

WHAT SAYS THE WORD OF GOD? by Donald McGavran

Carl Henry has recently penned some incisive words which shed light directly on our traditional approach to polygamy. He says:

"...so-called religious traditions sometimes are just that and little more--traditions of the elders rather than declarations of a sure Word of God. Today's generation will not let even the Pope of Rome presume infallibility for what it suspects to be mere tradition. And we shall not gain a hearing for sound biblical perspectives by simply repeating Victorian cliches in the name of the Law of God and the Gospel of Christ. Jesus warned the Pharisees that tradition can make the Word of God void. What says the Word of God?--that is the decisive issue."

(The Christian Leader, January 28, 1969. p. 5)

What says the Word of God about polygamy? Indeed the question is sharper than that. What says the Word of God about requiring "believing polygamists" to put away "legally married wives" before permitting them to be baptized?--that is the decisive issue.

As we consider this issue we must ask, "Is it pleasing to God to apply to societies in the process of becoming Christian the tradition of monogamy which, in societies long disciplined, has gradually become the only accepted way?"

Were Christians in Asia and Africa to start de novo, relying on the Word of God only, how would they act? If we were to search the Scriptures on that decisive question, what light would we find? This is no peripheral question concerning an academic problem. At stake are the lives of receptive millions in the process of turning to Christian faith. As Dr. David Barrett points out in his monumental study of Churches in Africa, to intelligent African Christians of the Independent Churches seeking light on this question, the Bible seems to say that a man with several wives may be baptized. In the Old Testament, the Word clearly related cases where polygamists were pleasing to God. In the New Testament there is not a chapter, nor a verse, not a word which condemns polygamy or prohibits the baptism of a believing polygamist.

All one can find in the New Testament about polygamy is an inference. Three well known passages--1 Timothy 3:2 and 3:12 and Titus 1:16--list among the qualifications of deacons and elders the stricture that each should be "a husband of one wife." The inference is that in the New Testament Church were men who had two or more wives. These were, moreover, men of sufficiently good standing that, but for Paul's counsel, they might have been chosen for deacons or elders.

Furthermore, "husband of one wife" is stated on a par with other qualifications which these leaders ideally ought to have. Officers of the Church ought to be "temperate," "sensible," "apt teachers," and ought to have children who are "submissive" and are "believers." The Church no doubt has sought such men to be her leaders, but not one of these other qualifications is now or ever has been considered an absolute requirement. Many deacons and elders have been appointed--and I believe correctly appointed, for we have to do the best we can in given circumstances--who are not "apt teachers." Many had children who were not believers or had lapsed. In the Church of Rome, many were appointed who had no children at all and were not husbands of one wife.

Are these passages laying down absolute requirements, or rather did Paul intend them to be counsel concerning virtues desirable in deacons and elders? Do not the verses suggest that as far as possible the Church should choose deacons and elders who possess these qualifications, in at least some measure? It sounds very much as if the Scriptures were saying that married men as a rule make better deacons and elders than unmarried, and that those married to one wife make better church leaders than those married to two or more. (It is possible, of course, to construe the clause which refers to "one woman" more strictly, i.e., to hold that it absolutely prohibits men with more than one wife--or remarried widowers!--being deacons or elders; but this construction faces the difficulty that the other clauses--apt teachers, submissive children, and the like--are seldom if ever construed absolutely. Why should this one be?)

These three passages then support the position that believing polygamists out of non-Christian society may be baptized. (a) They strongly infer that in the Early Church there were husbands of two or more wives. (b) They may even indicate that in the choice of deacons and elders there was no absolute prohibition of men with two or more wives.

Church rulings on monogamy rest back not on Scripture but on considerations such as these: according to the Scriptures, women are of as great worth

as men; polygamy inevitably weights the balances in favor of the men; since polygamy sequesters large numbers of women with a small number of men and thus leaves multitudes of young men without wives, it encourages adultery among the young men and the sex hungry wives of the old men; since numbers of men and women are very nearly equal, the best rule in the matter of marriage is "one man: one woman"; and polygamous households are often torn by jealousies, infidelities, and quarrels. The Church has been right--polygamy is not as good a system as monogamy. Nevertheless, monogamous marriage is one of the traditions of the Church, not one of the revelations of Scripture. It is a good tradition which the Church is likely to uphold; but it is a tradition. Since Scripture is silent on the issue, the Church which made the tradition is free, within the limits of other germane biblical principles, to adapt it so that it fits temporary conditions in societies becoming Christian for the first time.

This is what many Christians and an increasing number of Churches (denominations) are saying. Among thinking Christians, conviction grows that the Church must say that while this "tradition of the elders" (monogamous marriage) is good for disciplined populations, in populations being disciplined the tradition (inferred in First Timothy and Titus) which allows believing polygamists to be baptized must be revived. Full membership in the Church of Jesus Christ must not be denied to those who, while yet unbelievers and integral parts of a pre-Christian social order, have legally married more than one wife.

The considerations set forth in this issue of Church Growth Bulletin have led many different denominations to this position. The Christian and Missionary Alliance in West Irian, the Lutheran Church in America in Liberia, the Christian Church in Madhya Pradesh, India, and many others, after considering the whole matter with care have come to feel that baptizing believing polygamists as they first turn from non-Christian to Christian faith is a biblical and therefore correct procedure--provided it is safeguarded in some such fashion as we indicate in the last paragraph of this article.

Church Growth Bulletin associates itself with these Churches and the many Christians whose convictions lie along these lines. We commend to those who wish to study the matter further Pastor J. C. Wold's fine historical treatment of the matter in his book, "God's Impatience in Liberia" (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan). In it he devotes nine luminous pages to the issue and quotes in full the considered action of the Lutheran Church on the matter.

Moreover, we believe that in the decades immediately ahead great turnings to Christian faith are in the will of God. The Church and her assisting missions must never dilute the biblical requirements of becoming Christian. The scandal of the Cross cannot in any way be removed. Belief on the Lord Jesus Christ is essential. But equally truly, all non-biblical, merely cultural, traditional requirements must be scrutinized to see if they can stand the test today--what says the Word of God.

Discriminating thinking is demanded. As missionaries and ministers ponder this matter they should observe carefully what we, who hold this position, are and are not affirming. We are not affirming that polygamy within disciplined populations--Eurican or Afericasian--is good or should be permitted, that polygamists once baptized should be allowed to take further wives, or that sons and daughters of Christians should be allowed to marry second wives and remain in the Church. We are affirming that, since there is no biblical directive that believers with more than one wife be denied baptism, and since there is much reason to believe that the Early Church regularly baptized such and they were "added to the Lord," the Church today should baptize all such believers.