

CHAPTER FOUR

Monogamy: Is it Biblical or Western ideology?

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Abstract

In this paper, the author has attempted to establish beyond any reasonable doubt that monogamy is a biblical concept and NOT a Western ideology. He has done this by taking his audience through the Old Testament, the New Testament, and has also shown the supporting evidences from the history of the Christian Church.

Introduction

Before we go into our discussion of this topic, we will briefly define some terms so that we will know what we are talking about:

1. Monogamy:
 - a. The Practice or state of being married to only one wife at a time.
 - b. The practice of marrying only once during life. This practice is recommended in the Bible for bishops (pastors or clergy), cf. 1Tim 3:2a. This practice is rare.
 - c. Among other animals or birds: the practice of having only one mate. Cf. Doves.
2. Polygamy: The state or practice of having two or more wives or husbands [polyandry] at the same time.
3. Adultery (*Mokeia*). A voluntary sexual intercourse between a married man and a woman who is not his wife, or between a married woman and a man who is not her husband.
4. Fornication (*porneia*).

- a Voluntary sexual intercourse, generally forbidden by law, between unmarried woman and a man, especially an unmarried man.
- b. Bible: any unlawful sexual intercourse, including adultery.
- c. Worship of idols by God's people, especially Israel.

5. Rape:

- a. The crime of having sexual intercourse with a woman or girl forcibly without her consent,
- b Statutory rape: Sexual intercourse with a girl below the age of consent.

6. Divorce: To turn different ways, legal and formal dissolution of a marriage. To separate or disunite. The topic of monogamy is a very important and interesting one. I wish I had time and space to deal with it exhaustively, but human limitations will not allow me to do so. Permit me therefore to look at this topic at a glance.

I). Monogamy in the Old Testament

From the outset it will not be an overstatement to say that marriage is a divine institution. It is God himself who in the Garden of Eden created man and also made a helper [wife] "suitable for him" (Gen 2:18). The making of a woman for Adam was already alluded to in Genesis 1:27 where the Bible records: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them".

Note singular reference to man and woman in these two texts: Gen 1:27 and 2:18 is worth noticing. God was not certainly talking about polygamous marriage here, but He was talking about one man and one woman, a monogamous marriage or union. God created one

man (Adam) and gave him only one wife (Eve). But one could ask, “If monogamy is God’s order for marriage, then why did he seem to approve of polygamy?” The answer to this question is not far fetched. We know that many of the great saints of the Old Testament were polygamists, including Abraham, Moses, and David. As a matter of fact, Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (IKings 11:3). In response then, it should be noted that the Bible does not approve of everything it records, at least not explicitly. For instance, the Bible records Satan’s lie in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:4), but certainly does not approve of it, or any form of lying; in point of fact, one of God’s Ten Commandments forbids us giving false witness against our neighbours (Ex 20:16). In Lev 19:11 God commands; “Do not lie.” Likewise, the Bible records David’s adultery with Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife (2Sam 11) but does not approve of it. Compare Nathan’s pronouncement on David; “You are the man!” (2Sam 12:7). Moreover, the Bible does not only disapprove of polygamists, but record enough of problems, agonies, and the sufferings the Old Testament polygamists had in their respective homes. For example, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, and the rest, all had marriage problems because of their polygamous marriages.

It is also on record that Cain had only one wife, that means he followed the example of his father Adam in having only one wife, thus continuing the divine institution of a monogamous marriage (Gen 4:17). Bockle, on the other hand, argues, and rightly so that Lamech, Cain’s descendant, was responsible for instituting polygamy (Gen 4:19-24), (Bockle, 1970:45). The Bible names his two wives as Adah and Zillah (Gen 4:19). This situation however, seems to be reversed when in the story of the flood, Noah and his sons had only one wife each: “But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter

the ark— you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you" (Gen 6:18): "On that very day Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japhet, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, [i.e. one wife each] entered the ark" (Gen 7:13).

From this time on, as far as we know, cases of polygamy as a form of marriage were rare in Israel and where polygamy seems to stick itself out the Bible condemns it in most touching terms. Read Malachi 2:14-16: God is a witness between the man and "the wife of his youth" (2:14) and he had ability to make many wives for one man, yet he made only one woman for one man (2:15). This is why God would never approve of divorce (2:16) rather, "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Cf. also Prov 5:18-19, Job 31:1, 9-12. In all these passages there is no allusion to polygamy. Job himself, whose life was that of the ancient patriarchs, had only one wife (Job 2:9): "His wife said to him, "Are yo still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!"

In support of the monogamous marriage in the Old Testament, Geisler (1989:281) argues and rightly so, that monogamy was taught by precedent in the Old Testament, and that God gave Adam only one wife; and this set precedent for the whole race to follow. Not only that monogamy was also taught by precept. God told Moses in regard to the king: "He must not take many wives [must not multiply wives], or his h[^]art will be led astray" (Deut 17:17). Thus polygamy was expressly forbidden. Monogamy was taught as well in the moral prescription against adultery. It is implied in the moral prescription: "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife [singular]" (Ex 20:17). This implies that there was only one lawful wife the neighbour could have. As it has already been indicated, monogamy is taught by punishment: Every polygamist in the Old Testament paid bitterly for his sin. Solomon is

the classic example. The Bible declares that “his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God” (1 Kings 11:4).

Before we leave this brief look at the Old Testament, we must say without any reservations that the fact that God permitted polygamy no more proves he prescribed it than the fact God permitted divorce indicates that God desires it. We should note then that what Jesus said of divorce is true also of polygamy; it was “permitted... because your hearts were hard. But I was not this way from the beginning” (Matt 19:8), God therefore intends that marriage be a lifetime monogamous relationship.

II). The New Testament

When we come to the New Testament, the situation is that of asserting monogamy as an ideal form of marriage instituted by God (Gen 2:18-24). This is God’s standard for Christian marriages, and **NOTHING SHORT OF IT IS RIGHT**. Divorce breaks God’s law for marriage and should never be excused as such. As we have said many times in this paper; God’s ideal for marriage is a lifetime commitment between **ONE MAN AND ONE WOMAN**. The pattern should never be violated, and to do so is wrong. Thus in the New Testament, Jesus himself forbids divorce and the rest of the Bible concurs. Jesus was emphatic -when he declares; “...anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt 5:32). Mark’s Gospel however does not make any exception for divorce. Jesus simply declares: “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her” (Mk 10:11), cf. also Luke 16:18. The purpose of this paper is not to establish an exception for divorce, therefore it will suffice to say that it is only Matthew who was writing primarily for the Jews, who

mentions fornication (Porneia) as an exception for divorce; but if there was exception that was applied to the audiences of Mark and Luke, surely they would have mentioned it. The fact is that what God has joined together, he does not want man to put asunder (Matt 19:6).

In Paul, the “mystery” contained in Gen 2:24 is compared to the relationship between Christ and his Church, revealing at the same time the definitive ideal of marriage (monogamy), (Eph 5:25-32). Paul, especially, regard marriage (ICor 7) in terms of divine vocation. He taught it better to live a life of celibacy, but gave no fast rules about this, but encouraged those who would not be able to live like him to marry (ICor 7:8-9). Paul also asserts empathically that: “A wife must not separate from her husband” (ICor 7:10) and “a husband must not divorce his wife” (ICor7:11). The emphasis of the New Testament on the indissolubility of marriage is then a disapproval of divorce which distorts God’s standard of idea! marriage, which is monogamy. Let me assert once again that in the New Testament in the context of biblical testimony, we find a development of the concept of marriage, a definite tendency to monogamy is evident. With what we have seen so far, “Can we still think of monogamy as a Western ideology?” Not at all!

III). In the History of the Christian Church

A. Early Church

When we come to the history of the Church as it addresses the issue of polygamy and monogamy, we should know that it is a long time issue. The early church looked at marriage as a divine ordinance, and this gave it the strongest of weapons against the Gnostic doctrines and other tendencies hostile to marriage.

The Early Church did not allow divorce among its members and

there were even greater differences of opinion about the remarriage of divorced persons. Moreover, the legislation of the Christian emperors tended to make divorce more difficult out of consideration for the needs of the children, but was not based “on a consistent doctrine of marriage, which could hardly be found before the writings of Augustine” (354-430) (Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 1967:59; footnote 1). It is fair to note here then that in his *Reply to Fustus*, Augustine enunciated his moral principle that “...plurality of wives was no crime when it was the custom; and it is a crime now because it is no longer the custom.” By this quote, St. Augustine argues and correctly so, that it is the biblical concept of monogamy which was relatively absent among his people that is now fully present among them that has made an old polygamous custom a crime.

Pope Innocent I (401-417) was noted for his complete rejection of polygamy when he stressed the ruling anyone must also be reckoned a bigamist who had already been married as a pagan and then contracted a second marriage as a Christian, “For baptism does indeed wash away sins, but not a number of wives,” (A Letter to Archbishop Vitricius of Rouen). See also *Dictionary of Popes*, p.37, and also Ritzer, *Formen*, p. 164 & 168, note 69. Note, on the contrary, that in 542, the emperor Justinian made it obligatory only for persons of senatorial rank to draw up written marriage contracts. He rescinded the requirements of 538 that persons of the middle class must provide themselves with a written marriage testimonial signed by an official of the church (*defensor ecclesiae*) and three or four clergy (Bockle, 1970:73-74).

Ironically, the same Emperor, Justinian, tightened up marriage legislation to the point of condemning the guilty partner to join a

religious order. This some sanction applied also to divorce by mutual agreement so that guilty divorcees could not remarry: This in a way, the emperor was approving of monogamy. St. Basil, a church father cautions: "If you marry a fourth time you are behaving like a big." In point of fact, third marriage was punished with canonical penalty though it remained valid. Later on it was accepted that in a married life if the man is ordained bishop or one of the partners enters a monastery, the other partner could marry again. This shows how strong monogamy was encouraged, and was almost made a way of life, not only for a Christian society, but for others as well. For example, after the decree of Leo the Wise, marriages could only be contracted through the church's- blessing, and no longer outside the church by mutual agreement in front of witnesses. Thus the church could not under normal condition accept polygamous marriages. It is however sad to note that Christians wanted to make a Christian marriage; "But, as a rule, young, rich and prominent Christian women in Rome could not find a husband in their circle because there were so few Christian men among the Roman upper class" (Kurt Aland, 1980:61). Thus these young, rich women were compelled to marry considerably beneath their station. The danger is then clear, with time, some of these marriages would end in divorce to the amazement of the church.

B. The Development of the Medieval Church's Teaching on Marriage

In the preceding pages we found that the Early Church did not have exclusive control over marriage. This situation continued until the eleventh century. In this century, the church acquired exclusive control over marriage. In this period, marriage was not just simply "something sacred," but it was a sacrament It is fair to note here that the Protestant Reformers accepted the sacredness of marriage in the

order of creation, but they denied that marriage belonged "to the order of grace as a sacrament" (McBrien, 1970:790-1). It is interesting to note that in the controversies between the church and the Christian States, the states gradually lost their powers of jurisdiction over marriage, which was henceforth considered a uniquely sacred affair. Of course, this victory on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities was not universal: there were still places in the eleventh century where matrimonial questions were judged by lay tribunals, but these cases were exceptional and gradually ceased. It will not be wrong then to conclude that the exclusive competence of the church in matrimonial matters came to be universally accepted in the eleventh century. For example:

- a. In France, the weakening of royal power made this transfer from civil to ecclesiastical jurisdiction relatively easy.
- b. In Italy, it seems that the emperor's habit of conceding civic titles and the corresponding civic powers to numerous bishops had already prepared the way for the exclusive competence of the bishops in matters affecting marriage.
- c. In England, finally, where the political situation had evolved somewhat differently, this exclusive competence of ecclesiastical tribunals in matrimonial questions appears to be accepted at the beginning of the twelfth century (Bockle, 1970:84).

It is to be noted that from this time on the church alone possessed competence in judiciary questions, and she also possessed the power to legislate, to fix the rules governing marriage, and to apply her own in place of the secular laws which she had allowed. She was to

be capable of formulating a whole matrimonial code of law. Yet varied customs and legislation were to be found in the Christian world at that time. In order to stabilize the laws affecting marriage and to reach some sort of unity in legislation, the church had to take account of Roman law. For instance, by establishing as valid a marriage freely contracted between the TWO spouses even when there was no official ceremony.

We can also note here in passing that marriage was not universally accepted as a sacrament until mid-twelfth century. This acceptance was absent in the Early Church. The early Church accepted the “mystery” referred to in Ephesians 5:32 as a mystical bond between Christian and the Church, but never dreamt of marriage becoming a sacrament. Nevertheless, all sacred canons and the papal decretals (decrees) taught the indissolubility of marriage, and continue to do so.

It is fair to state here without any reservations that divorce can easily make a person a polygamist, thereby violating the monogamous standards set by God himself in the creation order (Gen 2:18-24). Once again monogamous marriage is a creation order, not a western ideology that has been imposed on Africans or other peoples of the world. This is agreed upon by all true churches around the world as a way of finally establishing monogamy as God had intended it from the beginning.

IV). Conclusion

Throughout this paper, the author has attempted to argue and logically, that monogamy is a biblical concept; it is NOT a western ideology. In fact, all the cultures of the world had practiced polygamy at some time in the history of their existence, it was the light of

Christianity that shone on them and taught them monogamy as it is required by God from the beginning. We all learnt monogamy from the Bible, not from the West: When there was no West as we know it today, the Bible was with its teaching on monogamy: a union between two persons, man and woman, to part no more until death separates them. God gave this structure himself; and without the structure of marriage there can be no justification for sexual relations, and this structure is monogamy which shares faithfulness, love, peace, sex, acceptance, humility, and so on, with a SINGLE person, man or woman bound in a monogamous marriage state as recommended and ordained by God in the Bible.

May God bless all of you.

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