CHARLES R. MARSH

2: Polygamy

a) *In view of the Old Testament examples of polygamy are there now any situations or countries where polygamy is right?*

Let it be said that a foreigner has no right to legislate for those of another country, or impose his culture on them. At the same time his teaching within the church will ultimately affect their culture. He will not insist that a convert should conform to his culture in the matter of clothes, habits, hours of meetings etc., nor will he condemn such customs as accepting a gift with both hands. Where the culture includes female infanticide, human sacrifices, initiation rights involving occult practices, female circumcision or mutilation which usually results in severe suffering or haemorrhage at childbirth, he must in all good conscience speak the truth, remembering that one role of Christianity has been and still is, to emancipate women and avoid suffering.

In considering this question we must revert again to Gen. 2: 18, 24; where God's ideal is set forth. Polygamy, or rather polygyny started with Lamech, Gen. 4: 17-24. His boast to his wives that he had killed a mere lad simply because the boy had wounded him reveals the character of the man. Derek Kidner comments, "The attempt to improve on God's marriage ordinance sets a disastrous precedent on which the rest of Genesis is comment enough". Custom sanctioned Abraham's action in taking Hagar to wife in order to have children, but the sad consequences were immediately seen in the false pride of Hagar, the unjust reproach of Sarai, leading to friction and division in the home. Hagar was involved in intense suffering, Ishmael was an embittered man, (Gen. 16: 12) and the consequences for the world today are still seen in the rival faiths of Islam and Christianity, the Arab-Judaic conflict, the persecution of Christians and the plight of Muslim women. This all happened because Abraham followed the counsel of his wife, and was *guided by reason and not implicit trust in God.* Does not the question suggest a similar approach to polygyny, viz: the expediency of polygamy in some circumstances? In any community where this is practised the status of women is lowered, men become arrogant and dominate women, there is friction within the home and the children are divided in their loyalties.

Similar lessons are taught by the action of Esau. "They made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah", Gen. 26: 34; and by Leah's words concerning Jacob:- "The Lord knows that I am hated", Gen. 29: 32 f. Solomon's wives turned away his heart from the Lord, and David bitterly regretted his sin against the Lord in taking Bathsheba.

It is obvious that human reason would argue in favour of polygyny in a tribe where many of the men had been killed by intertribal warfare, and the tribe was faced with extinction, or in the fact that when women are in excess of men an unmarried woman is exposed to immorality etc. We must remember that God's laws were made for all mankind and that to transgress them in any culture is to deprive women of their freedom, to render them the slaves or playthings of men, often to involve them in intense suffering, as well as to debase the character of the man. All this is the very antithesis of Christianity; as C. G. Scorer reminds us, 'Lifelong monogamy alone *preserves to society* the possibility of growth in moral character of all the members of the household'. (*The Bible and Sex Ethics Today* p 19.)

b) *What would you as a missionary do when a man with more than one wife is converted and wants to come into church fellowship?*

The aim of a missionary should be to form churches according to the pattern of the New Testament, In such churches the elders must decide on all matters relating to church fellowship, and they will do so by applying Scriptural principles to their own culture, bearing in mind the effect of their decisions on the non-christian community. In the Republic of Chad a man with three wives was converted and applied for fellowship. The elders baptised each of the three wives and received them on the grounds that each wife had only one husband. The husband attends the meetings, but is not allowed to partake at the breaking of bread or to engage in assembly activities as he has three wives! To European Christians this appears to be rather hard on the man, as he had married his wives before conversion. The elders argue that to receive the man into fellowship would be to create a precedent, and encourage younger men to obtain several wives before professing conversion.

Elders throughout Africa would insist that the man who desires to drink pure water must go to the fountain head. The further the stream is from its source the more danger there is of pollution. They would therefore go back to the one man, one wife relationship as stated in Genesis 2: 24, and maintained by the Lord Jesus (Mark 10: 2-9). In all His teaching he referred men back 'to the beginning'. The taking of other wives involves the transgression of the commandment: "You shall not commit adultery", Ex. 20: 14. See also Matthew 5: 27 f. Both overseers and deacons are to be "the husband of one wife" 1 Tim. 3: 2, 12. These are the principles which I, as a missionary teach, and as a fellow-elder with African brethren, seek to maintain.

I would also point out to my African friends that there is a very real danger in assemblies of legalistic Christianity, and that

each case should be decided individually in a spirit of love. The permissive society in Africa, and in the homeland, at present makes it possible for a man to have had intercourse with a number of women before his conversion. Each of them has in one sense been his wife, yet if such a man really repents he is ultimately received into fellowship.

Apart from the Scriptural issue the main difficulty is obviously the maintenance of the wives. There are several possibilities:-

1) He could retain the first wife, send off the others, making adequate provision for them until they were able to remarry, but in so doing he would cause them to commit adultery. In many African communities such a woman would be sorely tempted to become a prostitute. A young Christian would hesitate to marry her, regarding her as a little 'secondhand', and she would be embittered by the action of her husband who she would feel was not acting in a spirit of love.

2) The man could permit the younger wives to still live in his house, supporting them, refraining from intercourse, and maintaining intimacy with his first wife, and on these grounds be received into fellowship. In this case both the man and the women would be exposed to serious temptation, jealousy would be incurred, and the world would misjudge his action.

3) He could wait until the death of one of his wives resolved the situation, but it could well mean waiting a very long time. African elders would not be prepared to baptise a man with more than one wife. They know their own people and their decision is certainly Scriptural.

Obviously these do not exhaust the possibilities, and as a servant of God I would suggest that each case should be considered sympathetically in a spirit of love, bearing in mind the principles of the Bible.

HELEN COOKE

3: Barriers in communication

For too long, Christians have naively pretended that Christian marriage is *per se*, total bliss, and utterly devoid of the many problems of the marriage next door. In the seventies, we have suddenly become aware that marriage, and—dare we say it, Christian marriage, has fallen from its pedestal. Most of us have Christian friends whose