

The Slippery Slope towards Polygamy

Why should Christians oppose polygamy if even the patriarch Abraham, the father of all believers, practiced it?

by Johan D. Tangelder

In our Canadian society common sense is in short supply. Perhaps this new century will go down in Canadian history as the age of *uncommon nonsense*. How else can we describe the latest developments? Marriage and family-relations professionals have come to extol "alternative lifestyles." Textbooks that used to be entitled *Marriage and the Family* are now entitled *Intimate Relationships* or the all-inclusive *Families*. Abnormal behavior has taken on the appearance of the normal

Down the slippery slope

Though Canada had had a long Christian tradition it is now in sharp decline. The Liberals' wild experiment in social engineering is rapidly resetting the boundaries of behavior. When you are opposed to same-sex marriage, you are accused of being dominated by a feudal mentality which stifles freedom in the name of an outmoded set of religious taboos. When you suggest that the next step in the Liberals' social engineering is legalizing polygamy, you are called a wild-eyed fundamentalist. Yet, I believe our society will be rushing down the slippery slope toward polygamy if same-sex marriage becomes legal. Thanks to Canada's official government commitment to multiculturalism, *culturally* based polygamy has now – in theory – a strong case for parity with sexual orientation rights. If gender is irrelevant to marriage, why can't two brothers or two sisters marry? Why not any number? If a man can marry several wives, why can't a wife have several husbands?

These questions are not farfetched. In 1997, the Law Commission of Canada published a report, *Beyond Conjugalinity*. One of its recommendations was to establish a legal structure validating interdependent personal relationships – sexual partnerships, friends, siblings, etc. In a footnote the authors of the report stated that they saw "no reason in principle to limit registered partnerships to two people." The Supreme Court of Canada won't hesitate to push the traditional concept of marriage over the cliff. Its judges are unelected anti-family ideologues, who make laws designed to undermine family authority and supplant the family with the state.

Defining Polygamy

Polygamy is the practice of having more than one wife at one time. It occurs where women occupy a low station in society. Strictly speaking, polygamy means multiple marriage, but in practice when we use the word we are thinking of "polygyny" (a few, or even many, wives for one man) because polyandry (several husbands for one woman) is quite rare in human history. Polygyny (polygamy) is practiced in parts of Africa, Australia, Melanesia, and elsewhere. It is usually the privilege of a small minority who thereby increases offspring, prestige, and wealth.

The Influence of Islam

The rapid spread of Islam in the West may well force governments to rethink monogamous marriage as the only form. According to the Qur'an a man may have four wives. If some Canadian Muslims want official status for polygamy, what will stop them? Gerald Owen, who apparently views the Supreme Court as the ultimate arbitrator of right and wrong, speculates in the *National Post* (Feb. 19, 2005), "If claims favoring polygamy start working their way through Canadian courts, our judges will have some trouble reconciling the logic of their same-sex marriage decisions with their aversion to polygamy. Probably, they will find their way out of this mess by appealing to the principle of equality." However, the judges may also point to the precedent set by England and Ireland where polygamist Muslims are already enjoying special dispensations.

Controversy on the Mission Field

Missionaries working within polygamous contexts have learned through trial and error how difficult this issue is. The question repeatedly arises of what is to be done with regard to the baptism of those who are living in polygamous marriages, especially men (chieftains, etc.) who have a "harem." When monogamy is made a prerequisite for baptism after conversion this means that a candidate for baptism who is living in a polygamous marriage must abandon all his wives except one. But what direction does the missionary provide concerning the man's many wives? The issues are exceedingly complex. It was the divorces of superfluous wives, and the freeing of slaves that raised many questions for missionaries. It means nothing less than breaking up a social system developed and fortified by long centuries of custom. Quite apart from the temptation for the converted polygamist to retain only the youngest and disown the older ones, this demand would force a cruel hardship upon the wives who are dismissed. In most of the existing tribal structures they will be left without any ties or protection whatsoever and in most cases delivered over to prostitution. Several conferences have been held through the years to discuss the issues raised. They struggled with the question: What are the ways and means of dealing with polygamous converts and attaining the monogamous ideals? For example, at the All-Africa Church Conference held in Kitwe, Zambia, in 1963, the participants concluded regarding partners in a polygamous marriage who wish to become church members:

1. The polygamist has a social responsibility for his wives. To demand that he put them away, whether with or without their consent, is to place them in a difficult social position, and to expose them to moral danger, including that of prostitution.
2. To permit baptism to the polygamist but to refuse him Holy Communion is contrary to Holy Scripture. Polygamists might be entered on the list of "adherents," and be permitted to partake of the Holy Communion, but not allowed to hold a post of responsibility in the church.

Polygamy in the Old Testament

Why should Christians oppose polygamy if even the patriarch Abraham, the father of all believers, practiced it? In referring to the time of Christ and before, Josephus, the Jewish historian and friend of the Romans, said, "it is the ancient practice among us [Jews] to have many wives at the same time." Numerous

polygamous marriages are found in the Old Testament. Biblical heroes such as Abraham, Jacob, Elkanah, David, and Solomon, and others had multiple wives. However, we do not know how common such polygamous marriages were and how many wives were involved. The accounts of a number of kings having a relatively large number of wives must not lead us to draw exaggerated conclusions. Royals Courts occupy a special position.

Polygamous marriages were far from ideal. Scripture frankly describes the evil effects of polygamy in the families of Jacob (Gen. 35:22; 37:18-28), of David, (2 Sam.13:1-29; 15:1ff.), and especially of Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-12). Every polygamist in the Old Testament paid dearly for his sins. Elkanah's wife was considered a "rival" or adversary by the other, who "used to provoke her sorely, to irritate her" (1 Sam. 1:6).

Although Scripture does not directly condemn the polygamy that occurred in Old Testament times, it was never understood as a reflection of God's original plan for marriage. God permitted it because of the hardness of man's heart (Deut. 24:1; Matt.19:8). The progressive unfolding of His will in Scripture clearly reveals that His will for marriage is the restoration of the original monogamous relationship.

The Creation Order

Ever since paradise people could have known that God intended monogamous marriage. That monogamy is God's standard for the human race is clear. From the very beginning He set the pattern by creating a monogamous marriage relationship with one man and one woman (Gen.1:27; 2:21-25). The creation of Adam and Eve as the embodiment of the image of God functions as the foundational paradigm of marriage. The man and woman are joined; they are "one flesh." This "one flesh" concept eliminates polygamy as well as same-sex marriage as an option.

The instruction to be fruitful presupposed the sexual union of the man and the woman and the complementary nature of "maleness" and "femaleness." The creation of a single male and from his side a female companion as his helpmeet is to provide a permanent spiritual and moral basis for monogamous marriage. As in origin, so in life, the man and his wife coalesce into the unity of one being. Alone, neither the man nor the woman accomplishes the intentions of God in creation. It is together that they are blessed and together that they are commissioned for productivity in raising children and working in God's world. This point is reinforced in Gen. 2:24, where God explicitly pronounces, "It is not good that the man should be alone."

In *The Mystery of Marriage: As Iron Sharpens Iron*, Mike Hanson comments on this text: "After we have surveyed, as far as possible, all the other creatures in the world, eventually God presents us with one who is special, one who strikes a deeper chord in us than anyone else was able to do. Although the person may be very unlike us in many important ways, still there is something inside us which recognizes the other as being bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, akin to us on a level far deeper than personality. This is a blood tie, an affinity of the heart in every sense. It is as if we discover an actual kinship with the one we love, which the marriage ceremony serves only to make official."

Polygamy was an aberration. Monogamy was already the norm in Old Testament times. The law of Moses clearly commands, you "must not take many wives" (Deut.17:17). The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls took the significant step of presenting the reform of marriage in terms of a return to the single-hearted solidarity of the first couple, Adam and Eve. They wrote that those who take another wife while

the other was alive (possibly by practicing polygamy) sinned against the principle of Creation..."Male and female created He them." The story of Adam and the original family stands, therefore, in stark opposition to polygamy. Clearly, monogamy, the marriage of one man and one woman, with an exclusive sexual relationship, is the norm for marriage. Through their teaching our Lord and the apostles reinforced what God intended for marriage right from the beginning of human history.

Jesus and the Creation Order

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to restore the original divine ordinance of matrimony (Matt.19:1-12) in its full integrity. He insisted on monogamous marriage as a renewal of the undivided union of Adam and Eve. When Jewish leaders challenged Jesus' teaching on marriage, He responded, "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female" (Matt.19:4). He said, "The two [not three or four] will become one flesh" (Matt.19:5). In other words, the creation order that God established "from the beginning" remains normative throughout human history. Jesus never lent any support to polygamy. Whenever He spoke about marriage or used marriage as an illustration, it was always in the context of monogamy. Another time He said that if anyone wished to follow Him, He would have to choose Him over his brothers, sisters, mother, and his wife (Luke 14:26). He did not say "wives." Despite the polygamy of the patriarchal era, the verdict of Jesus is clear: "from the beginning it was not so"(Mat.19:8). Christ's view of marriage as monogamous also complements His high regard for women as polygamy invariably demeans women.

The apostle Paul

It should be noted that whenever marriage or married life is mentioned in the New Testament, monogamy is the only form of marriage assumed. The writers of the New Testament all presuppose its monogamous, life-long state. The apostle Paul instructed elders of the church to be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:1-2). This was said in a mission situation where the elders had to show by example that Christianity was a better way – a higher standard. Monogamy was not only required for church elders but it was recommended for all men. Paul wrote, "But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). Monogamous marriage is also symbolic of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church (Eph. 5:31-32). As Christianity spread and gained ascendancy, monogamy became the marriage norm wherever the church became prominent.

Christian Marriage

From the Biblical perspective, then, the marriage state consists of one man and one woman at any given time. They enter into the married state intending and promising a life-long union of mutual trust, service, and love. This love (agape) is self-sacrificing. It is the love expressed in John 3:16: "For God so love the world that He gave His one and only Son." In marriage agape demands the full acceptance of the other person. It causes the husband to deal with his wife as a unique individual and thus checks his own tendency toward polygamy. Both husband and wife have dignity or as Adolf Harnack put it, the "infinite value of the human soul." Marriage so

understood corresponds to the intention of the Creator, and that alone will meet the needs of our society.

Conclusion

As we reflect on the meaning of marriage for our time, we should remember that its definition does not depend on the passage of time. Morality is not subjective and changing. God revealed in Scripture His standard for marriage. Don't succumb to the lure of political correctness. Christians can and should be a fixed reference point in a changing and chaotic world. They should fear God rather than man. In her compelling book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity*, Nancy Pearce wrote: "It is a common assumption that, in order to survive, churches must accommodate to the age. But in fact, the opposite is true: In every historical period, the religious groups that grow most rapidly are those that set believers at odds with the surrounding culture. As a general principle, the higher a group's tension with mainstream society, the higher its growth- rate."

Polygamy and Canadian law

On the third of February BC's Attorney General Geoff Plant warned that Canada's anti-polygamy law might not stand up to a legal challenge. "There might well be a case where the court would have to deal with religious freedoms arguments, and I think there is at least some risk that those arguments might succeed," he told the CanWest News Service. Plant's assessment was confirmed by former B.C. chief justice, Allan McEachern.

Polygamy and American law

In early March Utah and Arizona's Attorneys general – Mark Shurtleff and Terry Goddard – told a combined two-state meeting that they would not go after polygamists. The practice is still theoretically against the law, but it is a law that Shurtleff and Goddard won't enforce.