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Polygamy

Polygamy is not a great problem in the western countries, mainly because of the influence of Christianity. (Polygamy in the west tends to be serial, not simultaneous!) But in other parts of the world, young churches find this to be one of the major ethical issues. When a society has a tradition of polygamy, how should the church treat those polygamists who become Christians?

Some churches have taken the position that polygamists professing faith should not be admitted to the sacraments; yet they do seek to give pastoral care to such people, even though those people cannot be recognized as official members of the churches. By this policy, they seek to defend the biblical view of the family and to give a clear witness to their culture of their faith in Christ.

While admiring the motivations of this policy, I must say that in my view it is unscriptural. The New Testament was written in a polygamous culture, and its own stance, I believe, is clear. Polygamists were denied church office (I Tim. 3:2); but there is no evidence that they were denied church membership or sacraments. The Old Testament, of course, is rather tolerant of polygamy, and many of the great Old Testament saints had more than one wife. Jesus makes plain that God's original intention for marriage was one man and one woman (Matt. 19:1-12); thus we may infer that the Old Testament tolerance of polygamy, like its tolerance for divorce, was because of the "hardness of heart" of the people. But though Scripture upholds monogamy as God's pattern, it does not reject polygamists from the kingdom of grace.

The reason is obvious. Polygamy is not like other sins. A thief can stop being a thief immediately upon his conversion; and if he does not stop after a reasonable period of pastoral attention, he can and should be removed from the church. But a polygamist cannot simply stop being a polygamist. He has incurred obligations to his wives, and he cannot simply cast them off. A sinful divorce does not remedy the sin of polygamy. _