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CHRISTIANS ENGAGEMENT IN POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGE: A THREAT TO CHRISTIAN VALUES

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Abstract

This material examines the position of Christians on polygamous marriage, how Christians perceive polygamy and their engagement in the said practice, the growing trends of polygamy among Christians, and what triggers such. The study will consider relevant factors that might push Christians into polygamy. From discussions and the look of things, it is clear that some people who have confessed Christ and got baptized into the Christian faith are engaging in polygamy, while the Bible sets standards and also teaches against such practice. This goes a long way toward indicating that morality and righteousness are compromised in this respect. Interestingly, in my dialogue with some Christians, they have agreed that their denomination (church) approves of polygamous marriage, so a church member can marry more than one wife with support from the church leadership, whereas others believe it is an abomination for a Christian to do so. This has apparently raised my appetite to conduct this research and establish what exactly the Bible commands us to do regarding marriage, as this remains a controversial topic within Christianity. This study seeks to address the following: What is the biblical principle about polygamy? What does God actually expect from His followers? And how can the church arrest this canker? The researcher will use interviews and questionnaires both on social media and in person to collect data by sampling participants randomly. He concludes by explicating the consequences of polygamy for the salvation of a Christian and making some recommendations.

Key words: sororal, non-sororal, polygamy, polygyny, polygynandry

Introduction

In a fast-growing global community where there is exposure to the internet and other materials anyone could think of, coupled with a high literacy rate, people have had access to some kinds of information, including the Bible, where they have realized that some great men in the Bible who were so dear to God's heart were people who had wives and concubines. This biblical literature is the basis for Christians who engage in polygamy.

Commelin, G. (2021) expresses that God describes David as "a man after my own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22)¹. This does not mean that he was blameless. As a result, some sections of Christians feel that once that is recorded in the Bible, it implies God is not against marrying more than one wife, and so they are at liberty to marry as many wives as they deem fit. Some Christians, including some preachers I listen to, even say casually that the Bible does not mention categorically that a man should marry only one wife, so such a decision to stick with a wife is to eschew societal criticism. Dlamini, CRM (1989) also consolidates this assertion by stating that the Bible is painfully silent on this institution. Only inconclusive inferences may be drawn. The rejection of polygamy by the churches has been based largely on missionary authority rather than on the clear word of scripture, although the arguments are obliquely based on the Bible. I consider this very unfortunate. This work seeks to find out what Christians must do, including their leaders, for their followers to get disabused about how many wives a born-again Christian must marry. The study will also explore different views regarding polygamy within the Christian community. This is to bring better understanding and to also establish the fact that Christians marital lives are subject to the dictates of the Bible and not individual or congregational discretion.

Literature Review

Definition of Terms

It is apt to explicate polygamy and marriage to set a good foundation for my work. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023 defines Polygamy as marriage to more than one spouse at a time. The most typical forms of polygamy have been polygyny, in which co-wives share a husband, or polyandry, in which co-husbands share a wife.

Shaiful Bahari, I., et al. (2021) defined polygamy as "a marital relationship involving multiple spouses". They elaborated further by indicating that there are three types of polygamy: polygyny refers to "one husband [who] is married to two or more wives," Polyandry refers to "one wife married to two or more husbands," and polygynandry refers to "a group marriage scenario in which two or more wives are simultaneously married to two or more husbands". Only 2% of the global population practices polygamy. Polygamy is most often found in West and Central Africa, where the highest rate was in Burkina Faso (36%), and is widespread among people who practice folk religions (45%), Muslims (40%), and Christians (24%). From the data provided, it is established that polygamy is a practice among Christians. It is notable from the data provided

¹ All Scriptural quotations are from the King James Version, except as otherwise stated.

that Christians' engagement in polygamy is quite significant, and that is a cause to worry as one is burdened to ponder over what could motivate this.

Powell N. (2021) posits that there are two main types of polygyny: sororal and non-sororal. Other concepts used in polygamy are Sororal polygyny and non-sororal polygamy. **Sororal Polygamy** is the practice of one man being married to multiple biological sisters at the same time. Whether the husband and the **co-wives** (a group of women married to one man) live under the same roof or in different homes, the eldest sister is considered the head wife. **Non-Sororal polygyny** is the practice of one man being married to at least two women at the same time, but the co-wives are not related to each other.

Though sorority is in practice in Africa, it is not very common to see two biological sisters married to the same man. In rare cases where the ladies are twins and desire to marry the same man to avoid being separated by marriage. Another instance is when a woman is barren and permits her husband to marry no other person but her biological sister in order to protect the marriage from savage incidents. The non-sororal is common in west and central Africa.

Marriage, on the other hand, according to Koçyiit zyiit, M. (2017, cited Ersanl & Kalkan, 2008), Marriage, which includes the coupling of two people possessing different interests, desires, and needs, is a special association given shape by social rules and laws and significantly affects individuals' development and self-realization.

What is the biblical principle about polygamy?

The Bible gives divine direction about marriage. It is made clear in the New Testament that every believer in Jesus Christ should marry a wife. This has generated a lot of arguments among both Christians and even unbelievers. People argue that if Solomon and David are men God loved so much and God referred to David as a man after His heart (1 Samuel 13:14): The Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord hath commanded him to be captain over his people. People argue that if Solomon and David are men God loved so much and God referred to David as a man after His heart (1 Samuel 13:14): "The Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord hath commanded him to be captain over his people... ". Even when they had wives and concubines, then God has no business with whatever number of wives someone has. This argument has crippled the faith of many who have fallen prey to this carnal reasoning.

It is cogent to state that God made this pronouncement about David because of certain outstanding qualities He saw in him. It does not mean that God has compromised David's adulterous behavior. Edmondson R. (2023) has indicated the following as reasons for God's love for David:

1. *Humble*: – Lowborn men are but a breath; the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath. Psalm 62:9
2. *Reverent*: I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies. Psalm 18:3
3. *Respectful*: – Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief. Psalm 31:9

4. *Trusting*: The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1
5. *Loving*: – I love you, O Lord, my strength. Psalm 18:1
6. *Devoted*: You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. Psalm 4:7
7. *Recognition*: – I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. Psalm 9:1
8. *Faithful*: Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Psalm 23:6
9. *Obedient*: Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Psalm 119:34
10. *Repentant*: – For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great. Psalm 25:11.

Has the Bible Recorded Polygamy?

This is a delicate question that people ask. I see this question as a trap and a calculated attempt by people who have the burning desire to engage in such behavior to bulldoze their way through by getting a justification from any answer that might not be carefully answered. It is undeniable that polygamy was recorded in the Bible, and it encapsulates the most popular and revered kings and great leaders in the Bible (King David and Solomon, Abraham, among others).

Davidson, M.R. (2015) explains that the book of Genesis contains several examples of polygamy and/or concubinage: Lamech (Gen. 4:18–24), Nahor (Gen. 22:20–24), Abraham (Gen. 16 and 21), Jacob (Gen. 29–30), Esau (Gen. 26:34–35; 28:8–9; 36:2–3), and Eliphaz (Gen. 36:12). He further elucidated that even though there is no explicit verbal condemnation of these practices given, these biblical narratives present each account in such a way as to underscore a theology of disapproval. The record of these polygamous relationships is bristling with discord, rivalry, heartache, and even rebellion, revealing the negative motivations and/or disastrous consequences that invariably accompanied such departures from

It should be stressed that they (those who are polygamists in the Bible) are not the yardstick for God’s standard, though God loved them dearly. They were humans, like all of us who have stumbled many times in our walk with God, and God did not spare them. They had their share of punishment from God. We can quickly recall how God dealt with David when he took someone’s wife (**2 Sam. 12:14–31**). We can also recall how God got angry with Solomon and promised to tear down his kingdom due to his polygamous lifestyle and even his practice of idolatry. (**1 Kings 11:11–12**).

It is flabbergasting to realize that believers of today still hold on to those practices that the Bible mentioned as fruits of the flesh in **Gal. 5** by alluding to the Kings of the Old Testament. The Old Testament of the Holy Book is unarguably relevant; however, it is not all of its content that we must practice. Rather, we are to learn from the weaknesses and mistakes of some of our great leaders and kings, which did not help them or brought calamities along their Journey with God.

It should be mentioned that God had compassion on those who died before the coming of Christ and did not partake in the new covenant with Christ by allowing Jesus Christ to preach to them when He died within the three days in the grave.

‘For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but making alive the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prisons because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited... (*IPet.3:18-20- ESV*). What this means is that Christians who have received or heard of Christ and know who He is and what He was sent to do, yet because of their fleshly desires, keep citing David and Solomon as people who practiced polygamy yet were loved by God, would not have the confidence to use that as an excuse on the day of judgment.

In as much as people make reference to men who were polygamous in the Bible, we should also acknowledge that there were eunuchs, unmarried men like Apostle Paul and Jesus Christ, as well as those who were monogamous. ‘Some are born as eunuchs; some have been made by eunuchs by others; and some choose not to marry for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.’ (**Mat. 19:12-NLT**). Edmondson, R. (2023). Stated that David’s example is a great road map for how we are to live our lives. This is because of his encounter and walk with God.

What does God actually expect from His Followers?

Davidson M.R. (2015) said the divine design for marriage established at creation is a monogamous relationship between "a man... and his wife" (Gen. 2:24). Paul’s citation of this verse makes even more explicit the monogamous design: "And the two [not three or more] shall become one flesh" (Eph. 5:31, emphasis added). Monogamy is ultimately rooted in monotheism and in the concept of ‘*imago Dei*’ (the image of God): just as the Lord God, who is "one" (Deut. 6:4), is not involved in promiscuous relationships within a polytheistic pantheon, so husbands and wives, created in God’s image, are to be monogamous in their marital relationship with each other. However, a distortion of the creation design for monogamy manifests itself during Old Testament times in the practice of polygamy and concubinage. Once God instituted marriage by creating a man and a woman only, it means that God expects that marriage should comprise just the two. The Bible made it clear that the **two** shall become one flesh... (Mark 10:8–9). In the face of this sound teaching, there are diverse schools of thought on polygamy. Many secular as well as theological scholars have advanced many reasons as factors that trigger the practice of polygamy.

Baloyi (2013, cited by Kimathi, 1994, and Gaskiyane, 2000) explained that some African people invoke polygamy to prevent a possible divorce, particularly in cases where childlessness or barrenness is anticipated. Waruta and Kinothi (2000) also state that in traditional African society, it was almost inconceivable that a childless marriage could be sustained monogously.

This assertion is rather unfortunate to be made about Christians. The issue of bareness, when not treated well, can actually cause broken marriages, but once polygamy or divorce become

threatening when crises arise, it is a clear indication that the marriage is not grounded in Christ. Christians have a lot of examples, like Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 21:5), Zechariah, and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-7), to look at from the Bible as a source of their hope and faith in Christ. The Apostle Paul advised that such bad things should not be said about believers (Eph. 5:3).

Gaskiyane (2000) rightly points out that, in some cases at least, polygamy follows on from a man's unwillingness to acknowledge that problems relating to infertility may lie with him. This unwillingness to accept that the inability to bear a child may also be from the man is highly egocentric, and this exposes the woman (wife) to family pressure. This invariably distorts the peaceful coexistence in marriage, and this violates what I call the great commandment of God to couples as found in Eph. 5:22–33: Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands... This is an ordination from God. Steer J. (2019) indicates that God does not approve of people being involved in more than one sexual relationship simultaneously. God created man and woman in his image (Genesis 1:27), and He meant for man and woman to be united in marriage (Genesis 2:24). I wish to mention that a man who thinks getting another wife is the solution to his marital crises has never been a Christian in the first place and ends up suffocating the first wife. This is not God's plan for couples.

According to Gaskiyane (2000), there is plenty of evidence to show that "no woman really wants to share the affection and love of her husband with another woman". The testimony of those who have lived in polygamous homes around the world supports the fact that jealousy and bias always prevail. In the Old Testament, Jacob favored Rachel over Leah, and Elkanah favored Hannah over Peninnah (1 Samuel 1:5). Dlamini (1989) supports this by indicating that it has been contended that although a polygamous union in a way satisfies the definition of a marriage in that it is a permanent union that confers on each consort the status of a wife, and although it is not incompatible with the primary purpose of marriage, which is the procreation and rearing of children, it lacks reciprocal attachment between husband and wife, leads to a man's favoring one wife at the expense of the other, and consequently to mutual jealousies, rivalry, and bickering.

Rompis, N.H., et al. (2020), and Kasim, N.M., and Bakung, D. A. (2020) consolidate this by indicating that Apostle Paul also mentions marriage as a monogamous relationship that reflects the unity of the people with the one God. Polygamy and divorce are fornication, and because the people are the house of the Holy Spirit, we must glorify God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:12–7:16). They further explained that the apostle Paul describes marriage as monogamous about Christ's relationship with the church and that love and respect are the unifying and foundation of married life (Ephesians 5:22–33), amid a culture where people are polygamous. and there are converts who, when infidels practice polygamy, the leaders of the church are required to be an example by having only one wife (1 Timothy 3: 2). Burrige, B. (2013) explains that Biblical examples from silence where polygamy was practiced but not directly punished or condemned are simply records of history and cannot nullify moral principles God had already revealed. Emadi, S. (2021), reasons with Burrige by also stating that This marriage pattern established at creation—oone man and one woman in a monogamous commitment—is both commanded and commended throughout the rest of Scripture. The seventh commandment forbids adultery, that is, sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage (Exodus 20:14).

How can the church arrest this canker?

The church (the body of Christ) has a huge responsibility to sanitize Christendom by preaching that which is biblical without any ambiguities. The fact is that there are too many divisions in the church due to different interpretations of the scriptures, which have given rise to different doctrines and practices. We cannot eradicate the problem of polygamy if we do not have the same understanding of the scriptures. We must appreciate the truism that when we read the scriptures, we need the leading of the Holy Spirit so as to rightly interpret them. It is accidental for any church or leader to use a carnal mind to interpret the scriptures (2 Peter 1:21). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (2023) states that the end of plural marriage required great faith and sometimes complicated, painful—and intensely personal—decisions on the part of individual members and Church leaders.

The concern of ending polygamy is a very tedious one, as church members may be tempted to reference the legal backing of their countries as well as the social and cultural approval of the practice in Africa. With these factors as a threat to easily abort polygamous marriage, Bouit, J.J. (1981), indicated in his doctoral dissertation that Polygamy is far from being a thing of the past, and the problems involved must be seriously addressed as the church presses forward in its commission of bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the multitudes in Africa. I believe that when Christians learn to separate constitutional as well as social and cultural privileges from the worship of Christ and make the Bible the ultimate and only standard for their lives, eradicating such practices will not be as difficult as he asserts.

All that the church needs to do is inculcate the fear of the Lord by hammering home the lifestyles of the saints in the Bible, which are worth emulating. In his address to the Corinthians, Apostle Paul admonished them to imitate me, just as I imitate Christ... (1 Cor. 11:1-2 AMP).

Methodology

The researcher has used a qualitative research approach. He has used both oral interviews and questionnaires in person and on social media platforms for his data collection. The interview and the questionnaires were administered using random sampling. The sample population focuses on opinions about Christians' engagement in polygamous marriage. Questions were fairly distributed to Pastors, lay preachers, and Christians in general. I have chosen this sample population to be able to have people who are informed about the topic under discussion. I have allowed participants to use any medium of expression (both local and English) to facilitate smooth communication. This helped me have varying revelations in my research as their backgrounds influence their experience of Christians' engagement in polygamy.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The table shows the responses gotten from the respondents on whether Christians should engage in polygamy or not.

| Responses | No. of respondents in figures | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Never/ no | 45 | 56.3% |
| Yes | 28 | 35% |
| Sometimes/uncertain | 7 | 9.7% |
| TOTAL | 80 | 100% |

Discussion of results

It is clear from the data gathered that a greater section of Christians believe that it is not good for a Christian to engage in polygamy. Some considered the entire discussion as an abomination so they exclaimed 'never' whereas some wrote it in words and others said 'no'(56%). They explained that Jesus Christ, the Apostles, and John the Baptist, among other saints, did not practice such acts, and so no New Testament believer should engage in what the Old Testament recorded, which has brought about disagreement among Christians. Those who said 'yes' (35%) anchored their argument on those scriptures that gave account of those who had wives and concubines and went further to ask if God said something bad about them. This question has been answered in the literature review. Those who chose 'sometimes or uncertain' frankly indicated that they are actually confused as to what to believe. They stated that since the Old Testament is also part of the Bible and it speaks about polygamy, yet the New Testament says a man should marry a wife, it is confusing. The total number of respondents for both the oral interview and questionnaire is 80..

Recommendations

The following recommendations should be considered as a way of dealing with polygamy:

1. **a.** Christians should get themselves rooted in the Word to avoid deceptions and heresies that conflict with the sound doctrines of the Bible.
2. **b.** Teachers of the gospel should consciously disabuse the mindset of Christians that the Bible has not specifically mentioned that a Christian should marry only a wife or a husband. With regard to some biblical references made in this article, it is clear that we can bring those who have gone wayward back to line.
3. **c.** Preachers must stress the need to get born again. Jesus said that unless a man is born again, he (male or female) cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Once a Christian becomes born-again, the things of the world are no longer appealing. (II Cor. 5:17).

4. **d.** Christians must learn to disassociate themselves from any form of practice that will compromise their faith and biblical teachings, for a servant cannot serve two masters at the same time (Mat. 6:24).
5. Christians should say no to polygamy irrespective of the challenge they face, be committed to prayer, and seek good counsel when they have marital crises. This is because resorting to polygamy as a solution to marital crises is nothing but a carnal idea. This cannot help the church, as unbelievers are looking up to us as the light of the world (Mat. 5:14–16).
6. Christians must understand that marriage between a man and a woman is like the church and Jesus Christ, and anyone who violates the marital vow sins against heaven.

Conclusion

The greatest challenge for Christians who are caught in this web is their inability to separate African Traditional Religion and practices from Christian moral values and Biblical Principles. It is clear that people are baptized into the Christian faith and are communicants, yet they are struggling to come out of the world, as the Bible has stated: ‘I have given them your word, and the world has hated them for they are not of the world anymore’. (John 17:14, NIV)

It is the duty of the church to intensify its moral teaching and make followers of Christ understand that there is a difference between our traditional practices that dominate where we find ourselves and what Jesus Christ brought. It will take conscious efforts by Christians to give themselves wholly to the teachings of Christ and the foundational Apostles as recorded in the scriptures. It is also evident that some Christians who indulge in polygamy are not under the influence of any traditional practices but are controlled by disaffection for their wives and an insatiable thirst to taste women of different stature or outlook. Dlamini CRM (1989) explains that the assumption in the past was that education and Christianity would lead to the abrogation of polygamy. Although these elements have led to a reduction in polygamous unions, they have not been completely eliminated. To use the law to abolish polygamy will lead to people who are not really criminals being branded as criminals. This is an abuse of the criminal sanction.

It is clear from the submission that no amount of external force can help stop Christians involvement in polygamy. Without the willingness and readiness of individuals to submit and distance themselves from traditional practices such as polygamy, it will be difficult to maintain Christian teachings and values, and that is very inimical to our salvation. Apostle Paul expects us to live holy and unquestionable lives, and for such he admonished Christians: ‘I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God... (Romans 12:1)

I must state unequivocally that the Bible has never endorsed polygamy, although it gives accounts of it in the Old Testament. Apostle Paul admonished Christians that it is good we do not marry (I Cor. 7:1) and added that due to so much immorality, he encouraged us to marry.

‘But since there is so much immorality, **each man** should have his **own wife** and **each woman** her **own husband**.’ (I Cor. 7:1). This is loud and clear enough for Christians to know the number of wives or husbands the Bible expects Christians to have, so the argument that the Bible is not explicit on this topic lacks basis. Hence, from the words of the Apostle Paul, it is wrong for any believer to marry more than a wife or husband.

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