

Evangelism among Resistant Peoples with Deeply Entrenched Polygamy

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This article has to do with the problem of polygamy in the evangelization of peoples in societies which are resistant to the gospel. Examples of these are some Muslim societies in the Middle East, Africa, and Indonesia, and some ethno-religionist societies such as the Southern Nilo-Hamites (including the Maasai) of East Africa. While the focus is on polygamy in a few select societies, an introductory overview is given of some aspects of the dealings of the churches and mission societies with polygamous families over the years. This is followed by a review of the trajectory of the Adventist experience and of the



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biblical/theological foundations of the issue in order to provide a background for discussion regarding an appropriate course of action.

The way missionaries respond to the polygamy problem has always been, and remains, a particularly sensitive issue for two main reasons: first are the deeply entrenched views in the Christian West regarding the theology and forms of marriage. Second, there is fear that an accommodating position will undercut the standard of monogamy in the church, and reduce the security of the monogamous status of Christian women in polygamous societies.

A cursory view of the road traveled

General Missions History

The problem of how to accommodate converts coming to Christianity with polygamous families in a manner that is both faithful to the gospel and sensitive to human need has been a recurring item on the agenda of missionary conferences for a century and a half. Change in the general attitude toward polygamy, at first

slow, seems to have accelerated rapidly during the past thirty years. Until about that time most of the major churches and mission societies had adhered, at least in theory, to a firm refusal to accommodate polygamy in any form. The position defined at the Anglican Lambeth Conference of 1888, and subsequently repeatedly reaffirmed, was adhered to by most of the English-speaking missionary bodies. In general, practice was as follows:

Polygamous men were not baptized or accorded church membership. Further, inasmuch as polygamy was generally regarded as a form of institutionalized adultery rather than mar-

traditional societies, of the wide differences in patterns of polygamy, and of the social dislocation and dire consequences for women and children caused by the separation of families in some societies. The general attitude is changing. Many missionaries have either observed or experienced some of the following consequences of rigid insistence upon monogamy.

1. The recognition that polygamy is marriage, and stable marriage at that, has led to increasing unease about being the agents of divorce.

2. The serious problems involved in separating families, such as the separation of young

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riage, the separation of wives was not regarded as divorce. Polygamous families and wives were dealt with in two major ways: (1) separation of families was encouraged in which case the husband was required to keep the first and only true wife, or was allowed to choose the wife he wished to retain, or (2) families were held together and in some societies converting wives were baptized but not the husband.

Recently missionaries and church leaders have gained greater insight into the forms and functions of marriage in

children from their mothers and the dereliction and isolation of divorced wives.

3. Unexpected developments, such as splits or offshoots in their churches initiated by leaders accepting polygamous families. In some cases some of the most exemplary men attending church, including unofficial leaders, have been unbaptized polygamists. Missionaries have not known how to deal with this situation short of admitting them to membership. Church leaders have failed to disciple chiefs and other leaders of society wishing to become Chris-

tians because these have felt they could not alienate their wives without creating serious friction between clan groups and severely disrupting the society. Church leaders have become aware that some of their prominent and wealthy church members have secretly maintained secondary wives. Church leaders have also realized that acceptance of polygamy has been a significant factor in the growth of independent movements, including loss of their own members. Many have come to recognize that acceptance of polygamy has been a significant factor in the rapid spread of Islam in some countries. Some missionaries have experienced tension between mission societies regarding different practices in dealing with polygamists. One missionary told me, "There is literally a Babel regarding polygamy among missionaries."

Other changes are also taking place. Erstwhile colonial countries have become sovereign, independent nations and many of the churches are gaining greater freedom and adopting a more accommodating stance toward polygamy. Already in 1969 Donald McGavran, director of the Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, dedicated a whole issue of the *Church Growth Bulletin* (vol. 5, no. 4) to "Polygamy and Church Growth" in which insistence on monogamy was recognized as a major obstacle to church growth. An accommodating stance is boldly advocated by such leading lights as McGavran;

Alan Tippett, leading anthropologist of the movement; Ralph Winter, who in due course established the U.S. Center of World Mission; Kenneth Taylor, translator of the *Living Bible*; and Lesslie Newbigin, then secretary of the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism in Geneva, shortly to return to India as Bishop of the Church of South India.

The Lambeth Conference Resolution of 1888, which strictly forbade the extension of Church membership to polygamous families, has dominated the polygamy issue for over a century, but there has been a radical change. A resolution was adopted by the Synod of the Church of the Province of Kenya in 1982 approving the baptism and confirmation of polygamists (Minute 22/82). This was presented to the 1988 "Centennial" Lambeth Conference with the support of the bishops of many provinces in Africa and elsewhere. The resultant Resolution 26 of 1988, like its predecessor a century earlier, constitutes a landmark.

This Conference upholds monogamy as God's plan, and as the ideal relationship of love between husband and wife; nevertheless recommends that a polygamist who responds to the Gospel and wishes to join the Anglican Church may be baptized and confirmed with his believing wives and children on the following conditions: (1) that the polygamist shall promise not to marry again as long as any of his wives at the time of his conversion are alive; (2) that the receiving of such a polygamist has the consent of the local Anglican

community; (3) that such a polygamist shall not be compelled to put away any of his wives on account of the social deprivation they would suffer; and (4) recommends that Provinces where the Churches face problems of polygamy are encouraged to share information of their pastoral approach to Christians who become polygamists so that the most appropriate way of disciplining and pastoring them can be found, and that the Anglican Consultative Council be requested to facilitate the sharing of that information (The Lambeth Conference 1988:220-221).

One can only wonder what the experience of missions in polygamous societies would have been

outreach work of the church in contemporary society.

While no one is loudly trumpeting the victory of an accommodating stance, the general attitude toward polygamy seems to have changed from an unbending prohibition to a gracious and selective extension of church membership to polygamists under some circumstances. Many, if not most, churches in societies with inflexible forms of polygamy have quietly begun to baptize husbands and wives who contracted plural marriages before coming to Christianity on condition that they do not marry additional wives. At the

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if this position had been adopted a hundred years earlier. What would the result have been if leaders who balked at becoming Christians because of the social dislocation resulting from the alienation of wives had enthusiastically joined the church and supported the evangelization of their people? The history of missions among some peoples might have been strikingly different.

Because of the radical social change now taking place in most traditional societies, this resolution seems more appropriate to pioneering movements among largely unevangelized peoples, such as those which are the focus of this paper, than to the general

same time there is great concern to promote the Christian ideal of a loving and congenial monogamy and to protect the church and its youth from the incursion of an incipient polygamy. Much attention is now being given to concerns such as the following: (1) education regarding the meaning, mutual responsibilities, and beauty of a Christian monogamous family relationship, (2) promotion of the adoption of civic marriage laws that protect monogamy and the rights of women, (3) education of members regarding the above, and of how a woman can protect herself in the event that a husband wishes to bring another wife into the marriage.

We thus approach the central concerns of this paper in the context of a broadly different general attitude toward polygamy than that obtaining even two decades ago.

Trajectory of the Adventist Experience

Adventist missionaries entered the field a century after the beginnings of the great Protestant thrust without any pre-established policy regarding the marriage situation. They immediately found themselves face to face with extremely complex social issues, which varied widely from society to society. They also

Missionary

Round Table Sessions

In search of a solution to this and other issues a Missionary Round Table session, presided over by W. A. Spicer, was convened in conjunction with the General Conference Session at Takoma Park, Maryland in June 1913. The report of the discussions reveals the perplexity of the missionaries regarding the complex marital issues they faced. They seem not to have been adequately aware that their different attitudes and practice were grounded in the very different forms of polygamy of their host societies, more than in doctrinal

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found themselves in contact with the established practice of other societies, and these too varied from rejection of every trace of polygamy to selective accommodation. Many Adventist missionaries were thus confronted with a two-sided dilemma—their conception of the Christian/biblical solution, and the accepted missionary practice in the area. In places what seemed to them to be the appropriate course of action ran counter to current mission practice.

differences. The diversity of their thought and practice is reflected in the following comment by W. C. White:

I do think we will lose something if you fail to make an effort to come to an agreement regarding a moderate, well-balanced standard to work to. It is not law, and you can say how it shall be placed before the public. I cannot but feel that it will tend to the unity and strength of your work to have such a moderate, well-balanced standard as has been presented, recognized. Then each man is free to make exceptions as

his judgment demands; and when he finds that he has made mistakes in his exceptions, and that he has to retrace his steps and make different standards, then such a resolution will help him a lot (Missionary Round Table 1913:13).

A "Recommendation" was drafted (appendix A). W. A. Spicer described the status of the recommendation by saying,

In putting this on record it is not a legislative action as though passed by the General Conference, as an order in force, but it is the consensus of the counsel of the missionaries. We may still learn more, and we may possibly unlearn some things (Missionary Round Table 1913:1).

Thirteen years later, in May-June, 1926, a second Missions Round Table was convened in connection with the sixth General Conference Session in Milwaukee. The difficulty missionaries faced in breaking apart polygamous families in some societies was discussed more specifically than at the earlier conference. It became immediately clear that polygamy was much less stable in some societies than in others and that some missionaries in resistant societies had followed the course of flexibility. In some fields, polygamous families were baptized while in others a rigid monogamy was upheld. Most of the missionaries seemed to be in favor of flexibility given the different social circumstances of the marriage institutions with which they had to deal.

Discussion also included the problem of what to do with *de*

facto, but not legally married families in some countries in South America in which it was not possible to obtain divorce. A committee was appointed to make recommendations to the General Conference Committee.

General Conference Resolutions and Policies

The first formal General Conference Resolution on "Polygamy and Marriage Relationships" was adopted on 13 June 1926 (appendix B). It represented a brief, but stern, endeavor to correct errant excess and precluded the baptism of polygamous men. The status of plural wives was not defined. The simplicity of the resolution seems to belie the complexity of the reality the missionaries faced. In somewhat strange juxtaposition in this same policy, grace was extended to the unmarried Latin *de facto* family allowing them to be admitted to church fellowship (Recommendations 2 and 3), but grace was strictly denied the African polygamous family.

The brethren from Africa returned to their mission fields perplexed as to how they could respond to this resolution. W. H. Branson, president of the Africa Division, took the matter under investigation and came to a realization of the absolute intransigence of the large Southern Bantu patrilineal patrilocal societies regarding the dissolution of polygamous families. Tribal leaders stoutly maintained that marriage was an agreement between clan groups in which men incurred

responsibilities for women and children from which they were not entitled to withdraw because they became Christians. Branson and some of his co-workers came to a full realization of the grave injustices perpetrated in the breaking apart of families which, in some of these societies, involved the separation of children from their mothers and the dereliction of divorced women. In addition, they learned of the harshly critical judgment of the tribesmen on a religion that would inflict such suffering and injustice upon women and children in the name of a God of love. They discovered that missionary insistence upon

now be accommodated in a more considerate manner? There was a strong feeling on the part of Elder Branson and his group that the 1926 resolution was inadequate to the situation they faced.

Branson brought the matter to the attention of the fifth biennial council of the African Division at Solusi Mission in June 1929. A decision was made to request the General Conference to reconsider the resolution. J. I. Robison, secretary of the Division, drafted an excellent fourteen page paper on polygamy in the Bible, including a brief survey of the practices of some of the churches in the area, and made a strong case for

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monogamy had engendered such hostility to the gospel among some tribesmen that it countermanded the missionary message of a benevolent God. They began to ask themselves whether becoming a monogamist was a *sine qua non* of becoming a Christian. To add to the difficulty of the situation, converts who had learned to read began to come to missionaries with the Bible in their hands asking why, if so many of the great men of the Bible practiced polygamy, it could not

a more accommodating stance. Branson sent this to Elder Spicer along with the formal request of the Division.

The African Division was successful in getting a committee appointed at the 1930 Annual Council, which recommended a major revision of the 1926 Resolution. A radically changed policy was adopted on 3 November 1930, which was adequately flexible and which opened the way for the baptism of polygamous families under certain circumstances (appendix C).

This policy remained in force until 1941. However, acceptance of the new policy in Tanganyika brought protests from the Adventist British missionaries in neighboring Kenya where the hard lines of the 1888 Lambeth and the 1926 General Conference policies had been strictly adhered to. The missionaries did not see how they could go back on their earlier rigorous insistence on monogamy without engendering much confusion in the minds of their members or invoking the severe criticism of their neighboring mission societies.

An appeal for a firmer stance on monogamy as prerequisite for church membership was made to the General Conference by the Northern European Division. In response a subcommittee of the Home and Foreign Officers was appointed to give further study to the matter and make recommendations that would lead to a united worldwide standard. The General Conference in session at San Francisco in 1941 adopted a policy which countermanded the 1930 position (appendix D). This policy, re-edited in 1977 but substantially unchanged, remains the official position of the church (appendix E). It is of more than passing interest that very few missionary representatives were able to attend the session because of the severe travel restrictions imposed by World War II. One wonders whether a broader less restrictive policy would have been adopted had a larger number of those directly involved with

the complexity of the polygamy situation been present. According to this policy a polygamous man is "required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one" before baptism. It allows, however, that under certain circumstances the wives in a polygamous marriage may be baptized.

A More Recent Initiative

In 1980, under the leadership of General Conference President Neal Wilson, a decision was made to reorganize the divisional structure of the church in Africa. This restructuring joined together segments of three former Divisions, forming the Africa-Indian Ocean Division. In one of the Divisions the attempt to separate families had been largely abandoned and converting wives, but not the husband, were baptized. Greater pressure in the direction of monogamy had been maintained in the other two Divisions, but there were differences regarding which wife should be retained. Some insisted that it should be the first and only legal wife while others permitted the husband free choice of which wife to maintain.

Neal Wilson, who had previously worked for a number of years in the Middle East, was much concerned to promote an effective evangelistic program among Muslims, whose religion permits polygamy, and who, if converted, will generally enter the church *en famille* or not at all. He sought to promote

consensus regarding the polygamy-related concerns in the new Division in Africa, and while the matter was under consideration, open the way for a revival of evangelism among Muslims. Wilson requested a study paper on the forms of, and dealings of the Adventist Church with, polygamy in Africa, and brought the matter to discussion at a meeting of the General Conference and Division officers in October 1981. A study conference

son's reprinted article, "Between the Ideal and the Actual" in this issue of *JAMS*).

Wilson shared a "Progress Report" of the "Plural Families" study with church leaders at the Annual Council in Rio de Janeiro on 6 October 1986. Finally, the proposed policy, which was intended to replace the 1977 C85 policy, was presented to the Annual Council in Washington in October of 1987. The following action was taken:

The priorities of mission include: acceptance of Christ as Savior, the biblical basis of Adventist belief and hope, the gathering of members into the witnessing community of the church, and progress toward monogamy as an ideal to be achieved as members mature in faith.

was convened in 1983 and the concerns and hopes raised there were introduced to the Annual Council in October of that year (Coffin 1983:9).

Study papers soliciting a response were subsequently circulated throughout the world field. At a broadly representative study conference convened in March 1986, a tentative alternate and more accommodating policy was drafted (appendix F). The editor of the *Adventist Review* reported on the process and the issues discussed (see William G. Johns-

Plural Marriages (Polygamy).

For several years there have been discussions and study as to whether the guidelines on plural families as outlined in the General Conference *Working Policy* should be changed, or remain as they have been for approximately fifty years. Recently the divisions were asked to carefully explore this matter and comment on whether they felt a change should be made. The majority are clearly opposed to any change at this time. It seems obvious that there is no Biblical authority for plural marriages. Although some patriarchs were involved in plural marriages, it was outside the Lord's will. It is felt

best to set this matter to rest for the present until the Holy Spirit, in His own time, shows the church a better solution (Annual Council 1987:31).

And there the matter remains.

What then can be learned from these eight years of serious endeavor to overcome the enormous difficulty confronting polygamous men who give their hearts to the Lord and wish to become active members of the church, but who cannot in free conscience bring themselves to wreck havoc upon the wives and children they love?

First, it would seem that efforts to gain approval of an accommodating stance would be more likely to gain consent if application is restricted to a few select societies in which deeply entrenched polygamy is a major obstacle to conversion and church membership as is the case among the Maasai and some Muslim societies. Details of these situations will be considered in another article in this issue.

Second, a program sharing information on the following three fronts could be helpful in stimulating thought regarding responsible mission practice.

a. A description of contemporary missionary programs in which an accommodating stance regarding polygamy is practiced would provide useful practical information. This could include studies which show to what extent insistence upon monogamy at the outset in some societies constitutes a major obstacle to acceptance of Christianity. Fur-

ther, discussion of the ordering of the priorities in mission might be helpful viz.: acceptance of Christ as Savior; the biblical basis of Adventist belief and hope; the gathering of members into the witnessing community of the church; monogamy as an ideal to be achieved rather than as a *sine qua non* of becoming a Christian, and so on.

b. The preparation of a detailed and balanced study of polygamy in the scriptures by respected biblical scholars would provide a biblical basis to inform missionary practice. This could include information regarding the doctrinal position now taken by most churches.

c. A description of the missionary problems that result from rigid insistence upon monogamy at entry into the church would be helpful. In addition, personal and social problems resulting from the separation of families could be illustrated by appropriate case studies.

Biblical Evidence

The Old Testament

There have been numerous attempts to either minimize or explain away the biblical evidence indicating that polygamy was an accepted pattern of marriage in Israel, much of which amounts to special pleading of one kind or another. Monogamy is the ideal form of marriage established in Eden and this ideal has been staunchly upheld by the Christian Church from its early

beginnings. This is the form of marriage which has been taught and upheld by the Adventist Church throughout its history and strongly affirmed here.

The patriarchs departed from this ideal surprisingly early, and there is abundant evidence that polygamy came to be an accepted practice in Israel. Two major forms of evidence testify to this. First, there are the biblical records of the practice of polygamy in the Old Testament. Second, there are the historical records regarding polygamy in the Talmud and Mishnah, and

As regards the first pattern of evidence, the record of two events are of significance inasmuch as it can be argued that they confer an *imprimatur* on the practice:

(a) the word of God to David from the mouth of Nathan:

This is the word of the Lord . . . to you. . . . I gave you your master's daughter and his wives to be your own, I gave you the daughters of Israel and Judah; and had this not been enough, I would have added other favors as great (2 Sam 12:7, 8 NEB).

(b) the action of Jehoida the priest on behalf of Joash whom

There is not a single forthright prohibition of polygamy in the Old Testament . . . [there is instead] textual evidence for the incidence of polygamy and the regulatory system controlling it.

also in the works of Jewish and Christian historians and the early Church Fathers. Much has been written about the matter. It is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct even a cursory survey of the evidence; however, a few of the highlights from the biblical record are outlined below. This consists largely of two patterns of evidence: first, records of the practice of polygamy by patriarchs, kings, and ordinary citizens; and second, the regulations controlling the practice of polygamous marriage.

he and his wife had sheltered and reared:

Jehoida got two wives for him [Joash], and he became the father of sons and daughters (2 Chr 24:3 NRSV).

Secondly, of even greater weight in indicating that polygamy was an accepted practice in Israel are the many Levitical laws regulating the practice:

You shall not take a woman who is your wife's sister to make her a rival-wife (Lev 18:18 NEB).

If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity (Lev 20:14 NRSV).

If he takes another wife to himself he shall not diminish the food, clothing or marital rights of the first wife (Exod 21:10 NRSV).

And he [the king] must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away (Deut 17:17 NRSV).

When a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, . . . and the son of the unloved wife is the elder, then when the day comes for him to divide his property . . . he shall recognize the rights of the firstborn, the son of the unloved wife (Deut 21:15-17 NEB).

Weight is added to the above passages by the law of the levirate which is defined as follows:

When brothers live together and one of them dies without leaving a son, his widow shall not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother . . . shall take her in marriage and do his duty by her as her husband's brother. The first son she shall bear shall perpetuate the dead brother's name (Deut 25:5-10 NEB).

The levirate ensures continuity of the family name and in addition defines the inheritance and transmission of family property from firstborn to firstborn son. Leviratic marriage in Israel was not a matter of choice, it was a defined responsibility. Wherever the levirate is strictly practiced, polygamy is an inevitable consequence.

It is inconceivable that this considerable body of law regulating both the practice of polygamy and leviratic marriage, and expanded upon in the Talmud and Mishnah, would exist in a society in which polygamy was not an accepted form of marriage. And when one adds the fact that there is not a single prohibition of polygamy in the Old Testament to the textual evidence for the incidence of polygamy and the regulatory system controlling it, it becomes impossible to deny that polygamy was an accepted practice in Israel.

The New Testament

While the incidence of polygamy declined after the exile and was not commonly practiced by the Jews of the diaspora, there is considerable evidence that polygamy was practiced by some Jews, especially the aristocracy including those of the priestly caste, in Judea in Jesus' time, and was protested against by the Essenes of the Qumran community (Jeremias 1969:93-94, 369-370). The laws governing the transmission of name and property (the levirate was a part of this system) remained a part of the Jewish heritage. Polygamy was not officially condemned in Judaism until the Middle Ages, and some Jewish communities have continued the practice until modern times.

Jesus certainly points to the depth, intimacy, and binding nature of marriage in "the two shall become one flesh" state-

ment (Matt 19:5). This description of marriage is much more appropriate to monogamy than to polygamy, but is not necessarily exclusive of the latter. It is of more than passing interest that when the case of the woman who had had seven husbands was put to Jesus by the Sadducees he made no comment regarding the polygamous implications of the leviratic law (Matt 22:33-34). Jesus specifically and strongly countermanded divorce (Matt 19:8, 9), but nowhere did he condemn polygamy even though he must have known that it was still practiced by some. This should perhaps give cause for thought regarding the insistence on separation (divorce is really the proper term) of polygamous families coming into the church.

Among the most commonly used New Testament phrases in missionary discussions regarding the place and role of polygamous men in the church is the Pauline rule. "Our leader, therefore, or bishop, must be above reproach, faithful to his one wife" (1 Tim 3:2, 12; Titus 1:5, 6). While this phrase is open to several interpretations, it was employed by noted leaders in the early centuries of the church as a rubric for the treatment of polygamous husbands. For instance, the biblical scholar Jerome (*circa* 400 A.D.) wrote the following on the "One Wife" rule of the church:

The apostle came of the Jews and the primitive Christian church was gathered out of the remnants of Is-

rael. Paul knew that the Law allowed men to have children by several wives. . . . Even the very priests might . . . enjoy the same license. He gave commandment therefore that the priests of the church should not claim this liberty, and that they should not take two wives or three together, but that they should each have but one wife at a time (1890-1900:114).

Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople (*circa* 400), and Theodoret of Cyrrus, a decade or so later, gave similar interpretations of the text. Because of the stature of these men and their closeness to the days of the early church, considerable weight should be given to their interpretation of this Pauline prohibition. There is, however, little direct historical evidence of the existence of polygamy in the early church; therefore, many New Testament scholars suggest that this rubric could have served a dual purpose; i.e., as a prohibition against the election to leadership of men who had been divorced as well as defining the status accorded polygamists in the church.

There has been considerable discussion regarding the relevance to the issue of polygamy of Paul's directions concerning marriage (1 Cor 7) to the church at Corinth. Here we see Paul the realist who recognizes that the ideal is not always attainable, even by the redeemed.

First, Paul addresses the difficulty of the Christian woman in Corinth (1 Cor 7:11) who wished to terminate a tension-laden

marriage with an unbelieving husband. Paul's fundamental advice is that the Christian should remain in the marriage contracted before she became a Christian and endeavor to win the husband. Several reasons are given for this (1 Cor 7:12-14). Then, having quoted the "command of the Lord" (1 Cor 7:10) to the effect that the wife should not divorce her husband, he invokes his apostolic authority, "To the rest I say—I and not the Lord" (1 Cor 7:12) to grant permission for divorce, as a last resort, in the event that it is the unbelieving spouse who withdraws. And

each of you remain in the condition in which you were called" (1 Cor 7:20). Paul concludes his admonition with a resounding affirmation of the binding nature of the marriage contract, "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives" (1 Cor 7:39).

Even though there is no specific reference to polygamy in this chapter-long pattern of advice to the Corinthians, and it thus gives no exactly corresponding model to follow, it has been frequently utilized in discussions regarding polygamy in the following ways: First, Paul affirms the binding quality of a marriage, even though

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in that event "he or she is not bound" (1 Cor 7:15). There is ongoing debate about the meaning of this clause. However, it is widely interpreted to signify that in this circumstance the divorced spouse is free to marry.

Second, having advised Christians to earnestly strive to remain in the marriage in which they came to the gospel Paul gives similar advice in three parallel circumstances. Whether circumcised or uncircumcised (1 Cor 7:19), whether free or a slave (1 Cor 7:24), whether celibate or a widow (1 Cor 7:26), "Let

it is contracted with an unbelieving spouse before one becomes a Christian. The implication is that pre-Christian marriages are to be regarded as marriages, and that dissolution is divorce against which there is a divine interdiction. Second, Paul's basic advice is that Christians should remain in the condition in which they are called; i.e., it is better in missionary practice to keep polygamous families together if possible, and this may possibly mean bringing them into the church as a whole rather than enforcing monogamy. Third, divorce is possible under

some circumstances, but should be reserved for extreme cases. Missionaries should not be in the business of teaching divorce, least of all in societies where it is barely recognized as a possibility. Fourth, Paul realizes that rather than simply following inflexible principles in these practical matters, it is important to take cognizance of the situation and adapt even firm principles in a realistic and constructive approach.

In light of the above, the question is asked: Would Paul have required a converting Jewish polygamist to divorce his wives, the mothers of his own children, as a condition of entry into the church? The answer is generally “No.”

Thus, while it is recognized that no specific mandate is given here regarding the status to be granted polygamous families entering the church, it is also held to be the case that the apostle’s instructions to the Corinthian Church are more in harmony with a compassionate and accommodating stance which keeps families together and admits them to church fellowship, than with a rigorous enforcement of monogamy that tears the family apart.

A Suggestion Regarding Interpretation

I have heard it suggested on several occasions, particularly in connection with American Presbyterian missions in India during the 1880s and 1890s, that the resistance missionaries encountered in gaining board approval for an accommodating

stance in dealing with polygamous converts was due, at least in part, to societal abhorrence of the Mormon practice. This is not surprising since missionaries and mission board leaders are invariably conservative and staunch advocates of high Christian values and ethics, and would be expected to react even more negatively toward the aberrant Mormon behavior than members of society at large, and would not want to perpetuate polygamy in the young churches overseas.

If there is validity to this thesis, then its applicability to Adventists would be vastly greater than to any of the main-line mission societies. This is so because, from the early days of the Millerite Movement until the first decades of the twentieth century, the general public persistently confused Mormons and Adventists. There are several reasons for this: Mormonism and Millerism arose at about the same time, and in the same socio-geographical area, both were millennial sects and, more importantly, both laid claim to special revelation. As a result, each was constantly involved in disassociating itself from the other. David Rowe writes:

The public associated Millerites with other religious rebels of the day. . . . Unfavorable comparisons with the Mormons were particularly numerous. True, both prophets were from upstate New York, transplanted New Englanders, and both were millennialists, though in quite different ways. But neither Mormons nor Mil-

lerites approved of the comparison. Adventists were shocked when they heard people claim “our doctrine is as bad as Jo Smiths” and that the people should “put them down immediately, as it might be more easily done now than when it was deeper rooted.” Smith’s revelation that Christ would not return in 1843 was almost certainly his attempt to dissociate himself from the Millerites, and the Millerites tried equally hard to distance themselves from him. “One day the world represents Mormonism as twin brothers. The next, they hear that ‘Joe Smith’ has wiped all the stain from his pure skirts which a belief in Christ’s near coming would attach to him, and they seem disposed to fondle their favorite pet” (Rowe 1985:105).

Ellen White points to the most significant basis, or source, of this confusion: “As the cry of Mormonism is often raised, especially in the west, at the introduction of the Bible argument of the perpetuity of spiritual gifts, I have felt anxious that my brethren should know *what* my experience has been and *where* it has been” (1860:iv).

Adventists were categorized as Mormons and accused of polygamy in some of the Sunday Law trials of the 1880s and 1890s. I counted thirteen articles containing significant reference to polygamy in the *Review and Herald* between 1870 and 1894 (four were reprints from major

Missionaries should not be in the business of teaching divorce, least of all in societies where it is barely recognized as a possibility.

This confusion remained. James White described the reception they received in Iowa in 1860: “Just before we reached Knoxville, the cry of ‘Mormons’ was raised against us, and a strange enthusiasm seemed to seize some of the people in the place, as if inspired by Satan. . . . We can excuse the people who are deceived and imposed upon, but not those ministers who raise the cry ‘Mormons’ to keep the people from hearing us” (White 1985:415-416).

papers) many of which relate to the Mormon/Adventist confusion in one way or another.

The confusion was not confined to this country. Early Millerite Adventists in Great Britain repeatedly felt called upon to explain that they were not Mormons (Dunton 1984:218). This association continued for many years in Europe. Ellen White wrote in 1886 concerning the fact that greater effort was needed in Europe: “As soon as the truth is brought to the place the min-

isters of the different churches become alarmed and send at once for ministers to come in and commence revival meetings. . . . Warnings and threatenings will be poured out from the churches against the seventh-day people, who are classed with Mormons, and who they say are breaking up churches and causing divisions” (White 1946:410).

Adventists thus continually endeavored to disassociate themselves from any connection with Mormonism. Any attitude which was perceived as being soft on polygamy would have served to undercut the distance they sought to maintain. Even in a

entering the family circle and alienating the affections of the husband, or of wives competing for love and favors, and of resultant dysfunctional families. All of which is considerably removed from the concept of polygamy as fulfilling important social functions as is revealed of primal societies by many ethnographical studies. And there seems to have been but little literature during the period that cast the polygamy of the Old Testament in a favorable light.

Ellen White would hardly have been a normal woman of the period had she remained totally uninfluenced by the general

The Church and its workers are committed to upholding the Christian ideal of marriage, but in some circumstances this may be most effectually realized *gradatim*, by stages . . .

recent Gallup Poll some who said they had knowledge of Adventism connected it with Mormonism.

Given this background, Adventist writers of the period, including the Whites, would naturally take a hard line against polygamy, even in commentary on the Old Testament patriarchs. Anything that could be interpreted as favoring polygamy could have been easily construed as a pro-Mormon stance. Further, the general public concept of polygamy was that of a loose woman

social abhorrence of Mormon polygamy. In addition, she would have been acutely aware of the jeopardy a sympathetic stance could constitute to the young Adventist Church seeking to establish its identity as the faithful bearer of God’s last message to humankind. A fundamental principle of biblical interpretation is that the events and messages of the prophets are best understood, in the first instance, in the time and social circumstance in which they take place.

After establishing as clearly as possible the meaning of the message and the intentionality of the messenger in the perspective of its particular context the interpreter is equipped to explicate its contemporary meaning and significance.

This applies also to the interpretation of the writings of Ellen White. She too was a faithful servant of the Lord at a particular time wrestling with some issues and public opinions which have ceased to be of pressing concern to us. She is consistently negative about polygamy in commentary about the Old Testament patriarchs, and much concerned about its effect on family life. Given the ambience and concerns of her writings this should come as no surprise. However, she passed from the scene of action before the reality and enormity of the missionary challenge vis-à-vis polygamy had broken through upon the Adventist consciousness. As far as I have been able to discover, she does not directly or clearly address the missionary issue of polygamy as it came to light, probably for the first time in Adventist circles at the 1913 Missionary Round Table Conference. However, in her general letters to workers overseas she consistently advised them to be sensitive to cultural and social differences lest penultimate issues obstruct acceptance of the message.

It remains to us to carefully and prayerfully weigh her words and ask how she would have re-

sponded to the not unusual, but extreme case scenario in which the missionary functions as the teacher and agent of divorce consigning alienated wives to lives of abandon, and separating mothers from their young children. Ellen White had a heart filled with the love and goodness of her Lord, and I am convinced that had she herself seen and experienced the reality that confronted the next generation of missionaries in some societies, she would have advocated a course of love and compassion, lest in the overthrowing of one evil a greater is precipitated. Of course the Church and its workers are committed to upholding the Christian ideal of marriage, but in some circumstances this may be most effectually realized *gradatim*, by stages which proceed from one expression of love and kindness to the next, until the ideal is brought to fulfillment

Practical Application

The problem of how best to deal with polygamous families has always been, and remains, one of the most complex and difficult issues with which missionaries have had to deal. The history of both missionary conviction and vacillation regarding polygamy, of failure to understand the depths of the problem, the harsh social disruption caused by the separation of families, and of consequent opportunities lost, is not entirely edifying. More than any other, the issue has been

the source of much personal bewilderment and of intense disagreement between missionaries. It is, of course, easy to recognize all of this from a distance, but the problem is still there and it remains to be seen whether we can be more faithful to the missionary imperative of rightly communicating the gospel message and inculcating Christian standards of living while at the same time being more sensitive to local needs than were some of those who have gone before. We have the great advantage of hindsight, of examining the issues in historical perspective, and with more developed sociological and hermeneutical understanding than was available to our forebears. In addition, there is now much broader ecclesiastical precedent for an accommodating stance.

The foregoing brief survey of some of the major issues and turning points in the convoluted history of the general missionary and Adventist approaches to this problem has been presented to facilitate adoption of an understanding approach. So also have some aspects regarding the interpretation of the applicable biblical and revelatory evidence. There is strong evidence in justification of, and compelling need for, a more sensitive and accommodating approach to polygamous families in some societies than that defined by the present Adventist policy.

The mandate assigned to us (the GC Global Mission Commit-

tee) therefore is to decide whether present Adventist missionary practice is adequate to the situation in some societies, and if not, to outline a better way.

If there is general agreement that the cause of the gospel in the designated societies would be better served by a more accommodating approach than that mandated by the present policy, then an alternate plan, to be employed on a tentative basis, should probably be drafted and submitted for study to the front line workers involved and appropriate church administrative officers.

The obvious starting point for a revised approach would seem to be the suggested policy drafted by the *ad hoc* polygamy committee in March of 1986 (appendix F). Amendments regarding the following issues should perhaps be considered: (1) restriction of applicability to designated societies, and subject to periodic re-evaluation; (2) the polygamous baptismal candidate should be required to solemnly promise (before the congregation?) that he will not contract a further marriage while any of his spouses are alive; and (3) appropriate discipline of church members who subsequently contract a polygamous marriage.

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Appendix A

The Recommendation of the Committee on the Question of Polygamy As Amended by the Missionary Round Table, "Informal Discussion On Dealing with Converts from Polygamous Families," Takoma Park, MD, June, 1913.

WHEREAS, In heathen and Mohammedan lands polygamy is largely practiced,--

We Recommend, That, when a man practicing this custom becomes a Christian, he be accepted into the church on condition that he support all his wives and children, but that he live only with his first lawful wife as husband and wife. It be further understood that such a convert be not eligible to any office in the church.

In the case of a plural wife accepting Christianity, she be required, as a condition of church membership, to separate from her husband, and if possible to obtain his consent, or if the separation can be effected by legal process, that she be privileged to marry again.

Appendix B

The 1926 Resolutions on Polygamy and Marriage Relationships

General Conference Committee Minutes, Vol. XIII, Book 1, 6th Meeting, June 13, 1926

WHEREAS, the practice of polygamy on the part of many races for whom we are laboring is in itself a challenge to Christian principles, and constitutes a ground 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 be 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 himself from this practice.

WHEREAS, the marriage ordinance is instituted by God for the good of society and for the protection of the home; therefore,

WE RECOMMEND, 2. That where parties are living together as husband and wife, that they be not baptized nor received into church fellowship until they have been legally married; however,

Inasmuch as we find many parties whose matrimonial alliances became badly tangled before they accepted the truth, and as the laws of some of our countries are such that it is impossible for them to become legally married; and as some of these desire to obey the truth when it comes to them, to be

baptized and unite with the church; and in many cases, after careful investigation, we cannot advise them to separate and thus break up their home and present relationship, for this would only make conditions worse, and knowing that the gospel truth does not come to people to make their conditions worse, but better, and that God receives a sinner where he is found and saves him when he repents and turns to Him; therefore,

WE RECOMMEND, 3. That in countries where the laws are such as to make impossible legal marriage of certain persons whose matrimonial alliances have become badly tangled on account of these laws; and when such persons have given real evidence that they are truly converted and are in harmony with the truth and desire to unite with us, all such cases shall be presented to the conference or mission committee of the field in which they reside; and if, after careful investigation, this committee is clear in the case, then the parties may be recommended to church fellowship; with the understanding, however, that if the time ever comes when such persons can be legally married, they do so, and that until so married, they be not eligible to hold any office in the church which requires ordination.

Appendix C

The 1930 Resolution on Polygamous Marriages in Heathen Lands

“Actions of the Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee,” Vol. XIV, Book 1, Fifty-Ninth Meeting, November 3, 1930

WHEREAS, the message finds people in certain heathen lands living in a state of polygamy, and where tribal customs subject a cast-off wife to lifelong shame and disgrace, even to the point of becoming common property, her children also becoming disgraced thereby, it is,

RESOLVED, that in such sections, persons found living in a state of polygamy at the time the gospel light comes to them, and who have entered into plural marriage before knowing it to be a custom condemned by the Word of God, may upon recommendation of responsible field committees be admitted to baptism and the ordinances of the church, and may be recognized as probationary members. They shall not, however be admitted to full membership unless or until circumstances shall change so as to leave them with only one companion.

This action merely contemplates the recognition of a condition which in some places cannot be changed without resulting in great injustice to innocent persons and is not to be construed as endorsing polygamy in any way. Anyone entering into a

plural marriage relation after receiving a knowledge of the truth should be regarded as living in adultery, and dealt with by the church accordingly. A man who has apostatized from the truth, and who during the time he is in apostasy, enters into plural marriage may not be received again into any church relationship until he puts away the wives taken during his apostasy and in every way brings forth fruits meet for repentance.

In countries where separation of families can be arranged without injustice being done to innocent parties only one wife should be retained, but we recognize the right of the man to choose the one to be retained.

Appendix D

General Conference Policy, as voted June 4, 1941

WHEREAS, It is clearly God’s plan that man should live in a state of monogamy, that is, that a man should have only one living wife; and

WHEREAS, Any contravention of this plan results in confusion and the lowering of the moral standards that should govern human society, and especially the church of Christ; and,

WHEREAS, The practice of polygamy on the part of many non-Christian peoples for whom we are laboring is in itself a challenge to Christian principles, and

constitutes a ground of compromise if permitted in the Christian Church;

WE RECOMMEND,

1. That a man found living in a state of polygamy when the gospel reaches him, shall upon conversion be required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one, before he shall be considered eligible for baptism and church membership.

2. That men thus putting away their wives shall be expected to make proper provision for their future support, and that of their children, just as far as it is within their power to do so.

WHEREAS, The message finds people in certain countries living in a state of polygamy, where tribal customs subject a wife who has been put away to lifelong shame and disgrace, even to the point of becoming common property, her children also becoming disgraced thereby;

WE RECOMMEND,

3. That in all such cases the church cooperate with the former husband in making such provision for these wives and children as will provide for their care and protect them from disgrace and undue suffering.

4. That we recognize the right of a wife who has been put away by a polygamous husband to marry again.

5. That wives of a polygamist, who have entered into marriage in their heathen state, and who

upon accepting Christianity are still not permitted to leave their husbands because of tribal custom, may upon approval of the local and union committees become baptized members of the church. However should a woman who is a member of the church enter into marriage as a secondary wife, she shall be disfellowshipped and shall not be readmitted to the church unless or until she separates from her polygamous husband.

6. That it is understood that the above policy supersedes all previous policies on polygamy.

Appendix E

General Conference Working Policy on Polygamy, *Constitution Bylaws and Working Policy*, 1977 Edition

It is clearly God's plan that man should live in a state of monogamy, that a man should have only one living wife. Any contravention of this plan results in confusion and the lowering of the moral standards that should govern human society, and especially the church of Christ. The practice of polygamy on the part of many non-Christian peoples for whom we are laboring is in itself a challenge to Christian principles, and constitutes a ground of compromise if permitted in the Christian church. The denomination has therefore adopted the following policy:

1. A man found living in a state of polygamy when the

gospel reaches him shall upon conversion be required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one before he shall be considered eligible for baptism and church membership.

2. Men thus putting away their wives shall be expected to make proper provision for their future support, and that of their children, as far as it is within their power to do so.

3. We recognize that the message finds people in certain countries living in a state of polygamy, where tribal customs subject a wife who has been put away to lifelong shame and disgrace, even to the point of becoming common property, her children also becoming disgraced thereby. In all such cases the church is to cooperate with the former husband in making such provision for these wives and children as will provide for their care and protect them from disgrace and undue suffering.

4. We recognize the right of a wife who has been put away by a polygamous husband to marry again.

5. Wives of a polygamist, who have entered into the marriage in their heathen state, and who upon accepting Christianity are still not permitted to leave their husbands because of tribal custom, may upon approval of the local and union conferences become baptized members of the church. However, should a woman who is a member of the church enter into a marriage as a secondary wife, she shall be

disfellowshipped and shall not be readmitted to the church unless she separates from her polygamous husband.

Appendix F

Suggested Resolution of March 1986

It is clearly God's plan that marriage should be monogamous, one husband living with one wife in the "one flesh" model established in the beginning and reestablished by Jesus Christ while on earth. Any other form of marriage contravenes this plan and results in the lowering of the standards that should govern human society, and especially the church of Christ.

The family also had its beginning in Eden with divine approval and blessing. The New Testament repeatedly asserts the significance of the family as the basic unit of society and seeks to protect it from disruption through the application of Christian principles of human relationships and standards of behavior.

The practice of polygamy among non-Christian peoples challenges the ideal of monogamy and the human values set in place by Scripture. As an aberration of the original biblical family unit, it represents something less than the ideal even though practiced in biblical times. Every effort should be made to encourage prospective adherents living in a polygamous state to so order

their lives that the monogamous ideal is achieved.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has always required its members to accept monogamy as the Christian norm for marriage. It does not and cannot accept polygamy as a suitable Christian model. However polygamous persons not already committed to Christianity may be restricted from monogamy owing to legal, tribal, and cultural practices that they cannot modify. The breaking up of such families may bring lifelong shame and disgrace tragically affecting the spouses and their children. In such situations it may be advisable to preserve the polygamous family unit as individuals accept Christianity, while at the same time urging monogamy and requiring it in every possible instance.

RECOMMENDED

1. That we affirm that the biblical account portrays and urges monogamy as God's best plan for mankind; and that the sacredness and inviolability of the family unit is an integral part of biblical teaching.

2. That we instruct members and adherents on the Christian values and relationships sustaining monogamy, and on the legal position in their societies that may protect them from polygamous relationships.

3. That we continue to witness by example and proclamation that the Christian marriage is monogamous, and that we uphold monogamy as the norm for marriage.

4. That every effort be made for monogamy to replace polygamy as individuals and families enter the church.

5. That we maintain a rigorous standard of monogamy for those who are entering into marriage after receiving the gospel.

6. That in cases where the Adventist message reaches persons living in a state of polygamy and where legal, tribal, and cultural strictures cannot be modified without causing severe damage to individuals sharing in the polygamous unit, church membership may be made available to such persons provided:

a. Thorough pastoral investigation and counseling have preceded the offer of membership.

b. A screening committee at local field level makes such a recommendation after satisfying itself that the polygamous marriage is true and stable; that tribal, legal, and cultural strictures exist that warrant consideration of admission into membership without dissolving the polygamous status; that the polygamous status is not a guise for what would otherwise be an adulterous relationship; and that the parties concerned are genuine in their desire for membership and are otherwise worthy of acceptance into church fellowship.

c. Such cautious admission into membership shall not make the persons concerned eligible for holding any church leadership position.