

DOES GOD CONDEMN POLYGAMY?

IF polygamy were an abomination to God never would He have recognized it or enacted a law to regulate its practice among His chosen people. This is a point that the Christian mind, which is disciplined enough to view things as they are from the Scriptures, must take into consideration.

Polygamy is the practice of marrying more than one wife at a time. Its origin dates back to antiquity, and, historically, it is known to have existed in the various stages of human development. There is no part of the world where, at one time or another, it has not been practised.

The question as to whether polygamy or monogamy (that is the marriage of one wife) is preferable is topical. In the homes it has been a matter for friendly conversations; at social gatherings it has come up for frank exchanges of views; worldly intellectuals have taken it up as a topic for academic exercises at symposia; and in the radio but, more particularly, in the newspapers and magazines, the question has been a subject of controversy- everyone giving vent to his views for or against polygamy, some assuming an air of authority over the matter.

Some people have preference for monogamy. Some others are all out in favour of polygamy; and yet there are those who take a fancy neither to monogamy nor polygamy-they hate to marry. What can be deduced from this is that human tastes vary from one person to another.

The arguments of some of those who have spoken against polygamy are in most cases based on their personal dislike borne out of social or economic circumstances. The point at issue is whether God is against polygamy; and this cannot be determined on the merit or demerit of the likes or dislikes of men but by the infallible word of God as contained in the Holy Bible.

This sermon is therefore intended to throw light on the subject from a scriptural point of view and to admonish those who appreciate that the opinions and counsels of men will always fail and lead to sin when they are opposed to God's word; so we will not exert energy on economic propositions or what some people call the "demands of modern life" which have nothing to do with the will of God, but which have made the so-called civilised nations of the world to be ridden with iniquities and incessant tribulations!

In certain church denominations, polygamy is forbidden on the ground that it is a sin for a Christian, they say, to marry more than one wife.

James Cardinal Gibbons, an authority in Roman Catholicism, stated in his book *The Faith of Our Fathers*: "The Gospel forbids a man to have more than one wife." He quoted Jesus Christ as saying that God "who made man in the beginning made them male and female and He said, for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they two shall be in one flesh".

Cardinal Gibbons stated: "Now marriage in its primitive ordinance was the union of one man with one woman for Jehovah created but one helpmate to Adam. He would have created

more, if His design had been to establish polygamy. The Scripture says that 'man shall adhere to his wife' - not his wives. It does not declare that they shall be three or more, but that 'they shall be two in one flesh'."

Yes, the argument of the cardinal is quite plausible; but let God's word decide whether his view is in line with the truth. That God made "one helpmate to Adam" there can be no dispute but to infer that He, by that pattern, prohibited the offspring of Adam from marrying more than one wife is very wrong. It was not necessary that God should make two helpmates for Adam since it was His purpose that the entire human race should descend from one stock. And when Adam and Eve sinned their children were affected having been born in sin. Concerning this aspect of the divine purpose. St. Paul wrote: "Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin: and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. Therefore, as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." – Romans 5: 12,18.

God's Approval

The fact that polygamy was practised with God's approval by the descendants of Adam some of whom were renowned faithful worshippers of His, invalidates any argument with reference to "the beginning". Abraham who is described in the Bible as "the Friend of God", (James 2: 23) was a polygamist, He married Sarah and Hagar, as it is written: "And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian.... and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife." (Genesis 16: 3)

As a matter of fact, God was in favour of Abraham's marrying Hagar. This point is buttressed by the fact that when Hagar attempted to escape from Abraham's house because of her insubordination, God through His angel ordered her to return and submit to Sarah. He said to Hagar: "Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands... I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude..." - Genesis 16: 5-12.

Some argue that Abraham was impelled by the circumstance of Sarah's barrenness to marry Hagar. This argument is most untenable. If it was forbidden to marry more than one wife, no circumstance would have forced Abraham – a man known for his exemplary character of faith and obedience – to break the rule.

Jacob who had twelve sons through whom the Jewish Nation emerged, was a confirmed polygamist. He married Leah and Rachel and later had their handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah. (Genesis 29: 21-35; 30: 1-13; 35: 23-26) All of them had children for him and none of his children was treated as "illegitimate". Out of the tribe of Judah, the son of Leah, Jesus Christ the Righteous who is the Saviour of mankind, came into the world; and St. Paul whom even H. G. Wells acknowledged as "a man of great intellectual vigour", and, whom St. Peter commended for his wisdom, sprang up from the tribe of Benjamin the son of Rachel. – Genesis 29: 31-35; 35: 16-18; Matthew 1: 1, 2; Hebrews 7; 14; Philippians 3: 4, 5; 2 Peter 3: 15, 16.

After the twelve tribes of Israel had been organised into a nation, their customs were brought under the strict guidance of the laws which God enacted through Moses. There were laws

against incest, fornication, adultery, prostitution and every form of immorality. But nobody can cite a single instance of a law that prohibited a man from marrying more than one wife.

The ancient worthies enjoyed polygamy in abundance of freedom. Gideon was the husband of many wives and he had 70 children. (Judges 8: 30) Elkanah was a polygamist, and it was one of his wives, Hannah, that was the mother of Samuel the famous prophet. (1 Samuel 1: 1-3, 19-20) What about David, the anointed king of Israel, who was described as “a man after God’s heart”? He, too, had many wives, and God was not displeased. (2 Samuel 3: 2-5; 5: 12-16) But the moment David overstepped his bounds and committed adultery with Uriah’s wife contrary to the divine law (Exodus 20: 14) God showed His disapproval and anger immediately, and subjected David to discipline and caused the child who was the fruit of their adulterous union to pass away. – 2 Samuel 11: 1-12; 12: 23.

The most striking point in the whole incident, which is very relevant to our argument; is that God Himself indicated through His prophet Nathan, that He gave David WIVES to marry. Nathan told David: “Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul; and I gave thee thy master’s (Saul’s) house, and THY MASTER’S WIVES into thy bosom...and if that had been too little (not enough), I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things (including wives).”-2 Samuel 12: 7-12.

The point here is, if God did not approve of polygamy, why did He give David his “master’s wives” for inheritance?

We cannot do without touching briefly on the issue of King Solomon who was a polygamist to the core. He was the husband of 700 wives and 300 concubines. God was not displeased with him because of his marrying more than one wife. It was when, at his old age, he committed idolatry through the influence of some of his wives who were pagans that he incurred the anger of God. – 1 Kings 11: 1-10.

Anyone who has read the Bible well cannot fail to understand that God’s attitude was never in disfavour of polygamy. The practice was legalised, and to this effect God enacted a law to guide the polygamist. As it is written: “If a man has two wives one beloved, and the other hated, and they have had children by him, and the son of the hated be the firstborn; and he meaneth to divide his substance among his sons: he may not make the son of the beloved (wife) the firstborn, and prefer him before the son of the hated (wife): But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn: and shall give him double portion of all he hath. For this is the first of his children: and to him are due the first birthrights.”- Deuteronomy 21:15-17. Douay Version.

Even the Watchtower Society has now admitted that God permitted the practice of polygamy. In the book Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God, the Society says: “Even in his law given through his prophet Moses to the nation of Israel Jehovah God recognized the existence of polygamy and concubinage, and he made allowances for it, but at the same time his laws regulated it fairly.” (Page 223.)

New Testament

Some people may say that all we have stated so far are from the Old Testament of the Bible and that in the New Testament polygamy is condemned. But where in the New Testament,

may we ask, are Christians forbidden to marry more than one wife? The opinion that polygamy is condemned in the New Testament is indefensible because it has not a shred of truth. We take full responsibility for this statement.

The text some often cite is Matthew 19: 4-6, and they lay stress on Christ's statement that "they twain shall be one flesh". It is worthwhile to note that Christ was not discussing polygamy or monogamy but he was answering the question of the Pharisees whether it was lawful for a man "to put away his wife for every cause" (verse 3). Jesus said to them: "Have you not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." (Matthew 19: 4-6) The subject matter is divorcement pure and simple.

We agree that the "twain" consists of one man and one woman as husband and wife. But to twist this to mean that Christ was advocating monogamy as against polygamy is misleading. The clause "they twain shall be one flesh" is but an emphasis of the inviolate relationship between husband and wife which makes it unlawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason other than the one expressly commanded by God and Jesus Christ.

The statement of Christ under reference has equal effect on both monogamous and polygamous marriages. Its bearing on polygamy is explained by the fact that the marriage contract is entered into by the husband on the one part, and each of the wives, respectively, on the other part at a time. The contract is never between the husband on the one part and the two or more wives, collectively, on the other part at a time. Each of the wives is bound by law to the husband and they all have equal legal status.

Concerning polygamy, the Encyclopedia Britannica states: "This is a form of marriage in which several wives are united to one man, each having the status of legal consort, while her off-spring are regarded as the LEGAL DESCENDANTS of the husband. As an institution, polygamy exists in all parts of the world...Many peoples have been said to be monogamous, but it is difficult to infer from the data at our disposal whether monogamy is, the prevalent practice, the moral ideal, or an institution safeguarded by sanctions. It must be remembered at once that polygamy is never practised throughout the community: there cannot exist a community in which every man would have several wives. The second important point with regard to polygamy, which is seldom brought out clearly, is that in reality it is not so much a form of marriage fundamentally distinct from monogamy as rather multiple monogamy. It is always in fact the repetition of marriage contract, entered individually with each wife, establishing an individual relationship between the man and each of his consorts. As a rule each relationship is little affected legally or economically by the others." (Vol. 14, pages 949-950).

We must also bear in mind that the point of the "twain" becoming "one flesh" as stated in the Bible is not literal but spiritual. And so, if one and one can be one, there is no reason why one and one and one cannot be one.

Another text sometimes referred to by certain Christians in condemnation of polygamy is 1 Corinthians 7: 1,2. It carries St. Paul's advice to the Christians at Corinth that in order "to

avoid fornication. Let every man have his own wife and let every woman have her own husband”.

Their point of argument is that St. Paul did not say “let every man have his own wives” but “wife”. This is very unreasonable. A man of St. Paul’s spiritual intelligence could never say “let every man have his own wives” since it was not a rule, and could not be possible that every man could afford to marry more than one wife. The way the apostle put it is the reasonable way to give the advice so as to apply both to monogamists and polygamists alike. One who has a wife has the chance of avoiding fornication and the man who has two wives has a double chance of living up to the advice.

Moreover, St. Paul stated categorically that he was not enforcing a law by his statement. He said: “But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment,” (verse 6) He was not married and he said that he wanted everyone to be like himself. But being an honest man who understood Christ’s “law of liberty” he refrained from standing in the way of those who would wish to marry. He stated: “But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that.” (verse 7) To enforce a law against marriage will be an unrighteous restriction of the freedom of those who can afford to marry; and to enact a law that every man must marry one wife only is an ungodly interference with the liberty of those gifted by God with the spiritual, moral, physical and material ability to maintain more than one wife.

Bishops

Lastly, some refer to 1 Timothy 3: 1, 2 where St. Paul stated that a “bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour...” A group of preachers who go from house to house are very fond of this text. But the point is that it is not everyone that is a bishop. What St. Paul said applied to bishops and deacons only. (verse 12). Even then it was not a law, He was advising Timothy as regards the things he (Timothy) should consider in appointing people to offices of overseers and elders in the Ministry. A similar advice was directed to Titus.- Titus 1: 4-9.

If it was a law that a bishop MUST marry one wife, St. Paul who was also a bishop of a higher rank should have married too. Granted, that it was a law, Christians can only observe the spirit of it and not its letter. St. Paul himself stated that “the letter (of the law) killeth, but the spirit giveth life”. (2 Corinthians 3: 5, 6) Therefore, if a man has two wives and is gifted with other necessary qualities-and he ably rules his house in the fear of God like faithful Abraham (Genesis 18: 17-19)-nothing in the spirit of the law disqualifies him from being a bishop or deacon.

The salient point in the text is that St. Paul’s advice to Timothy as well as to Titus is a clear indication that the early Christians practised polygamy. For if the general practice among the Christians at that time was that of monogamy, it would have been unnecessary for the apostle to advise that only those desiring to be bishops or deacons should be “the husband of one wife”.

We must warn here that we are not by this sermon encouraging people to rush into polygamous life without counting the cost. It calls for God’s wisdom, manliness, the practice of righteousness and a good economic standing to be a successful polygamist. These days

in which the cost of living is very high, and the education of children involves great expense it will be unwise to marry so many women. But if all things considered any man can afford to have plural wives he may go ahead. It is no sin, we repeat. Anyone who calls his neighbour a sinner, just because he is a polygamist, is perhaps a worse sinner than the polygamist!

If the question is put that any monogamist who has never been unfaithful in his marriage should throw stones at polygamists, we know that majority of them, being hypocrites, like the Scribes and Pharisees who wanted a certain adulterous woman to be condemned in the days of Christ on earth, will not have the courage to do so. (John 8: 1-11) However, the contrast between the case of the adulterous woman and polygamists is that the woman truly sinned but polygamists DO NOT. It is common knowledge that some "gentlemen" among monogamists are the fathers of the "illegitimate" children now found everywhere in Nigeria. So too it is in London where no less than 1,000 odd teenage girls are put in the family way before leaving school annually. (Tit-Bits, May 23, 1964).

Coincidentally, while the manuscript for this sermon as about going to the press, Revelation Sope Johnson came out with a frank admission that "Christian doctrine does not imply monogamy". Under his column of "Practical Religion" in the Sunday Times, he wrote: "In all probability, monogamy as an exclusive ideal and a rigid legal view of marriage is perhaps not to be found outside the modern, relatively recent development of western culture. People often argue as though monogamy were implied in Christian doctrine. IT IS NOT!" Sunday Times, Feb. 23, 1969, page 4. (Emphasis ours)

It has been made abundantly clear that there is no law in the New Testament against polygamy. And St, Paul stated that "WHERE NO LAW IS, THERE IS NO TRANSGRESSION". – Romans 4: 15.