

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 19

Volume 19 • Number 1 • January 1995

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

‘Pastor, don’t lead me into temptation! How can I become a Church member, if it means to disobey Christ? Christ forbade divorce, but not polygamy. The Church forbids polygamy but demands divorce. How can I become a Church member, if I want to be a Christian? For me there is only one way, to be a Christian without the Church.’

‘Have you ever talked to the Pastor about that?’

‘He does not dare to talk to me, because he knows as well as I do that some of his elders have a second wife secretly. The only difference between them and me is that I am honest and they are hypocrites.’

‘Did a missionary ever talk to you?’

‘Yes, once. I told him that with the high divorce rate in Europe, they have only a successive form of polygamy while we have a simultaneous polygamy. That did it. He never came back.’

I was speechless. Omodo accompanied me back to the village. He evidently enjoyed being seen with a Pastor.

‘But tell me, why did you take a third wife?’ I asked him.

‘I did not take her. I inherited her from my late brother, including her children. Actually my older brother would have been next in line. But he is an elder. He is not allowed to sin by giving security to a widow.’

I looked in his eyes, ‘Do you want to become a Christian?’

‘I am a Christian.’

The late Walter Trobisch is well known for his popular books on marriage in the African cultural context. p. 74

A Socio-Theological Evaluation of Polygamy

Leopold A. Foullah

Reprinted with permission from Evangelical Ministries (Jan–April 1985).

The author of this interesting contextual article calls for a return to a God-centred view of marriage.

Editor

Among the subjects that need careful evangelical theological attention for guidance of Christ’s church in Africa, polygamy stands high. History has revealed to us that polygamy has been debated from time immemorial by church prelates, anthropologists and also by renowned theologians of wider circles. Questions about polygamy with which the church is still wrestling are: Is polygamy condemned by the Bible? Is monogamy the only approved form of marriage? Should polygamists who become Christians afterwards be accepted into the fellowship of the church? Questions about polygamy are many.

Instances where the church has given pastoral guidance on the subject can be cited as follows:

1. In 1979, an attempt to revise the canon law on marriage was undertaken by the Church of the Province of Kenya. Regrettably, most of the discussions centred around the problem of divorce rather than on the question of polygamy specifically.
2. There was a time when the Anglican Church in Nigeria in cooperation with their Sierra Leonian counterparts gave some consideration to this same subject.
3. The Lambeth conference of Bishops has on many occasions discussed polygamy during the years of 1888, 1908, 1920, 1968 and 1978. It goes without saying that other church denominations were not the least interested in the issue.

However, a careful analysis of past decisions of such church bodies has revealed that the usual approach to polygamy has been judgementally humanistic and culturally sympathetic rather than biblical. In [p. 75](#) view of this situation of lack of a clear biblical interpretation the church is left in a more confused state than ever before.

Today, the leadership of the church has been challenged to rethink the whole matter and possibly to overhaul past resolutions which may have been inadequate and misleading. This challenge that is so often taken up by some thoughtful scholars takes the following tone: 'In such a situation, we may be sure, theologians and church leaders would quickly enough produce weighty reasons and biblical texts to justify a new concept of marriage among their own people. How weighty must the reasons be? How many Bible texts are needed? Indeed, it might even be asked just how much of our moral theologizing ever really goes beyond the rationalizing of the accepted behaviour in the historico-cultural environment of our theologians.'

The aim of the writer in the light of the foregoing challenge is to set forth once more the question of polygamy in its socio-theological dimensions, taking into account the sociological causes of polygamy, the sociological advantages of polygamy, the sociological disadvantages of polygamy and the fundamental biblical blueprint of marriage.

I. POLYGAMY—A DESCRIPTION

According to its strict or technical usage, the word polygamy connotes plurality or multiplicity of mates in the marriage relationship. Plurality or multiplicity of mates is not confined to Africa since it is practised in other parts of the world as well, taking a variety of forms:

Polygyny

This is the kind of polygamous marriage where a man has more than one wife at the same time. It may also be called *simultaneous polygyny* because a bevy or group of wives live with their husband in a supposedly permanent union as long as marital norms are not abolished. Among Africans, this is the kind of polygamous marriage that is most commonly practised.

Consecutive polygamy or serial monogamy

This mode of marriage is more frequently practised in the West, although its presence cannot be totally denied in Africa. It is the kind where a man marries 'one spouse after another in a sequence involving divorce and remarriage. One spouse engaged consecutively in *discreet* monogamous union.'

Polyandry

The practice of polyandry in Africa and the world at large is a rarity. It is the kind in which a woman is married to more than one husband. It is believed to be a practice common among the Eskimos and the Todas of South India where killing of female babies is widespread. It is reported that some people in Tibet do practise polyandry. Also, *consecutive polyandry* occurs when a woman engages in the habit of having one husband after another.

A common mistake often made is to think that Africans are polygamous by nature. This is a false notion that has been held over the p. 76 years by some anthropologists, sociologists and ill-informed Christian workers. Available research has confirmed the universal nature of polygamy.

Among the Themnes of Sierra Leone, to marry more than one wife is the *modus operandi* (mode of operation) of community life. Unchastity, bad behaviour and sexual perversion are among the list of things frowned upon by the village people. But, polygamy is a virtue that is welcomed with open arms almost all the time.

The Themne people believe a man with one wife has just started treading on the paths of life and will soon gather for himself wives who will enlarge and beautify his father's homestead, bear children, and by so doing establish the eternal link between the living members of the community and the dead (those who have gone ahead). After a few years of observation by the ageing members of the community especially, a man who insistently continues with the one wife pattern is ridiculed, and rebuked either openly or secretly by his parents, peer-group and the whole community. Such a man becomes the talk of the town. Today, things are changing due to the fact that no longer does a man with one wife receive the kind of disapproval that was so common in a typical Themne village hundreds of years ago.

II. SOCIOLOGICAL CAUSES AND ADVANTAGES OF POLYGAMY

Reasons for the practice of polygamy among the Themnes are many:

1. In the first place, it is the fashionable craze of the community. While it is prestigious to have more than one wife, the opposite sounds unattractive.

2. Secondly, since the percentage of women is higher than that of men, the acquisition of more wives eradicates prostitution. In view of this fact, the village is a commune of people who care, work together and aspire together. It is inhuman not to take part in contracting a marriage for the daughter of a friend or a relative.

3. In close connection with the aforementioned cause, *the spirit of comradeship* is also a contributing factor. In a case where two men are close friends like David and Jonathan in the Bible, the tendency is for their friendship to cover every area of their lives, including marriage. Stories have been told of men and women contracting marriage on their friends' behalf. Such gestures of friendship must be honoured at all cost whether a man has one or more wives already.

4. In some societies, the Themnes being no exception, it is an insult to return a woman to her parents on the pretext of *barrenness*. In such a case, an honest husband who does not want to sever the link that has already been established with another clan or family, may decide to augment his barren wife with another woman from a different clan or family without having to undergo the pain of divorce. In situations where the link is so strong, the parents of the barren wife may decide to give their son-in-law a substitute who would bear children on their daughter's behalf. Usually, p. 77 the substitute is the barren woman's younger sister. By this means the problem is not only solved, but a soronate (two sisters marrying the same husband) kind of marriage is introduced.

5. The need to expand one's *labour force* on the part of those whose vocation is farming, is another factor that leads to polygamy. Care must be taken not to blow this labour force aspect out of proportion because many polygamists do not see this factor as the major reason for marrying more wives. Nevertheless, it does appear the more wives a man has, the more children he will have; the bigger the farm and the labour force.

6. The common practice of inheriting wives from deceased relatives and friends is another way by which a man can be polygamous. For instance, among the Luo people in Kenya, a brother may inherit the wife or wives of his deceased brother.

III. THE SOCIOLOGICAL DISADVANTAGES OF POLYGAMY

With all these reasons or causes for polygamy, we must not be misled into believing that all is well in the home of a polygamist. It would be pretentious not to point out the evils which so often go side by side with this kind of marriage. By observing his own people among whom he grew up, the writer has seen for himself the dangers or disadvantages inherent in polygamy and can readily point out some of them:

1. *Dehumanization of women*: In a society where women contribute to the work force and are valued for what they can produce rather than for whom they are, such women cease to be what God designed them to be in the marriage relationship. They are more often subjected to treatment which makes them less than human beings, helpmates and companions. Women are maltreated in a variety of ways:

(1) Marriages are often ended on the pretext of barrenness.

(2) Crimes of rudeness and adultery are punished by beating.

(3) Among some societies, women are chosen on the basis of their social and economic skills instead of on the primary basis of love.

2. *Deification of children*: The concept of the essence of children in a polygamous setting is the opposite of what the Bible teaches. While the writer acknowledges the biblical command to be 'fruitful and multiply', he has not yet come across a verse in the Bible that says children are the end of marriage and where they are absent a marriage should be dissolved and the wife returned to her parents. In the home, instead of loving children and viewing them as additional gifts from God, they are worshipped, as it were, for the following reasons:

(1) They perpetuate the biological line of the family.

(2) They establish political links through intermarriage with other families or class.

(3) They fortify the family against external transgression.

(4) They provide a mystical link between the living members of the family and the dead. The act of making the children small gods for the reasons just outlined may sometimes [p. 78](#) lead to a facade of love for the wives.

3. *Petty quarrels and jealousy*: Quarrels and jealousy are not uncommon among polygamous families. In a family where the wives and children are not treated on an equal basis, there is nothing more to expect than a disorganized and turbulent atmosphere.

4. *Marital unfaithfulness*: A man with more wives may try to satisfy the sexual needs of his wives at all costs but one cannot truly say how well he is able to do this. The main cause for sexual perversion among women who are polygamously married may be lack of sexual satisfaction. In such a case, instead of eradicating the escalating rate of prostitution, the husband ends up turning out prostitutes or women who go out seeking sexual satisfaction from other men. Among the Themnes, it has become the obsession of some men to commercialize the plight of their wives by requiring them to confess the names of their boyfriends during a particular time of the year (confession season). A fine prescribed

by custom and law is levied upon each boyfriend found guilty of cohabiting with a man's wife.

5. *Inadequate care for children:* It is quite unlikely for a father of two or more wives and ten children to be able to fulfil adequately his fatherly role unless such a man is very rich and unique. So often, the early years of children born in families too big for one man are characterized by many problems. For instance, there is the problem of proper child discipline, hunger in times of drought and lack of money to send the children to school. Homes where these kinds of problems are inherent inevitably become feederstations for urban criminals and highway robbers.

IV. THE BIBLICAL BLUE-PRINT OF MARRIAGE

Biblically speaking, the pattern of marriage ordained by God for the whole of mankind is the one man one wife kind which is described by both sociologists and anthropologists as monogamy.

In [Genesis 1:27](#), we read, 'So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' While [Gen. 1:27](#) gives a more general description of the creation of mankind as male and female, [Gen. 2:7, 18, 20-24](#) give us a complete story of the first man and the first woman ever created on earth and the first marriage ever instituted by God. In the passage just cited,

1. God created Adam and made him a steward of the created order.
2. Among God's creation there was no suitable partner or helper to Adam.
3. God created Eve out of Adam and gave her to him for a companion and helper.
4. The deep and unfulfilled longing in Adam for fellowship was at last fulfilled—'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh ...'

The climax of Genesis chapter two in regard to the marital relationship of Adam and Eve is emphatically suggesting three things concerning [p. 79](#) the marriage that took place in the Garden of Eden:

1. God solemnized the marriage between Adam and Eve—'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him' ([2:18](#)); 'And he brought her to the man' ([2:22c](#)).
2. It was a one man, one woman kind of union—'And the rib which the Lord God had taken from *man* he made into *woman* and he brought *her* to *the man*' ([2:22](#)).
3. It became the measuring rod for all marriages that were to be solemnized in future generations—'Therefore *a man* shall leave *his* father and mother and be joined to *his wife*, and *they shall become one flesh*' ([2:24](#)). The reader should guard against being beguiled by those who advocate a plurality of mates on the basis of explanations that are different from what God enunciates in the Scriptures. [Gen. 2:24](#) does not read, 'Therefore, a man shall leave *his* father and mother and be joined to *his wives* and *they should become one flesh*.'

Proponents of polygamous unions or marriages have often cited instances in the Bible of the practice of polygamy on the part of some of the fathers of the Hebrew nation or other Bible personalities, like Abraham, Jacob, Elkanah, Solomon, etc. The impression often given is that God approved the polygamous marriages of some of his most renowned patriarchs whom he called his friends, a fact which seems to suggest that polygamy is O.K. for everybody if it was O.K. for Abraham, Jacob and Solomon. The writer can only say that this way of interpreting Scripture is inadequate and mutilated. It is a method that leads people astray.

Actually, those Bible personalities who practised polygamy violated God's commands, despised God's primordial pattern of marriage, and therefore suffered certain consequences for their disobedience.

In view of what I have just said, let us investigate three cases of polygamy in the Bible and underscore some of the bitter experiences suffered by those involved. First, Abraham. He started out with one wife but was later beguiled by his wife, Sarah and diverted from God's plan due to the sin of impatience. Consequently, an unwanted son was born— Ishmael. Then there was jealousy between Sarah and Hagar resulting in the sending away of both Ismael and Hagar. Ishmael and his descendants (the Arabs), born after the flesh, have been the greatest persecutors of the church (see [Gal. 4](#)).

Another case of polygamy worthy of consideration is that of Jacob which is found in the 29th, 30th and 37th chapters of Genesis. A closer look at these three chapters will bring a lot of sad experiences to our notice: 1. There was partiality on the part of Jacob because he loved Rachel more than Leah ([Gen. 29:18, 31](#)), 2. Rachel envied Leah because Leah had children while she did not have any ([Gen. 30:1](#)). 3. Joseph's brothers hated him and sold him into slavery.

Lastly, we also see the evils of polygamy in full display in the family of Elkanah according to 1 Samuel [p. 80 1:7](#). Elkanah had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Here, Elkanah shows more love and favour to Hannah, the barren wife, and Peninnah provoked Hannah and made life very unbearable for her because of her inability to bear children.

It has often been said by biblical scholars that the Old Testament should be used as the basis for the interpretation of the New Testament and that the New Testament is a commentary of the Old Testament. In light of this maxim, a careful study of the whole Bible will clearly reveal that the whole concept of monogamy is a theme that runs through the entire body of scriptures.

For example, in [Matthew 19:1–12](#), Jesus quotes and interprets [Gen. 2:24](#) in an attempt to teach the Pharisees who came to test him concerning God's primordial concept of marriage. Jesus' point of reference is not what Abraham, Jacob or Elkanah did. In order to teach the right thing about marriage, Jesus went back to the first marriage that was solemnized between Adam and Eve before the appearance of the rest of mankind ([Mt. 19:4, 5–6](#)).

The whole question of polygamy that is being debated today from one conference to another is due to a shift from a God-centred view of marriage to a man-centred view. The Bible has the answer to the problem. It is the responsibility of the church to give her members the true teaching concerning God's concept of marriage as Jesus did ([Mt. 19:4–7](#)). [p. 81](#)

Book Reviews

CRAVING FOR LOVE: RELATIONSHIP ADDICTION, HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE GOD WHO HEALS

by Briar Whitehead
(Tunbridge Wells, Monarch 1993)

(Reviewed by Pete Broadbent.)