

COMMON QUESTION NO. 6

MAY A CHRISTIAN BE A POLYGAMIST?

Polygamy is a widespread traditional practice in Kenya. A man feels he is someone if he has more than one wife. It is a status symbol. There have been a variety of attitudes in the professing Christian Churches. At one extreme has been the demand for the polygamous man to send away all wives but the first if he is going to be accepted as a Christian, i.e. be baptized and become a full church member. At the other extreme Independent African Churches have been formed with the express purpose of allowing such traditions as polygamy in the church.

1. Polygamy was practised in the Old Testament. Many men had more than one wife: for example, Lamech had two (Genesis 4:23), Esau had three (26:34, 28:9), Jacob had two sisters as wives and had children with their maids, Gideon had many (Judges 8:29), Elkanah had two (1 Samuel 1:2), David had six (2 Samuel 3:2-5) and then added more (2 Samuel 5:13), Solomon incredibly had 700 (1 Kings 11:3). Not all of these were wicked men. Yet in many cases the rivalry between wives and their offspring is clearly revealed, as with Elkanah's and in David's household. Solomon multiplied wives to a ridiculous level against the clear command of God (Deuteronomy 17:17). Note that this command for future kings not to acquire many wives was not a law against polygamy itself.

2. Polygamy was not openly condemned, as was adultery. David was not condemned for having more than one wife (the Bible only reports the fact that he did), but for committing adultery with the wife of another man, Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:7-8). So it seems that polygamy was not considered to be an adulterous relationship. Abraham is nowhere condemned for his relationship with Hagar, for example. That does not make what he did right, but it shows it was not an occasion for the pouring out of God's judgment. An Israelite with two or more wives was not considered as one who had fallen from the faith, as was an adulterer.

3. It is possible that the Law of Moses even allowed/tolerated polygamy, as it did divorce.

➤ There are passages that may refer to a polygamous situation (Exodus 21:9-10, Leviticus 18:18, Deuteronomy 21:15-17). However, there are other possible explanations for these passages. For example, we do not have to assume that "if a man has two wives" it must mean that he had them at the same time; alternatively it could mean he had them one after the other.

➤ The law of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) would seem to sanction polygamy, at least in principle if the husband's brother was already married. It is possible that Boaz was already married when he also took Ruth as a wife. These things would put polygamy in an analogous position with divorce.

➤ Jesus says that "because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). Therefore at best polygamy was allowed or tolerated, as was divorce, although it never was God's purpose for marriage.

4. Monogamy is the standard for marriage in both Testaments. From the beginning, from the creation, it is quite clear that marriage is to be between one man and one woman as God brought one woman to one man and united them (Genesis 2:21-23). The definition of marriage that 'the man and his wife become one flesh' (2:24) further confirms monogamy. Monogamy is often just assumed (Deuteronomy 28:54,56, Psalm 128:3, Jeremiah 5:8, 6:11). Proverbs is emphatic about the close relationship with one's wife (5:15-21, 18:22, 31:10-31). Malachi complains about unfaithfulness to the wife of one's youth (2:14). The teaching of

Jesus about divorce also forbids polygamy as it goes back to creation (for example, Matthew 19:3-9). 1 Corinthians assumes monogamy (7:1-2). Jesus has only one bride, the church (Ephesians 5:25-27)!

5. A church leader cannot be a polygamist. In the qualifications for an Overseer (Elder/Pastor) or a Deacon, he must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2,12). This does not mean that he must be a married man, but that if he is married he must only have one wife. [Similarly, there is a further qualification that he must keep “his children submissive” (3:4). This does not mean that he must have children or else he cannot be an overseer. It is assumed that ordinarily men are married and have children.] This implies that at least some Christians were married to more than one wife. Please note that apart from the qualification to be “able to teach” (3:2) the qualifications of verses 2-5 ought to be true of *every* Christian. Therefore it is the will of God that if a man is married, as with a church leader, he be the husband of only one wife. All Christians ought to have all the marks listed, but an Overseer **must** have them otherwise he is disqualified from being an Overseer. Therefore all married Christian men ought to be the husbands of just one wife and no more.

6. May a polygamist be baptized and become a full church member? As with divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and Matthew 19:7-8), polygamy was also tolerated in the Old Testament. Again, as with divorce it is *not* to be tolerated in the church. Any Christian who takes an additional wife ought to be put out of fellowship until there is clear repentance. But what about those who simply followed their culture and became polygamous *before* they became Christians? Must they put away all their wives except the first before they can be baptized and become church members? We believe that this is not a very Christian course of action. In traditional society the woman has little say in who she marries, or whether she becomes a second or third wife. For the husband then to put her away (with her children) would in so many cases to put her in grave hardship. Leaving such a woman, and the children, destitute, would appear to be a worse evil than the polygamous relationship. We see polygamy in such cases as analogous to the Old Testament situation. So if a man who is converted while in a polygamous marriage, or a woman who is part of a polygamous marriage, is converted, he/she ought to be baptized as a genuine Christian, and have all the rights of a church member. But in order to make it quite clear that polygamy is not being condoned, two things should be done at the time such are admitted as members:

- Both the polygamous man and woman must publicly confess before the church members that they know polygamy is not the will of God and that they promise not to add another wife (the man) or not to enter as a multiple wife in another home (should her present husband die).
- The polygamous man must assure the church that while he remains polygamous he will never seek office in the church (Overseer or Deacon).