamy is not from God and it is an act of indiscipline that should not be allowed in the church.

Keyword: Nigeria, Adventist, Polygamy, Monogamy, Igbo

I. Introduction

The issue of polygamy in the society, (including the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Eastern Nigeria), has been the object of much concern since the middle of 19th century. (Eugene, 1975) Though it

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has been a widespread institution in ancient civilization, it remains in practice in a few individual countries and is firmly established in the continent of Africa and even in Eastern part of Nigeria. (Lynoid, 1953) As neither a rare nor isolated institution in the tradition and practice of Easterners, polygamy requires acknowledgement and study by Adventist Christians who have contact with these cultures. The problem that emerge in this regard is, should a polygamous man or his wives be accepted as full members of the Seventh-day Adventist church or not? In fact it had been much controversy and subjected to all kinds of discussion and debates. Webster's dictionary defines polygamy (plural marriage) as the practice of having more than one spouse at the same time. It can take the form of a man having more than one wife concurrently (Polygyny) or a woman having more than one husband concurrently (polyandry).

Lynoid (1953) is of the opinion that a polygamist could not become a Christian. Tippett (1970) adds that the polygamist can be an Adventist Christian if the man chooses one wife and divorces the other(s), to become a member through baptism though not specific on the wife to choose, either the first or any other. Smith (1983) also maintains that monogamy is the acceptable biblical standard of marriage. On the contrary, Oswald (1974) contends that Christianity and polygamy are not mutually exclusive because Christianity should be contextualized. Stephen (1964) submits that polygamy is directly accepted from the Bible and should not be questioned or debated by any mortal being. Hillman (1975) adds that polygamy is a licit practice and should be accepted supporting his argument by quoting the Mosaic Law. From the aforementioned, it is obvious that the problem is long unresolved. How long will this problem exist which would likely produce only a reaction rather than a serious evaluation.

The debates and contention among scholars and Christians has led this paper to seek to inquire into the Biblical teaching concerning polygamy in an attempt to solve or minimize the clash between Christian Polygamists and Christian anti-polygamists. If the validity or invalidity of the polygamous argument can be ascertained, the clash between opposing forces could be reduced by proposing that positions be compromised or abandoned in accordance with this paper's conclusion. Many scholars and church leaders are questioning the stand of the Bible in this issue as converted polygamists also abandon their divorced families. The main purpose of this paper is to show the Biblical response to the problem of polygamy in order to ascertain that the Bible is the only rule of faith and practice.

II. Polygamy in Eastern Nigeria, Igbo Land

This work will consider and closely look into polygamy and its practice in Eastern Nigeria and considering the practice and development of polygamy. It will consider the extent at which polygamy has been practice in Eastern Nigeria, Igbo Land. A closer look into polygamy and its practice in Eastern Nigeria is approached, first, from its historical perspective. The factors promoting it in Igbo Land are examined and the concept of Igbo marriage discussed.

The history of the Igbo's as a people and the practice of polygamy and its development in Eastern Nigeria form the scenery, the state of polygamy in the present Igbo society. This history contains the people's origin, their structure both socially, politically and economically. The history of polygamy in the Igbo land is very vital to ascertain how polygamy came into existence. Polygamy is seen and claimed to be a tradition that is inherent in the life of an Igbo man from their origin. (Nwankwo, 1981) The Igbo's could be traced biblically as a part of the great migration and human movement of families that was as a result of the confusion of Babel (Gen 11:7-10). No accurate account can be given about how the Igbo's migrated and settled in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Archeological findings affirm that the existence and presence of the Igbo people in Nigeria has been for a very long time.

Some objects, copper and bronze work, beads, textiles, pottery and objects made of wood and ivory found by excavation carried out in Igbo-Ukwu, one of the oldest villages in Igbo land revealed important history about the tribe. These findings were dated with radiocarbon measurements and it was discovered to have been from the ninth century: Based on these artifacts, the Igbo land of the ninth-century was already a place of business where an outstanding measure of economic and craft specialization developed. This means that it must have been; ever at that time, a tracing contact with the Igbo's and the outside world. (Foyer, 1977) The Igbos, an ethnic unit; are rural dwellers and mainly farmers. Their men chiefly cultivate yam and cocoyam while their wives grow cassava, pumpkins, beans and okra. Longingly, division of labor in every farm phase is practiced and recognized.

Their living is organized in autonomous village communities without central political authority. "There is a dispersal of authority-

leadership and community building center on family units, clans, village elders, age groups, and various associations of men and women.(Hillman, 1975) There was no defense system. There were no policemen or standing army to cater for public and individual safety. The common man was, more or less, left to his own resources as far as his personal safety was concerned.” The Igbo’s therefore did inter-village marriages to avoid conflicts and this led to polygamy as one man marries into many families and villages.

III. Polygamy in Igbo Land

Polygamy was first mentioned, seen and identified within the Bible with Lamech, who lived a few generations from Adam (Gen 4:19). The ancient societies of the world, with the exception of Greco Roman Society, tolerated, accepted and practiced polygamy at one time or the other. The Igbo society is no exception in this practice as polygamy was found in the oldest account of the people.

This can be ascertained because the economy of the Igbo’s depends on the cultivation of Land. The producing of these crops is time consuming and depends solely on human labor. Since it depends on the family which the man is the head, this means that the greater the number of wives, the greater the number of family members to do the work. (Westermarck, 1949) It was also sometimes a mutual arrangement between the man and his first wife. As the woman is overburdened with work, or is barren, she encourages her husband to marry a second wife. (Hubert, 1976) Again the single person has no honor in Igbo traditional society. More so, marrying a polygamist was preferred than to remain unmarried. (Roland, 1976)

A. Factors promoting polygamy

Christianity as people may say came with the prediction of exterminating polygamy, (Beater, 1968) others feels that harsh economy, or literacy will discourage polygamy, yet polygamy appears to have increased in Igbo land due to these factors.

1. Economic Values

Much respect, dignity, and economic values are attached to a man with a large family, with male children and many women to care for them. This respect and value can only be gotten from a polygamous

marriage. As a result, when a large family is constituted, more farm land is required for more food to be produced. Thus, more money alongside many male children makes a man economically value-able since his children will keep his lineage. This is because a traditional man without male children is regarded as an incomplete man. (Mbiti, 1975). However, the number of children that the man has makes his value appreciated by the society and gives him high status. His need of recognition is also met by his many wives. Thereby when considerations for leadership position arise, he will be considered above others due to his ability to rule a large number of people.... (Nwankwo, 1992).

2. Personal and Religious Motives

There are also some personal or religious motives of polygamy which promote its practice. One of the major personal motives according to Chipress is that “Polygamy affords a man the opportunity of marrying the woman of his choice.” This means that if the wife that the man already has does not satisfy him in anyway, it affords him the opportunity to marry one that can satisfy that missing need. Mbiti (1969) adds that more wives and children help to alleviate the fear to being left alone at old age hence the marriage of more than one wife so as to have many children at old age who will look after the man. The more children a man has, the better his name could be remembered, his burial would then be well attended and his greatness, hospitality, personal wealth and generosity would be recounted. Religiously, this desire to be polygamous is related to Africa religious belief that the dead continues to live through their children, thus many descendants, insure “immortality”. Obawa (1978) echoes that polygamy has a virtually sacred character.

IV. Igbo Concept of Marriage

Marriage as an institution has its origin from creation, in the Garden of Eden where God, Himself united the first husband and wife, Adam and Eve. This He did for an indissoluble and life-long marital relationship, which is a model for mankind and every society. (Gen 2:18, 21-24). The Igbo’s have the concept of marriage as the living together of a man and woman in a permanent bond which does not have to do with both partners alone but with the extended family. This is done for the purpose of bearing children. This is a system

which what affects the bride and the grooms, naturally affects their extended family. They believe that the ability of man not to have children with his wife or wives is the determining factor to measure the success.(Nwankwo,1992) The women are expected to be under her husband as the Bible declares. In any instance of problem, the wife returns to her parents for settlement before the issue can be resolved and she comes back. The marriage of the Igbo's is a bond that unites families for a lasting relationship.

V. Polygamy in the Bible

This section will examine what the Bible says about polygamy and look closely into the reasons for which the acts were involved in. The section will also find out whether it was universally accepted or promoted by God. For the attempt to understand the phenomenon of polygamy in the Bible, this paper takes into account the numerous cases of the practice in both the Old and New Testaments.

A. Old Testament perspective

Survey of the ancient Near Eastern polygamous practices provides a general background to this Old Testament practice. According to Hall's comparative study of polygamy in the Bible and ancient near-eastern societies, "Polygamy seemed to be the dominant social structure allowed under the Sumerian Law. (Hall, 1984) This means that Sumerians acknowledged the presence of a second wife or more. In Babylon, the code of Hammurabi (Ca 1700 B.C) similarly acknowledged and accepted polygamy under certain circumstances when a wife did not produce any children, or if the wife becomes divorced. The middle Assyrian laws (Ca 1450 B. C.) took polygamy for granted. The man can take as many wives as he can. In Egypt, many texts recovered have proved that the practice of polygamy throughout Egyptian society was allowed. (Haper, 1904) It is clear that polygamy was a viable option for those who could afford it.

Examples of polygamous marriages are those of Abraham (Gen. 16: 1-3), Jacob (Gen. 29: 21-31), Gideon (Judges 8: 30-31), Saul (1 Sam. 14: 50; 2 Sam. 3: 7), David (2 Sam. 5: 13), Solomon (1 Kings 11: 3), Lamech (Gen. 4: 19), Jair (Judges 10: 3, 4), Ibzan (Judges 12: 8,9), Abdon (Judges 12: 13), Nahor (Gen. 22: 20-24), Esau (Gen. 26:34), Eliphaz (Gen. 36: 12), Manasseh (1 Chr. 7: 14), Elkanah (1

Sam. 1: 2-8), Caleb (1 Chr. 2: 46-48), Jerahmed (1 Chr. 2:25-28), Ashur (1 Chr. 7: 3,4), and Izrahiah, and his sons, Michael, Obadiah, Joel and Ishiah (1 Chr. 7: 3,4). Furthermore, also are Rehoboam (2 Chr. 11: 20-21), Abijah (2 Chr. 13: 21), Jehoram (2 Chr.21:14-17), Joash (2 Chr. 24:3), Jehoiachim (2 Kings 24:15), Zedekiah (Jer. 38:23), Ahab (1 Kings 20:3-7), Belshazzar (Dan. 5:2, 3), Ahasuerus (Esth. 2). Only thirty two cases of polygamy could be seen in the Old Testament.

While the marital status of most of the rest of the approximately 3000 men of the Bible is not discussed, several marriages seem to be quite clear monogamous. These include Old Testament characters like Adam, Noah, Shem, Ham, Japheth, Job, Isaac, Joseph, Amram, Aaron, Eliu, Samuel, Ezekiel, & Hosea. Any study of the practice of polygamy in the times of Old Testament needs to be based on the records of actual stories of biblical polygamists and the reasons for such practices. (Gilchrist, 1987)

1. Reasons for Polygamous Marriages

Some of the reason that made people of the Old Testament practice polygamy are found and described in the Bible. The factors are as follows:

1. Barrenness of the first wife, like in the case of Elkanah.(1 Samuel 1:1-2)

2. Desire for an heir

3. Pride, prestige, Sexual lust. Like Solomon, David & Lamech (Gen.4).

4. Custom like in the case of Jacob who was deceived into polygamy (Gen. 29:15-30)

5. Political treaties like Solomon who married Pharaohs' daughters.(1 Kings 3:1)

Each of the Polygamous practices was motivated by one or more of these reasons.

B. New Testament perspective

Some Old Testament examples concerning polygamy have been seen and their reasons for practicing it mentioned though not expansively. More insight is also required in the New Testament practice of polygamy. Throughout the New Testament, there is complete silence regarding any direct mention of polygamy or polygamists, even though there is extra-biblical historical evidence

that some Jews of this period practiced polygamy. (Jeremiah, 1977) There are some polygamous marriages that are described by some non-biblical writers. He further reports that Herod the great had ten wives and a harem of concubines. Dunran, (1973) argues that from the behavior of the Herodian family that polygamy which survived as a theoretical part of the traditional customary laws was a privilege reserved by rulers. Henri (1964) concludes that both monogamy and polygamy were practiced at the time of Jesus, but one predominated. He States: "It appears that at the time of Christ monogamy predominated because of the Greek and Roman example". Another probable example of polygamy in the New Testament period is implied in Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among You, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's Wife" (1Cor. 5:1). Other texts of the New Testament include Matt. 19:1-8; Mark 10:1-12; Mk. 6:17-29 and Mk 11:27-31. Therefore, the New Testament gives a clear confirmation of monogamy and not polygamy.

VI. Action of Some Churches in Eastern Nigeria on Polygamy

This section presents a historical examination of some Christian denominations and their positions or stands on acceptance of persons of polygamous union into church fellowship. This paper here seeks to investigate and closely examine these denominations and state their positions.

A. The position of Roman Catholics

The missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church met the challenge of polygamy first in South America among Indians, and some African slaves who were already married and had their wives in Africa before becoming slaves in South America. A solution was needed to match this situation (Coriden, 1985) hence Papal constitutions were respectively issued by three popes. Pope Paul III in 1537, Pope Pius V in 1571 and Pope Gregory XIII in 1585. The constitutions says that "Those who before conversion had several wives, according to their custom, and did not remember which one they had taken first could upon their conversion, take any wife they wished, while the others were to be sent away."

This was Pope Paul III's constitution "1571 papal constitution granted the polygamist the privilege of retaining the wife he was baptized with. The church in application of this constitution in Nigeria does it in principle and not in practice as a polygamist is baptized. Though no reason is given for this action but a careful survey shows that the church outlaws(outlaws) it in principle but not in practice. (Woods, 1935)

B. Anglican Church

The problem of polygamy cannot be overlooked in the protestant churches. The same issue chronics in the Anglican Church. After many deliberations in the 1988 Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Communion uphold that

Monogamy is God's plan and as the ideal relationship between husband and wife; nevertheless, it recommends that a polygamist who respond to the Gospel and wishes to join the Anglican Church may be baptized and confirmed with his wives and children on the condition that the polygamist will promise never to marry again as long as any of his wives at the time of conversion is alive; that the receiving of such a polygamist has the consent of the local Anglican community; that such a polygamist shall not be compelled to put away any of his wives on account of the social deprivation they will suffer. (Igenozu, 2005)

C. Baptist Church

The Baptist church after meeting the same challenge of polygamy also went into debates and discussions. The church leaders held that Polygamy was not a matter to be left to the decision of the local congregation. In 1903 the Mission executives resolved to advised all the local Churches to desist from tolerating and admitting polygamists to church membership. The church has a stand against polygamy (Sannah, 1983).

D. Methodist Church

This denomination was not left out as long as it exists in eastern Nigeria. As a result of their fear of the possibility of compromise with the Anglican Church towards polygamy, they resolved at Lambert

conference of Anglican church in 1888 and affirmed it at Lagos Synod of 1895 that no man be recommended for membership or continue in full membership unless a monogamist (Sannah,1983). It is clear that the position of the protestant with exception of Anglican Church took a unified stand to polygamy as in clear contrast with their belief. While Anglican Church sees nothing wrong with it now and still encourages polygamous practices.

VII. The Position of Indigenous/Independent Church

Having seen the stand of the Catholic Church and protestant Churches, the position of the Indigenous Independent Churches needs to be understood. Two Churches are selected to represent the group.

A. The Africa Church

This Church accepts polygamy in the Church but prohibits their clergy from being polygamous (Sannah, 1983).

B. The Aladura Church

The problem of polygamy does not exist here as the Church adapted them to the African marriage custom. It means that polygamy in this Church is taken for granted and no specified stand is taken. But by practice, polygamy is encouraged (Sannah, 1983)

In summary, three positions are held in this issue as above seen;

1. Polygamy is incompatible with Christian teaching and practice.
2. Polygamy as an unacceptable form of marriage for Christian but can be accepted.
3. Polygamy as a normal marital style and no problem with it.

VIII. Seventh-day Adventist Approach in Relation to Polygamous Union

The Approach of Seventh-day Adventist Church to Polygamous union developed over time after missionaries sent to parts of Africa including Eastern Nigeria encountered polygamy in their frontier mission fields. These positions were reviewed from time to time and the Church took a stand. These positions were taken in the highest

policy making of the church called the General Conference .Each stand is as follows:’

A. SDA Church stands from 1926

The Decision or the Church stand is that a polygamist be accepted into the church on the stand that he put away all his wives and children, taking care of them except the first one which is accepted as the legal wife. Precisely in 1926, the crime of polygamy came up again and missionaries react to the last note as a great impediment to the propagation of the gospel. As a result of the issue, the General Conference noted to adopt as a policy the following recommendation:

Whereas, the practice of polygamy on the part of many races for who we are laboring is in itself a challenge to Christian principle, and constitutes a group of compromise if permitted in the Christian Church: therefore: We recommend

1. That great care be used in the examination of peoples in heathen lands for entrance into the church, and as this examination relates to this practice, we would advise the following:

(a) that in no case should a man living in polygamy is admitted into the fellowship of the church.

(b) That preceding his entrance into the church, a sufficient time of probation be given him to test out his sincerity in separating him from this practice. (General Conference Minutes, 1926)

This could not settle the matter because of lack of a strong theological basis. This continued to be debated in these years and no conclusion or clear resolution was made.

B. SDA Church stands after 1941

The 1941 recommendation reads that a polygamist is permitted to return to the wife of his choice. (Seventh Day Adventist Working Policy, 1991)

IX. Problem OF Polygamy for the Church in the Eastern Nigerian

Polygamy is not just a pastoral problem but a big problem for Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria. This practice is a big hindering factor for many Igbo's of the Eastern Nigeria joining the Church. (Mmagu, 1982) The consequences of divorcing their wives and leaving their children wondering about as people without a father, becomes the result. Some consider the fact of leading the woman put away into perpetual agony and persistent adultery. Others maintain that the stand of the church has brought about social and psychological menace in the society, while legalists accuse the church as encouraging home breaking as some former polygamous men refuse to take care of their families. These issues pose difficult problem in the church and society at large in Eastern Nigeria as those. The question is, is the General Conference the final authority on faith and practices? What does the Bible say?

X. Biblical Response to Polygamy

The Bible is the description or stipulations of what should be done and what should not be done by man in any situation. Marriage was instituted and prescribed by God because it is good for man. For this purpose God created man in His image, "male and female created He them." (Gen 1: 27). They were created for each other. He created Adam and Eve. He created them and arranged by Himself the first wedding or matrimonial union between them. (Gen 2:22). After which He declared "Therefore, shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Here clearly suggests monogamy and not polygamy. The creation account of Gen 2:18-25, with some corroboration from Gen1:27 depict marriage as monogamous in the beginning and these verses constitute a formal teaching on the essential nature and ethical structure of marriage. It is clear that polygamist, existed in the Bible but the first record of plural marriages occurred among the reprobate descendants of Cain (Gen 4:19; 20). Polygamy is tainted from its inception. (Sehillebeecky, 1965) In Deuteronomy, the admonition against multiplying wives, although this is combined with the warnings against adultery also used as an apologetic argument in behalf of monogamy. (Deut 17:12-17).

Polygamy is suggested to be problematic even in the Old Testament because its tendency to lead one into adultery. And if attention is particularly drawn to the frequent use of the imagery of monogamy, polygamy opposes the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people (cf. is 50:1; 54: 6-7; 62:4-5 Jer 2:2; Ezek 16). In contrast to the values of the earlier period of the Patriarchs and Kings, it is a reflection of growing appreciation of monogamy. (cf. Prov 5:15-19'31, Eccles 9:9; Ps 45:9-11, 128:3), it is obvious that the Old Testament revealed God's preference for monogamy although the New Testament brings the definitive step

The New Testament teachings of Christ in the permanence of marriage (cf. Matt 5:31-32; 19; 3-9; Mark 10'2-12, Luke 16:18) show monogamy as the ideal. Since Jesus did not make reference to the problem of polygamy, He was clearly in support of monogamy. Considering Jesus' speech in Matthew. 19:6, 8-9 about divorce, is also another confirmation that Jesus preached monogamy. The "one flesh" analogy in the teachings of Paul could also be used to support monogamy (1 Cor.7:12, 17-20). Saint Jerome's comment on "One wife" marriage of the pastoral Epistle (cf.1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:16) is also very instructive. It goes on to ascertain that from creation to this time, monogamy has been the command of the scripture.

XI. Summary and Conclusion

Conclusively, polygamy in Eastern Nigeria is not founded biblically. Since available evidence indicates that this form of marriage still sustains important social values in Eastern Nigeria, it would be morally wrong for Church leaders to compromise the scripture for culture. With the biblical response in this paper, even though every conceivable aspect of this problem has not been touched, it is evident that the Bible remains the rule of faith and must be regarded than any other literature or cultures. That the Bible made mention of polygamists, is not an endorsement of such. Also that the Bible did not expressively condemn it, is no justification for it. If the cultural and historical nature of man is constituents of human nature, then the church must adapt teaching of the Scripture to take account of the necessity. The purpose of this proposal and indeed of this whole study would be totally misconstrued if taken from any other perspective except biblical response. Hence this paper submits that monogamy is the biblical recommended form of marriage and should

not be compromised. From the hand of the creator, the marriage of Adam and Eve is a perfect example of what God wants.

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