

Tuesday, 19 September 2017

Is Polygamy Sin?

This morning I received a letter from Gani Yohanna, either a son or grandson of my former Nigerian colleague Ifraimu Gani during my Nigeria missionary years. Among other items, he raised the above question.

It seems like a fairly straight forward issue that requires little more than either a "yes" or a "no." Unfortunately, it ain't quite that simple. Not only is this a matter of Bible interpretation in the context of ever-changing cultural phases of a given society, but it is also a church political matter. In my position as a respected retired long-time missionary in the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRC-N), my [answer](#) can easily cause conflict and tension in the community. The leaders can easily feel I let them down; the youth can easily use my reply to support a rebellion they may stage on the issue. So, truth, faithfulness and politics all in one go.

I did not have much time to develop a completely reliable answer to the question. So, I concocted the following answer, without being fully satisfied with it. I hope it is better than nothing or, as we say in the Hausa language, *ya fi babu*.

So, here then my immediate off-the-top response to the question:

Hello Gani Yohanna

As to your question regarding polygamy, that's a big one. Many years ago during the

1970s, I was part of a CRCN committee that studied the issue. I suggest you check out

the archives of your local CRCN congregation to see if they still have a copy of that

report. If they don't, then check it out at the CRCN secretariat. Unfortunately, I have no copy here.

If you are successful in obtaining a copy, I wonder if you could scan and send me a copy.

After you have read that report, ask me whatever question you have on the subject and I will try to help you.

However, off the top of my head without much time for deeper thought:

Abraham and many others in the OT practiced polygamy and none of them were condemned because of it, except kings like Solomon, who used polygamy for political purposes. In fact, Solomon had hordes of wives and concubines. Other things in the OT were condemned as sin, but not polygamy.

Polygamy is the result of the general fall into sin during our early Genesis [account](#). Human relationships deteriorated, including male/female relationships. However, God is realistic and seemed to have realized that something as deep as polygamy needs centuries to be corrected and so He allowed it even among His faithful ones. He provided further revelation over the centuries to slowly erase it. But do remember that already at the creation, we are told that both male and female were created in God's image equally. The fall broke that equality.

In the New Testament little is said about it, but the entire atmosphere is one of monogamy. It seems to be assumed by its writers.

To the best of my knowledge, you will find no Christian church in any part of the world that has emerged out of Traditional Religion more than 200 years ago that allows or practices polygamy. All of them agree that polygamy is not God's preferred way.

CRC-N is a new church that has emerged within the last century from Traditional Religion where polygamy was commonly practiced. The remnants of those male/female relationships are still there. It will take many years for those relationships to be cleansed by the Gospel--a very slow process. As those relationships change, polygamy will slowly decrease, not by force or law, whether church or government, but by a change of heart, mind, values and relationships in general. The church should gently nurture that process without force but by its leaders setting examples of godly living in general and in godly male/female relationships. These leaders and all godly Christians need to restore the equality that is inherent in both representing the image of God without distinction.

Is polygamy a sin? I think that in general cultural developments it is not necessarily a personal sin. It's the way people have been brought up. For members of churches newly emerged from Traditional Religion, where the Gospel has not yet deeply penetrated, I would not consider it a personal sin either. However for Christians in maturing churches who engage in it without caring about the Bible and historical church teaching, who disregard all that, I would consider it a sin, but the sin is not polygamy so much as distorted relationships that still have not been cleansed. I use the word "sin," but I'm not sure that's a good word for this situation.

The above may give the impression that the difference between older and newer churches is that the older churches are more mature spiritually. In the Western culture and its churches "serial

polygamy” is quite common. People divorce and then take another wife—serial polygamy, one at any given time, but multiple wives over the long haul. I think I have more cause to describe that as a sinful situation, for these Christians are not growing in grace but they are sliding backward spiritually.

Thank you for asking this important question. Please greet Elder Ifraimu Gani and his *uwargida* for me.