

**Third International Training Consultation**  
**Emmaus Bible College**  
May 27-31, 2014

**Workshop 2.1 -The definition of marriage: A Hermeneutical-Cultural challenge**

**Facilitators: Mark Davies and Felix Muchimba**

**Remit** *This workshop is an application of the morning plenary sessions on how we interpret the Bible regarding the Gospel and its demands on us as applied to different cultural contexts. Working through syncretistic factors, e.g., polygamy, same-sex marriage compared and contrasted. Based on the morning's plenary sessions, the workshop is aimed at exploring how we interpret the Scriptures regarding the definition of marriage and apply this teaching to cultures that permit or encourage alternative understandings of marriage such as the ancient practice of polygamy, longstanding acceptance of remarriage or the more recent development of so-called same-sex marriage.*

**See below, an input paper on Polygamy by Dr Felix Muchimba and some notes on Same-sex partnerships/marriage.**

**Workshop discussions**

This is not about opinion or standing church practice but hermeneutics. What Biblical passages, principles and implications would we use to give guidance in the following true to life scenarios (not as imaginary as you may hope!).

1. In eastern Zambia, Agnes came to faith in Christ five years ago and has grown into a godly faithful woman. She and her husband of 15 years have four children. He is regularly at the church's Sunday services. She is respected as a mature wise leader among the women of the village and a great witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. She has a mutually good relationship with her husband's first wife, with whom he has not been able to have any children. Her local church are setting up a church-based care group in the village to help deal with the problem of orphans, a situation made critical by the HIV/AIDS scenario. They would like Agnes to lead the newly formed care-group.
2. In western Australia Jenny, a mother of three, has cared for her family and been a faithful active member of her local church since her husband left her after a numbers of years of unfaithfulness. He eventually married one of the other women in his life three years ago. As a couple, jenny and her ex-husband had both been in fellowship in the local church in the town where they had lived during their 12 years of marriage together. Jenny has met a widower and his two children, he is a committed Christian, just finishing Bible college and soon to take up a full-time church worker position at Jenny's local church. They are thinking about getting engaged. As an elder in a neighbouring local church (or college Principal!) how would you advise them and/or the local church leadership?
3. In Denmark, a married couple both men have been in faithful partnership together for 18 years, and married for the past 2 years. They have adopted two children, siblings aged 3 and 5 years old. The children are orphans from a Congolese couple, asylum seekers who died from HIV/AIDS not long after they were granted asylum status in Denmark. John the older of the couple has recently come to faith in Christ. His spouse is sympathetic to the Christian faith but doesn't feel it is for him, however is happy with John's faith and church going. John wants to get baptised and be part of your local church. How do you proceed with making him and his family disciples of Christ?

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Dubuque, Iowa  
27 – 31 May 2014**

**Hermeneutical Issues – The Bible, culture and definition of marriage  
(Polygamy)**

**Paper presented by Dr. Felix Muchimba, Zambia.**

**The definition of marriage –  
A Hermeneutical-Cultural challenge with special reference to African Polygamy**

**Introduction**

It is common knowledge that from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to-date polygamy has been at the heart of the whole polemics within the Church and the African community. The introduction of Western civilization and Christianity into Africa brought about changes in many spheres of African lifestyles. The Church and the community to a great extent enjoyed interaction at various levels. However, in the practice of polygamy the Church and community remained unconnected. This still features as a problematic and sensitive socio-ecclesiastical issue.

This paper is aimed at exploring how we interpret the Scriptures regarding the definition of marriage and apply this teaching to cultures that permit or encourage alternative understandings of marriage such as the ancient practice of polygamy. I envisage that no matter what one's hermeneutical persuasion might be on this subject matter they would be led to a healthy pastoral handling of individuals in polygamous situations.

**The Nature, Extent and Function of Polygamy**

For some of my readers to fully appreciate this subject, I shall firstly briefly explore the function of polygamy. Let us start off by defining, the word "polygamy". Polygamy is a generic term, referring to either kind of plural union: the single husband with several wives, the type of union called "polygyny" and the single wife with several husbands, the type of union called "polyandry" Polyandry is very rare in the African community. Polygamy, however, is the word in popular use to refer to the state of a man who has more than one wife simultaneously. In this paper, the popular concept will be employed.

James Fenske observes:

*In several sub-Saharan countries, more than 10% of married women are in a polygamous union (Tertilt, 2005). Between Senegal and Tanzania stretches a "polygamy belt" in which it is common to find that more than one third of married women are polygamous (Jacoby, 1995). Polygamy has been cited as a possible cause of Africa's low savings rates (Tertilt, 2005), high incidence of HIV (Brahmbhatt et al., 2002), high levels of child mortality (Strassmann, 1997), and of female depression (Adewuya et al., 2007).<sup>1</sup>*

As can be seen from the above, the extent of polygamy is vast. It is indeed still a significant phenomenon in many African countries.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/seminars/ModernAndComparative/papers2011-12/fenske.pdf>

## The Function of Polygamy

The function of polygamy within any African community is multifaceted. Below I outline what I envisage as the major purposes of polygamy:

1. The institution of polygamy in traditional Africa was a means of satisfying male lust.
2. It helped to stabilize the marriage and integrate the family with society.
3. It regulated social relationships
4. It was a status symbol of the wealthy.
5. Procreating many children was also a sign of blessing and pride; consequently the barrenness of a wife motivated a man to marry more wives in order to keep up the family heritage and genealogy.
6. It provided cheap labour
7. Polygamy was of necessity since life expectancy was short, the infant mortality rate was undesirably high, and mothers were the cheapest source of food for infants during the nursing periods of two or three years. During that period sexual relations were taboo.<sup>2</sup>
8. Polygamy lowered the incidence of "illegitimate" children, who were frowned upon in the community; and eliminated the need for adoption, which Africans detested.
9. Polygamy greatly reduced the temptation of the man committing adultery, and increased the chances of most women getting married, because to be unmarried was frowned upon.
10. Polygamy ensured that widows were cared for through a leviratic custom.
11. Polygamy created multiple alliances with different families, thereby sustaining complex affinal networks of extended families. This kindred network was a support system for marital stability, communal identity, social ministry and social security.

## Polygamy in the Church in Africa: A Theological Dilemma?

The Christian Faith's conceptualization of mandatory monogamy encountered the African contextualization of functional polygamy. In this tension between the Church's Theology on Marriage and the African of polygamy gave rise to two problematic concerns:

- a) Is polygamy an adequate form of marriage for a community member who becomes a Christian?
- b) Is a polygamous convert from the community to be baptized, and subsequently allowed to take the Lord's Supper?

Over a period of time, in order to change the polygamous institution and transform the system, the Church has acted in various ways. Adrian Hastings<sup>3</sup> points out four basic positions that are discernible with regard to the Church's action on polygamous marriage.

1. Polygamy is simply a sin, comparable with adultery. This was the earlier position taken by many missionaries and Western thinkers until recently.
2. Polygamy is an inferior form of marriage, not sinful where it is the custom but always unacceptable for Christians. This is probably the position of most Christians today.
3. Polygamy is a form of marriage less satisfactory than monogamy but the Church can put up with it as the first century Church did with slavery and dictatorial government. This position is advocated

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<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel G.N. Inyamah, "Polygamy and the .Christian Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 43 (March 1972), p138.

<sup>3</sup> Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*. (London: S.P.C.K., 1974), p. 72.

by Hastings who feels polygamy can be tolerated but undermined by promoting the ideal of monogamy.

4. Polygamy is one form of marriage, monogamy another. Each has its advantages and disadvantages in different types of society. It is not the duty of the Church to make any judgment between them. This is more a cultural relativity viewpoint and often championed by independent persons in the African community.

On Christian baptism, the problem is accentuated by the Church's multitude of attitudes. There are at least eight different solutions as indicated by Alan Tippett.<sup>4</sup>

1. The women and children may be baptized, but not the husband.
2. All the children may be baptized, but not the women and husband.
3. Only those who are not in any way connected with polygamy may be baptized.
4. The husband may be baptized, if he retains his first wife, while divorcing the others.
5. The husband may be baptized, if he divorces all but the most preferred wife.
6. All may be baptized with the understanding that any subsequent plural marriages are forbidden.
7. All may be baptized, if they have monogamous god-parents.
8. On the testimony of their faith alone, any of them may be baptized with no other previous conditions.

### **The Church's Response**

The Church's response in any direction on polygamy and baptism has necessitated changes in the indigenous African setting. This phenomenon has effected a community reaction from three schools of thought according to Nwafor Orizu<sup>5</sup> namely: the *Rightist*, the *Leftist*, and the *Eclectic*.

#### **A. The Right's View:**

The rightist school sees the Church action as functional and positive. The Church's insistence on monogamy and denial of baptism to polygamists has brought a development of social, cultural, and moral stability. Only in the Church can there be genuine attainment of a couple's highest potential. The fears and taboos in polygamy are overcome, and one is converted from superstition to reality, from darkness to light and from primitivity to modernity. The bounties of the Church action have opened up higher standards of living and greater marital parity between husband and wife. The Church has moreover inculcated the invaluable benefits of education, social mobility, and intellectual enlightenment of the family, especially of the wife.

#### **B. The Leftist View:**

The leftist school, however, sees the Church action from a conflict perspective. Of course, the Church has stolen the vitality of the African stamina-physically, socially, culturally and mentally. It has caused social disruption and family disintegration. It has brought in its wake nothing but disequilibrium and cultural decay. Things have fallen apart and the centre cannot hold any longer in the family. Divorce rates have increased and the Church action is inconsistent with many injustices to legally married wives, and legitimately procreated children. An unbending demand of monogamy

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Tippett, "Polygamy as a Missionary Problem: The Anthropological Issues," *Church Growth Bulletin*, 4 (March 1969), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Nwafor A.A. Orizu, *Without Bitterness: Western Nations in Post-War Africa* (New York: Worth Publishers Inc., 1944), p. 161.

is both ethnocentric and anti-African. It is unethical colonialism to make "Western" monogamy to be "right" and "African" polygamy to be "wrong." It is a germ of religious intolerance and bigotry to call the African simultaneous polygamy improper, while the West practices "consecutive, progressive" polygamy through the sequence of divorce and remarriage. The intermittent divorcees and remarried partners are baptized and allowed to partake in the Lord's Supper, whereas simultaneous polygamists in a culturally approved communities are denied the same rites. The Church action is parochial and inimical to the indigenous system, as well as not being authenticated by the Scriptures.

### C. The Eclectic View

The eclectic school compromises and sees the Church action as having both functions and dysfunctions for the community. The Church action has been helpful in establishing higher standard of marital equality and education, but it has also distorted the indigenous marriage pattern. The Church has brought a noble notion of marriage form, but it has likewise introduced Western legislative demand of monogamy. The eclectic school does not accept the complete westernization of the African marriage system in the name of the Church, but it also does not agree that the Church is simply undesirable for the community: A grafting of the Church ideas to traditional values is the best synthesis.

Thus in the pluralistic African society, the variegated impact of the Church action on polygamy is viewed by these three schools of thought: the conservative rightist, who affirms the action, sees it as an asset; the radical leftist, who opposes the change, sees it as a liability; and the moderate eclectic, who accommodates the new institution, sees it as *comme ci comme ça*<sup>6</sup>

## Biblical Reflections

### The First Marriage (Genesis 2:18 - 25)

We serve a very orderly creator who takes delight in what he created. At the end of His creative activity, God pronounced the things He had made as being "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Genesis 2 gives us the details of the creation of mankind. Following the creation of Adam, God presented the beasts of the field and the birds of the air to Adam to give them names. Then the Lord said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him."

Following the making of Eve from Adam's rib and having brought the woman to Adam, Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed". This was the first marriage.

### God's intent for marriage to be monogamous—one man for one woman.

The passage above has several indicators (key phrases) which clearly show that God meant for marriage to be a monogamous union. Notice that God intended to make "a helper" for Adam, not several helpers. Notice also that from one rib God made one woman for Adam. Then we need to appreciate the pattern of a man leaving his family to "be joined to his wife," not wives. Notice it also states one father one mother. Genesis then described this union as becoming "one flesh."

In the New Testament we notice the Lord Jesus Christ endorsing this understanding of marriage when he was asked about divorce by the Pharisees (Mark 10: 1 -12 and Mat. 19: 1 – 12). Jesus responded by quoting from Genesis 2 thus confirming that His understanding of marriage was one man for one woman. When Jesus said that divorce was only allowed because of the hardness of the hearts of man He was confirming

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<sup>6</sup> "Comme ci, comme ça" (English translation from French: "Like This, Like That" or "So-So")

the covenantal nature of marriage. It is clear that the Creator and Institutor of marriage intended, from the beginning, for marriages to consist of one man and one woman for the duration of their lives. Divorce and polygamy were regulated in the laws given to Moses, but polygamy was recorded long before then. Polygamy only came into existence after the Fall.

### **Polygamy and the Bible (Brief reflections on the OT)**

We notice that it wasn't until sin made man fall (Gen. 4:23) that polygamy occurs. The same Godly pattern of one man and one wife is lived by Noah. At the time of the Ark (Gen. 7:7), Noah took his one wife into the ark, all his son's took one wife; God called Noah's family righteous and pure. If polygamy were ordained of God, it would have made sense that Noah and his sons would have taken additional wives with them to repopulate the earth faster from the flood catastrophe

In the lineage of Cain in Genesis 4 we have the first mention of polygamy. Before the Flood, we have a clear distortion of what God had intended for marriage. To compound Lamech's sin, he brags of his murderous deeds. The Flood was brought upon the earth to judge the sinfulness of mankind, including the sins committed by Lamech (Genesis 4:19 -25). The post-flood era records numerous polygamous relationships; notably among them - Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon. While the scriptures do not state, "No husband shall take more than one wife". Nevertheless, polygamous relationships are never mentioned in a positive light, and, indeed, the problems of such relationships are presented.

Time and space will not allow me to consider all the consequences revealed in Scripture in regard to polygamous marriages. The following are just a few examples to consider:

- Abraham—led to bitterness between Sarah and her maid, Hagar, and the eventual dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael.
- Jacob—led to Rachel's jealousy of Leah and to Joseph being betrayed and sold by his half-brothers.
- David—led to the rape of one of his daughters, Tamar, by one of his sons, Amnon and Amnon's subsequent murder by Tamar's brother Absalom,
- Solomon—his numerous wives "turned away his heart" from the Lord and to the worship of false gods 1 Kings 11: 1 – 8)

It should be noted that just because the Bible records polygamous relationships, it does not mean that God approves of such practices.

God instructed kings that were to rule His people not to "multiply wives" to themselves as is recorded in Deuteronomy 17:17. As noted above, polygamous relationships seem to be regulated in the commands Moses gave to the nation of Israel. According to Lev. 18:18 a man is instructed not to marry sisters. These sisters are understood by some to be any Israelite women. Deut. 21:15 speaks of assigning an heir to a man with two wives. This passage may also be translated as "has had two wives" in succession rather than at the same time. Many Bible Scholars suggest that these passages do not endorse polygamy but rather proscribe it. In any case, whatever one's interpretation of these passages, the taking of multiple wives is not in accord with God's design from the beginning.

### **Polygamy and the Bible (Brief reflections on the NT)**

The NT has several passages that can be understood to speak against polygamous relationships. I think one of these major scriptures would be the qualifications for leaders in the church as recorded by Paul to Timothy and Titus. 1 Tim: 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6 clearly instruct that leaders of the church must be the "husband of one wife."

In his letter to the Corinthians, where the Apostle Paul answered questions that the Corinthian church had about marriage, he used the singular form of wife and husband throughout the passage (1 Cor. 7: 1 – 16). The New Testament teaches that, "*Each man [should] have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband*" (1 Cor. 7:2). Monogamous marriage teaches us the type of the relation Christ has between

himself and His bride, the church (Eph. 5:31-32). The church is called the bride; collectively as one (singular) each person is not a bride, as in plurality of wives and marriages.

As a matter of fact this is true of the New Testament writers in general as well. Furthermore, Ephesians 5: 25 - 33 compares the relationship of husband and wife to that of Christ and the church. The Apostle concludes this analogy by stating, "Let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband". This is yet another clear indication that God's standard for marriage is defined as one man and one woman.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that God never commanded polygamy or divorce. Polygamy was tolerated but never with God's approval. The Bible says God only permitted it because of the hardness of man's heart (Deut. 24:1; Matt. 19:8). Matt. 5:31-32: *"Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.'*" The Mosaic Law aimed at mitigating, rather than removing, evils that were inseparable from the state of society in that day. Its enactments were directed to the discouragement of polygamy; to prevent the injustice frequently consequent upon the exercise of the rights of a father or a master; to bring divorce under some restriction; and to enforce purity of life during the maintenance of the matrimonial bond. God hates divorce as well as polygamy, since it destroys the family (Mal. 2:16). Whatever the patriarchs or any Christian did wrong does not change the fact the Bible condemns it. The Bible says adultery is not a choice, one does not have to acquire another wife to solve his urges. Jesus said if you look upon another woman with desire (married or not) it is adultery, a sin.

Despite the various cultural or traditional arguments for polygamy, the Bible makes it clear that God intends marriage to be between one man and one woman—as it was "from the beginning" (Matthew 19:8 and Mark 10:6). Any challenge to this teaching stands in opposition to God's plan for His creation. This short treatise cannot exhaustively cover all of the issues related to polygamy, but we can look to the Bible as the standard for understanding the world we live in. As the Church faces specific questions and challenges regarding plural marriage, she must prayerfully consider what God has revealed and apply the principles He has given her in Scripture.