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THE POSITION OF POLYGAMY IN THE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH OF WEST AFRICA

SHORT TITLE

POLYGAMY IN WEST AFRICA

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Washington University, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by
Paul D. Smith

June 1934

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Christian missions in West Africa the attitudes, policies and practices of the various church bodies toward the problem of polygamy have been called into question. The difficulty arises not so much from the question of whether polygamy is right or wrong, or whether polygamy is to be preferred to monogamy for the native of West Africa, but whether polygamous converts should be admitted as members into the Church without first dissolving their polygamous relations. The young Church of West Africa is found torn between two alternatives, that of demanding immediate and absolute obedience to the Christian ideal of monogamy or that of permitting it gradually to die out as Christian principles are inculcated into the lives of its people. Because of the complexity of the problems posed by polygamy, there have been divergencies of practice with the result that the Christian Church of West Africa has never adopted a standard or unified position. Furthermore, the total problem is aggravated by the confusion of thought which arises from the complexity of the subject, as viewed in the total framework of tribal life.

The writer personally became acquainted with this dilemma when he served the Lutheran Church of Nigeria from 1954-1956. In the churches of his charge, the problem of

polygamy was particularly burdensome for the majority of the leaders of these churches were polygamists. In search of an approach to the problem and a validation for the official position of the Lutheran Church, he found that the underlying causes of polygamy demand, of the missionary, more than a superficial acceptance of Church policy and practice. If one is to remain sympathetic to the needs of the Church and the problems created by an immediate enforcement of monogamy, the total picture of polygamy must first be carefully viewed against the total background of the economic, social, cultural and religious life. With a concern and purposeful aim this study was undertaken, first, to see polygamy as it is found in native law and custom and, second, to find how it is treated by the various missions of West Africa.

Polygamy is a generic term to include all marriages other than monogamy. Its different forms are polygyny, in which one man marries more than one woman, and polyandry, in which a woman marries more than one man. Polygamy, however, can also be popularly employed to describe the state of a man who has acquired plural wives.¹ It is in this sense that the term polygamy will be used throughout this study.

The general scope of this study takes in the wider area of West Africa and is not confined to Nigeria or Calabar Province, where the Lutheran Church is concentrated. The

¹James Hastings, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), VII, 426.

scarcity of adequate and accurate documentary materials covering this particular area demands the broader and more general picture. The writer, wherever possible, has availed himself of the familiar materials pertaining to the situation of the Ibibios of South-Eastern Nigeria.² While many references are specific to a certain given situation, it is held that they conform to the overall pattern found in West Africa.

The writer has tried to present an objective account through reports, mission proceedings, surveys, anthropological studies and personal diaries of missionaries. Yet the paucity of relevant materials to the subject of polygamy and its practice in the Christian Church has demanded a supplementation of personal documentation and a discriminating interpretation of the facts as they were observed firsthand.

In the second chapter of this study, West African marriage customs are viewed as they existed in primitive society prior to the coming of Christianity. Within this same

²The Ibibios are found mainly in Calabar Province and have no tradition of migration from elsewhere. They serve as an excellent basis for this study for there still exists among them today a strong tribal feeling and a respect for the moral authority and the ritual obligations of native law and custom. Prior to Christianity, they occupied the lowest possible rung on the ladder of culture. As a result of slave trade, Western influences affected their primitive culture at a comparatively early date and missionaries were established already in 1846. To observe their marriage today, as it has slowly evolved through the last hundred years, is to view the forces of primitive culture and Christian civilization working together in moulding and creating a new society.

context, chapter three shows the natural causes which have contributed to the creation of the polygamous estate. The next two chapters give the two divergent attitudes held by members of the Church of West Africa and state the official and actual practices of the various denominations dealing with the problem of polygamy. Special reference is made to the missions of Calabar Province, Nigeria. The concluding chapter gives suggestions for an approach to the problem.

Throughout this study it is important to bear in mind the sequence and historical development of the problem. Chapters two through four present polygamy in West African marriage at that time when Western missionaries first observed native law and custom. Inasmuch as the Christian Church is over one hundred years old in many areas and first generation Christianity has almost passed away, the problems which once confronted pioneer missionaries and which charted the future course of action for the Church no longer exist today. New problems now face the Church, and a reapplication and reevaluation of the principles and factors involved must be made.

This study makes no attempt to discuss the theological warrants for polygamy or the Scriptural validity of demanding absolute monogamy.³ This study is neither theoretical

³An appendix will present a resolution, drawn up by a special group of Christians from Africa and adopted at the Tambaram Conference in 1938.

nor remote. Its aim is to present the facts of a real and live problem confronting the Church of West Africa today.

CHAPTER II

A SURVEY OF WEST AFRICAN MARRIAGE ACCORDING TO NATIVE LAW AND CUSTOM

"It is fatally easy, with honest intentions but clumsy fingers, to tear the elaborate network of tribal customs and native habits, which have evolved for deep reasons through long generations."¹ Because African marriage customs are exceedingly strict and have gradually evolved through long generations and for deep reasons, it is important that the problem of polygamy be first treated with due regard to the natives' point of view. Before passing judgments or unnecessarily challenging or destroying primitive mores and ethical standards, it is the aim of this chapter to state the facts of West African cultural and social customs as they relate themselves directly to West African marriage.

The focus of African culture is found in the clan, through which all the well-knit cultural systems of past, present and future generations are held together in an organic whole.² The clan organization is responsible for determining the structure of society, law and political and

¹Denys W. T. Shropshire, The Church and Primitive Peoples (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1939), p. 425.

²B. G. H. Sundkler, "Marriage Problems in Tanganyika," International Review of Missions, XXXIV (July, 1945), 256.

religious practice.³ African marriage must also be said to exist for the clan and can be studied only against the social fabric of tribal custom, sanction and environment.

The clan correctly defined is "the group of people who either through the male or the female line are, or are supposed to be, of common descent, and therefore are of one blood, or of one soul."⁴ The clan is not only the social home of the African in which he is united with his own people now living, but it is a spiritual home as well, in which he is reunited with his deceased ancestors and forefathers. For this reason the belief in reincarnation within the clan is common to most tribes in West Africa. For example, it is generally believed that the grandfather is reborn in a grandson, so that in point of fact it is always the same people who form the clan, and who from the beginning lived on the same land which is now owned by the clan.⁵

The clan is governed by its oldest male member who speaks and acts in behalf of all the clan members through the authority invested in him by his forefathers. All individual members of the clan, in turn, are graded according to their status within the group and are expected to submit to the existing order of the clan. Sex and age are

³Mbonu Ojike, My Africa (London: Blandford Press, 1955), p. 122.

⁴Diedrich Westermann, Africa and Christianity (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 12.

⁵Ibid., pp. 12-14.

generally the determining factors of gradation. Each individual has specific functions to carry out which are designated for the good of the organic whole. In return every clan member can expect the security, respect and help of every clan member.

In everything an African thinks or does he has always to consider that he is not dependent on his own resources, but must take into account the community in which he lives and to which his life is bound. It is this social consciousness inherent in every African which has produced the best moral qualities of the African race: loyalty, willing submission to established social order and a feeling of responsibility to the community of brothers.⁶

When one views all life within the framework of the clan, it becomes clear that the African concept of family is not to be thought of as just husband, wife and children.⁷ The individual family unit must always be thought of in terms of a number of households linked together. Diedrich Westermann writes of the African family unit as he observed it:

A family may be no more than a common household where the husband is the boarder of his wife or alternatively of one of his wives. . . . Under such circumstances the family as a unit consisting of husband, wife and children does not exist: the larger group, be it called

⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷ Ojike, op. cit., p. 123.

clan or by some other designation, is the dominating factor in social life which must never be broken up. . . . Both husband and wife have by their work to make their contribution to the household, but for the rest each is economically independent of the other and has his or her own property. This form of married life does not preclude marital love and good relations between husband and wife, but marriage is in the first instance a social institution based on law and custom and dependent on the interest of the group. . . .⁸

Because African society places the clan above the family and because the individual is bound by many social customs when marriage is contracted, European marriage plays no vital part in the life and thinking of the African. Western marriage to him cannot be as high and as enduring, for it is too individualistic and personal, ignoring the need of society, the concern of the group and the social sanctions of the clan. Tribal custom does not recognize the autonomy of marriage in which marriage is regarded as simply the satisfaction of the mutual desires of two individuals. Any marriage is a social investment of the tribe which imposes new responsibilities on the pair concerned, that the common good of the whole society be guaranteed. Because African marriage is confined and controlled within definite prescribed limits, its society has known fewer divorces than in a society in which the individual marriage contract can ignore the wishes of that society.⁹ For this reason, the key to understanding the strength and the permanence of African marriage

⁸Westermann, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

⁹Thomas Price, African Marriage (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1954), p. 27.

is to be found, says Malinowski, in the fact that "primitive marriage is not biologically but culturally determined."¹⁰

In West Africa, where the solidarity and welfare of the larger group is more important than the personal desires of any one member of it, marriage is to be thought of as a social duty rather than a personal inclination. Its primary function is not only sexual or personal, but its driving motive is the production and care of children whereby the clan may be extended and preserved.¹¹ This fundamental purpose of marriage, in which the rearing of children for eternity is its paramount objective, is found rooted in West African religion. It is because of this intimate relationship with religion that West African society imposes rigid controls and sanctions on the marriage laws and customs of the clan. To gain an understanding of African marriage and of the social mores which govern it, one must first understand the basic religious beliefs of the African people, for "the basis of clan life and of African life throughout is religion."¹²

West African life is ruled by the belief that a power pervades the universe, which is in a special way possessed by certain men and animals and may be concentrated in objects

¹⁰As quoted by James W. Welch, "Can Christian Marriage in Africa be African," International Review of Missions, XXII (January, 1933), 21.

¹¹Diedrich Westermann, "The Value of the African's Past," International Review of Missions, XV (July, 1926), 423.

¹²Loc. cit.

called ju-ju charms. This belief in a hidden and mysterious energy and force is termed dynamism and is further described by Amoury Talbot in his study of the native of Southern Nigeria:

Contrary to general opinion, the religion of the West African negro does not seem to me to be animism in the sense that all the forces of nature are personified and the universe is a congeries of uncorrelated and independent entities. To him the world is a vast organization and all phenomena are set in motion, and controlled, by hierarchies of beings, ranging in power and responsibility from the highest conceivable God down to the lowest rock elemental, each in strict subordination to its superior.¹³

To possess this power, in order to secure happiness and to overcome hostile forces, is the chief aim in life.

The most prominent agent of the supernatural power is the clan head, whether living or dead. In this life he is the representative of the dead forefathers and of their supernatural capacities, and in the afterlife he is the guardian of the clan. In order that the clan may be assured of his help, sacrifices, gifts and prayers are offered him. It is this form of ancestor worship which is the dominating factor in African religion. There is a close connection between the living generation and the deceased forefathers, for through the reincarnation of clan members in the surviving sons supernatural mysteries and powers are passed on to successive generations. In order that the African society

¹³Amoury Talbot, Life in Southern Nigeria (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1923), p. 20.

may not lose the formulas which control the divine, the continuity of the clan is the chief aim of life and its future survival is safeguarded in marriage.¹⁴ Clan life and its marriage institution are to the African holy, for in them are embedded his most sacred conceptions of the divine.

"The destruction of this vital organism therefore means for him the disintegration of the original, congenial form of genuine African life."¹⁵ Denys Shropshire observes among the Bantu tribe that "among a primitive tribe marriage is a grave step. Its aim is not for pleasure but to provide another qualified to continue the family worship."¹⁶

While the living clan derives its well-being from the forefathers, the departed ancestors, in turn, are dependent on the surviving clan members. Among the Ibibio tribe of Southern Nigeria, it is popularly believed that the future fortune in the afterlife is determined by the number of descendants anyone has on earth to continue the family worship. It is of utmost importance to the well-being of the spirits in the after-world that a man should be left behind who can carry out the burial rites and ceremonial sacrifices at the family shrine. To this fact Henry Nau attests:

It is never expressed by our people that the soul, or spirit, is mortal; but in the course of years, when

¹⁴Westermann, op. cit., p. 424.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 430.

¹⁶Shropshire, op. cit., p. 383.

the 'wemo,' the structure over the grave, has been eaten up by ants and has collapsed, the soul is allowed to vanish. . . . Hence happy is the man who has many descendants. It is not the individual who is immortal; it is the family as long as it does not become extinct. . . . Only he who has no sons dies. The man who has no children at all or just a few has no honor in this world nor in that which is to come. . . .¹⁷

African marriage cannot be grasped unless viewed in the light of these biologico-religious demands. Religious motives have more than likely controlled marriage from its very beginning. Religion demands that the family and clan should never become extinct, under any circumstances whatsoever. Therefore, basic to West African marriage is the most primitive of all instincts, "the maintenance of the human race."¹⁸

To the West African native, a childless marriage is a source of grievous disappointment and, sooner or later, can only lead to serious trouble between man and wife. Polygamy offers one way out, giving native society a religious sanction in seeking out additional wives. From firsthand observations of many childless couples it is easily discernable that an additional wife is often sought to insure offspring for the husband. Sylvia Leith-Ross, in her exhaustive study of Ibo women, cites instances in which couples who were childless were willing to accept the principle of monogamy, but where native custom compelled the husband to take another

¹⁷Henry Nau, We Move Into Africa (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), pp. 177-179.

¹⁸John Waddington Hubbard, "The Cause and the Cure of African Immorality," International Review of Missions, XXI (April, 1931), 243.

wife.¹⁹

The high value set on fecundity is expressed in many ways. The fertility cults of West Africa emphasize and make explicit the sentiment that children are a blessing.²⁰ Among the Yakó clan of South-Eastern Nigeria, ritual means are employed to promote childbirth. Innumerable shrines are erected on behalf of women who have so far failed to bear thriving children.²¹ Because barrenness is the biggest burden a man and woman can bear, there is a virtual worship of sexual instincts. In many areas of the Congo, villages establish houses where young men live and mothers encourage their little daughters to go to them, thinking that it tends to their more rapid maturing and eventual fruitfulness.²² Generally the coming-of-age ceremony for a girl is climaxed with the rite of female circumcision. With this religious ceremony, a girl is given social sanction to begin her chief work in life.²³ It is worthy to note that every African girl

¹⁹Sylvia Leith-Ross, African Women (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1939), pp. 221, 270ff.

²⁰Amoury Talbot, Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People--The Ibibios of Southern Nigeria (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1915), p. 109.

²¹Daryll Forde, Marriage and the Family Among the Yakó in South-Eastern Nigeria (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., Ltd., 1941), pp. 90-93.

²²R. H. C. Graham, "A Record of Thirty Years' Work Amongst African Women," International Review of Missions, IX (January, 1920), 96.

²³Hubbard, op. cit., p. 243.

knows perfectly well what her life's work is. It is by no means uncommon for a young woman before marriage to cohabit with any likely young man, solely for the purpose of discovering whether she is barren or not.

In a childless marriage in Iboland, when neither mate knows who is to blame for sterility, the woman is at liberty to cohabit with another man in order to prove her contention.²⁴ The husband will raise no objection if conception results, as the child will be his by right of ownership. That he himself is not the father does not affect possession in West Africa.²⁵ Among the Ibibios, when a husband is impotent, his brother must be substituted and the children born are accounted to belong to the husband.

In the study of West African marriage customs, it is seen that all natural rights give way to the biological and religious demands, in order that offspring be guaranteed for the clan. There are only two instances when this desire for children is violated. According to custom, the prohibition of sexual intercourse to nursing mothers limits the frequency of childbearing. With the belief that the act of coitus would cause the nursing child to sicken, the ban on intercourse during lactation is nearly always maintained for the first year and in many cases during the entire nursing

²⁴G. T. Basden, Niger Ibos (London: Seeley, Service and Co., Ltd., n.d.), p. 226.

²⁵Melville J. Herskovits, Dahomey (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938), I, 342.

period of three years.²⁶) The other prevalent custom which restricts an increase of children in the family is the practice of twin killing.²⁷

Another custom which supports the biologically-religious foundation of African marriage is the custom of Levirate marriage, in which a son inherits all of his father's wives, or in cases where there is no heir or the heir is a minor, a brother takes the wives of the deceased brother. This practice enables even widows to continue childbearing and helps preserve the continuity of the family.²⁸

The universal West African custom of dowry also gives evidence to the underlying principle that the maintenance of the race is all important. Inasmuch as the dowry system puts a premium on hard work and industry, the African who works hard can take additional wives who will bear him children, in addition to being useful in farming and training. Of the dowry system, Hubbard writes:

The system is suited for the survival and propagation of those racial stocks which are best suited to their environment. Every opportunity is given to the better types among the tribe to bear as many children as possible; whereas the misfits, the weaklings and the lazy have but small chance to do so, seeing they will not

²⁶Ibid., p. 268. The hygienic principles involved in such a rule are based on careful observation of fact, since it is understood by the African that too frequent childbearing not only destroys the health of the mother but causes her to bear sickly children.

²⁷P. Amoury Talbot, Tribes of the Niger Delta (London: The Sheldon Press, 1932), pp. 157-158.

²⁸Basden, op. cit., p. 215.

be able to afford wives.²⁹

Because African marriage is built upon a different foundation than European marriage, one can expect to find distinct features and aspects in African marriage which have no parallel in Western thought and practice. It is vitally essential for every missionary or student of African culture to understand clearly that fundamental differences do exist, to discover why they exist and to determine what part they play in the pattern of African life. Some of these differences are explained in the following paragraphs.

According to tribal custom, there is no tradition of romantic individualism. While those ready for marriage seldom have a free choice of a partner, yet seldom would a particular one be imposed against serious objection by the proposed spouse.³⁰ Infant betrothals and marriages are not uncommon. Of this practice, Mrs. Talbot writes that "the baby bride usually lives with her husband's family; but, save in very rare instances, her youth is respected by him."³¹ It must be admitted, however, that the practice of child marriage inflicts undoubted hardships upon the unfortunate bride, who has no word to say as to her fate.

Under tribal custom, sexual play is scarcely checked among children. Restrictions are imposed only when girls

²⁹Hubbard, op. cit., p. 245.

³⁰Price, op. cit., p. 40.

³¹Talbot, Woman's Mysteries, p. 88.

approach the stage at which pregnancy might occur. Among the Yako^u clan, a survey report shows that nearly all girls have had relations before the first menstruation.³² In most African tribes, children pass into initiation schools where they receive instruction in adult sexual outlook and technique. Prenuptial license is freely allowed and encouraged that future fertility and compatibility in marriage may be guaranteed.

Another feature common to all West African marriages, which offers great confusion and bewilderment to the European, is the bride-price or dowry payment by a man to the father of his fiancée. A correct understanding and evaluation of what constitutes African marriage hinges on an understanding of this native custom.

The bride-price is not generally for the purchase of the wife's person. It is rather recompense to her kin for the children she is expected to bear and who will reinforce the husband's group. Mbonu Ojike interprets the institution of bride-price when he says that it does not mean that women are treated as chattel. It is rather a cultural practice amply supported by valid social reasons. First, a man pays a bride-price to betoken his ability to be a husband and provider. Second, it establishes the respect in which he and his family hold the wife and her people, and inaugurates a loyalty to them which will continue forever. Third,

³²Forde, op. cit., p. 11.

the bride-price operates as a cohesive factor in promoting marital continuity, in preserving the home against adultery, conflict and divorce. No parents would like to be called to refund what they have received on their daughter's account.³³ Divorces under this system are rare, for it is in the symbolic values of the system that the married state is preserved. While the native does not regard the payment of dowry as "buying" a woman, he does regard his wife as his possession. Dowry insures fidelity in marriage, and the terrible punishments imposed upon the guilty party are justified by the law and custom of the tribe.³⁴

According to West African practice, the actual marriage tie is entered after the completed payment by the groom to the bride's parents of the dowry. Payments take on the nature of a commercial transaction and can be paid installmentally. The first installment of the dowry constitutes betrothal and is recognized as such by society.³⁵ Before marriage, there is usually a considerable period of betrothal during which time the suitor is recognized by the girl's parents as the prospective son-in-law. It is not uncommon for the betrothed couple to have relations prior to the completed purchase. The final installment is often put

³³ Ojike, op. cit., p. 145.

³⁴ Leith-Ross, op. cit., p. 97.

³⁵ Talbot, Woman's Mysteries, p. 88.

off until there are evidences that the union will be satisfactory and there are evidences of conception. Forde records in a study of pre-marriage pregnancies from the period of 1870-1920 that they occur in about half of the betrothals.³⁶

African marriage is never an act or event which is as clearly defined as European marriage. Marriage is more probably a process to African thinking than a single act.³⁷ There is no fixed period between betrothal and actual marriage. When the final payment is paid to the bride's parents, the ceremony is attested by witnesses and attended by feasting and sacrifice.

That which, up to this moment, has been the man's possession only by virtue of 'his earnest' money, now becomes his own in fact by the fulfillment of the whole of his obligations, in other words, the payment of the final installment constitutes the marriage.³⁸

While divorce is uncommon in West African society, it does exist according to native law and custom. The procedures vary with each locality, but the general rule holds true that a marriage can be dissolved by either party, providing the dowry is repaid to the husband, either by the wife's family, herself, or her prospective second husband.³⁹

³⁶Forde, op. cit., p. 14.

³⁷Leith-Ross, op. cit., p. 99.

³⁸Basden, op. cit., p. 221.

³⁹Leith-Ross, op. cit., p. 103.

G. T. Basden gives a simple description of native divorce proceedings among the Niger Ibo:

All that a man has to do in order to make divorce effective is to order his wife to depart or, if she shows reluctance to obey, to drive her out. As she leaves the compound, he hurls her cooking-pot after her, together with one or two other of her personal belongings. This action is symbolical; it demonstrates complete renunciation, in plain language it constitutes divorce, and receives the support of native law and custom.⁴⁰

When a customary marriage is broken down, it involves more than restoration between the spouses for settlement between the kinsfolk of both parties is involved.

Recognized grounds for divorce on the man's side are laziness on the part of the wife, suspected witchcraft, childlessness, and extra-marital intercourse.⁴¹ The woman finds it difficult to obtain a divorce, inasmuch as she is her husband's purchased possession.⁴² The ownership of children in most cases belongs to the father. If they are too young to leave their mother, it is arranged that at a certain age they are to be returned to the father.⁴³

⁴⁰ Basden, op. cit., pp. 239-240.

⁴¹ C. K. Meek, Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 279ff.

⁴² Basden, op. cit., p. 239.

⁴³ Charles Partridge, Cross River Natives (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1905), p. 257.

CHAPTER III

A STUDY OF POLYGAMY IN WEST AFRICAN MARRIAGE

In connection with the discussion of polygamy, anything written is open to criticism because its problems and complications are so manifold.

Polygamy is a subject that is honeycombed with pitfalls; a slippery path even to the wary. With the exercise of extreme caution, one is still liable to misjudge, or to fail to discern the true aspects of this widely spread and deeply rooted institution.¹

While polygamy has been permitted among all races of mankind and has occurred in all countries, generally speaking polygamous marriages have existed in the lower and middle stages of culture. For this reason, polygamy is more common in Africa than anywhere else in the world.² While polygamy is universal in all of Black Africa,³ exaggerated claims have been made by missionary and anthropologist alike with regard to its frequency or its distribution. Drawing upon quantitative data in a demographic study of African polygamy, Vernon Darjohn reports:

1. Incidence of polygamy varies, as measured by the percentage of all husbands polygynously married,

¹G. T. Basden, Niger Ibos (London: Seeley, Service and Co., Ltd., n.d.), p. 228.

²Geoffrey Parrinder, The Bible and Polygamy (London: The Church Army Press, Cowley, Oxford, 1950), p. 10.

³John Gunther, Inside Africa (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 296.

- from a low of ca. 20-25% in the Koisian (range of 4% to 40%) and the East African cattle (range of 5%-75% areas to a high of ca. 42% (range of 24% to 91%) in the Guinea Coast area, with an all-African average of ca. 35% (range of 4% to 91%).
2. Measured by the number of wives to 100 husbands, the incidence of polygyny in Africa varies from a low of ca. 130 (range of 107-169) in the East cattle area to a high of ca. 158 (range of 129 to 211) in the Congo area, with an all-African average of ca. 150 (range of 107 to 234).
 3. The number of wives to 100 polygynously married men, the measure of the intensity of polygyny, varies from a low of ca. 215 (range of 267 to 397) in the East African cattle area, and to a high of ca. 255 in the Guinea area, with an average of ca. 245 (range of 207-325).
 4. Both the incidence and the intensity of polygyny are higher in the Congo, Guinea Coast, and West African area than in North and East Africa.
 5. In general, the data thus suggests that ca. 35% of all married African males are polygynous, that this 35% averages ca. 245 wives per 100 men (or households), while the number of wives to 100 husbands, monogamously or polygynously married, is ca. 150.

The mean number of wives per married men is 1.5, or the ratio of married women to married men is 3 to 2.⁴

In Ikot Ekpene Division of Calabar Province, it was generally assumed that over seventy-five per cent of the male population of the Efik tribe was at one time living in the polygamous state. This estimate has never been substantiated with factual data. Taking the neighboring Ibo country as a whole, Basden sets the number of wives in a polygamous household from three to five.⁵ However, Forde reports in an

⁴Vernon Robert Dahrjohn, "The Demographic Aspects of African Polygamy," unpublished Doctor's Thesis, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., 1954, pp. 146-147.

⁵Basden, op. cit., p. 231.

analyzed survey of an Ibo clan, that among 121 married heads of households of all ages the mean number of actual wives per household is 1.7.⁶ These statistics indicate that the Church of West Africa is operating in one of the most polygamous areas of the world.

Polygamy has been an institution so long in Nigeria that it has become part and parcel of the social economy. When the Nigerian Government assumed authority, it did not interfere with the deeply entrenched custom of polygamy. Throughout all the countries of Black Africa, customary law recognizes that a man may legally have more wives than one and prescribes no limit beyond which he can go.⁷

The problem of polygamy does not stand by itself but is bound up with the whole social order of African clan life. It is an oversimplification of fact to account for a plurality of wives because of sexual or economic reasons. The question of polygamy is a religious-social question not so easily settled as would be so readily supposed by Western critics and inexperienced missionaries. The fundamental factor determining West African polygamy is in essence a religious one, for as has been previously stated the possibility of polygamy is rooted in the cult and worship of the ancestors

⁶Daryll Forde, Marriage and the Family Among the Yakö in South-Eastern Nigeria (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., Ltd., 1941), p. 79.

⁷Thomas Price, African Marriage (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1954), p. 22.

and in the biologico-religious social system. The desire to have many children who will perpetuate the ancestral cult provides the obvious urge to multiply the number of wives. Polygamy increases the expectation of male heirs who alone can carry on worship and can increase the wealth and power of the clan. A childless marriage is held in contempt. For example, it frequently happens that the first wife is either sterile or gives birth to female children only, in which case a man bound up in the traditional socio-religious pattern turns to polygamy, which seems to him the best possible solution. As long as the worship of ancestors exists in its present form and as long as means are sought at all costs to insure a fruitful union, so long will the possibility of a polygamous society be present in Africa. To this fundamental fact, all social and economic factors are secondary. Dr. Nau also recognizes the religious factor when he writes:

Polygamy is anchored in the old animistic belief of the people; and as long as these animistic beliefs are still held by the majority of the Ibibios and linger in the subconsciousness of the Christians, so long will polygamy be the general custom among the Ibibios. . . .⁸

Because a polygamous marriage is grounded in the religious idea of the building up of clan life and the social organization to the largest possible unit of production, it is obvious that this type of collectivistic marriage differs almost in toto from the monogamous, individualistic marriage

⁸Henry Nau, We Move Into Africa (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 121.

of European civilization.⁹ The concept of love as thought of in Western monogamous marriage is lacking in part and in many cases altogether. In an article entitled, "The Cause and the Cure of African Immorality," John Waddington Hubbard writes:

There is an entire absence of that mutual love and regard between husband and wife which is the basis of Christian monogamy. African marriage, from the point of view of the individual concerned, is entirely an operation in the realm of economics, the husband regarding his wives as invested capital and as machines for producing children, the wife regarding her husband as the supplier of the necessities of life, and as a means whereby she can bear children. . . .¹⁰

In describing the foundation of African marriage in the Ibo tribe, Basden says:

The word "love" according to the European interpretation is not found in the Ibo vocabulary. As Warneck says: "animistic heathenism is the negation of LOVE. God is LOVE and, where in the wanderings of centuries God has been lost, love is also lost." (Living Forces of the Gospel, p. 122.) The nearest approach to the idea of love is "ifu-n'anya" ("to look in the eye") in a favorable manner. The verb "to hate" is constantly in use, and there is an expression "to hate" which implies the reverse of love.¹¹

It is not surprising then that many Europeans, at first glance, appraise African polygamy as bestial and immoral and approach the whole problem of polygamy and marriage unsympathetically and with bias. In viewing polygamy, it must

⁹Denys W. T. Shropshire, The Church and Primitive Peoples (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938), p. 385.

¹⁰John Waddington Hubbard, "The Cause and the Cure of African Immorality," International Review of Missions, XXI (April, 1931), 243.

¹¹Basden, op. cit., p. 214.

always be remembered that love has never been a strong feature in African courtship and marriage. For this reason, girls rarely manifest antagonism to infant betrothal and proposed marriage to a polygamist. Inasmuch as she can execute her function as a member of the clan and has her rightful place and share in all things pertaining to it, she is content to be numbered among the other wives of a husband. The charges leveled against polygamy,

That it is the destruction of the whole position of the wife as an equal partner in the joys and responsibilities of family life with her husband, . . . that moral freedom of choice, the dignity and independence of womanhood, the sanctity and service of wifehood and motherhood are impossible to her. . . .¹²

have validity and meaning only when viewed in the fuller context of the socio-religious aspects of marriage.

Apart from this fundamental factor contributing to plural marriages, there are also numerous economic and social factors to be considered. Attempts have been made to ascribe polygamy in West Africa to the sensuality of the Negro race. Yet plural marriage is not necessarily the result of sensual cravings. Their weight as a factor, where they are a factor at all, has been greatly exaggerated. In the first place, there are opportunities in African society to satisfy such cravings in extra-marital relationships. In the second place, there are polygamists who are apparently undersexed, or men who continue to marry long after there

¹²Norman P. Grubb, With G. T. Studd in Congo Forests (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1946), p. 61.

are sensual reasons for it.¹³

One of the greatest contributing factors to polygamy is found rooted in the economic condition of the people. In West Africa, where the chief occupation and source of income is agriculture, all farm labor is relegated to the women. Where the idea of hiring labor is not generally practiced or understood by the African, female labor is essential for weeding the farm, cultivating secondary crops, harvesting the yam harvest and gathering the palm fruit. Furthermore, polygamy is inextricably interwoven with the system of dowry, for among the typical African there is no limitation, apart from inclination and the resources commanded, on the number of wives that a man may at any time marry. Inasmuch as wives are considered valuable property, acquired through the African bride-price, plural marriage has an undoubted advantage for the energetic man who has access to tracts of land for farming or is active in the production of palm oil. Wives constitute the working capital of the husband, and every fresh outlay for the purchase of an additional wife is looked upon as a shrewd investment. For this reason alone, polygamy to the primitive African is considered a worthy institution.

In determining this economic basis for polygamy, Forde writes,

¹³Norman A. Horner, "Polygyny Among the Bantu of French Cameroun," International Review of Missions, XLIII (April, 1954), 175.

I was frequently told by men, in explanation of certain of their later marriages that increase in their yam harvest or the death of one wife made it necessary for them to seek another without delay.¹⁴

"A less worthy reason for polygamy," claims Geoffrey Parrinder, "has been the desire for a higher status and social renown brought by possession of a number of wives."¹⁵ Although women are not technically regarded as property, yet it is undeniable that the bride-price has this effect of treating them as part of wealth and material possession. Plural marriage is valued because it combines both the religious and economic motives, enabling a man to enlarge his family and to increase his crops, thereby securing for him prestige within his social group. To the pagan, a plurality of wives is a laudable ambition and given the opportunity he will add to the number. The church, when dealing with polygamy, must remember that it is generally confronting the elite of African society and not the weak and ignorant. It is an unquestioned fact that in a society where wealth and prestige are based on a man's own initiative and drive, the greatest polygamists are the most ambitious, intelligent and powerful men of the clan. That a plurality of wives has always been associated with prestige, an early Presbyterian missionary, among the Bantu in the southern part of French Cameroon, took notice when he wrote in his diary:

¹⁴Forde, op. cit., p. 77.

¹⁵Parrinder, op. cit., p. 11.

The Bulu idea of man, a real man, is that he must marry many wives. Osom, of course, said that he would marry but one. Some of his people said that by becoming a Christian he had lost his manhood. He was not a real man and was not deserving of a wife at all so that they planned to take away the one wife he had. . . .¹⁶

Forde records only one instance where little emphasis is given to the number of wives as a direct impression of a man's importance and prestige. The priestleaders who are generally regarded as the most influential men in the clan are not distinguished by a markedly higher degree of polygamy than the adult male population in general.¹⁷

Because polygamy is intimately related with the well-to-do men, the poor and young men are seriously handicapped. The virile young men are often held back from marriage for years before they can save the bride-price, and so consequently their choice also is limited. The outcome is that the wealthy accumulate more than their fair share of the women.

Another reason for polygamy is the custom of a woman withholding herself from the man for a considerable period during lactation. With husband and wife practicing abstinence for a couple of years, it does not call for much imagination to form some idea of the difficulties created by this impasse. Lacking a natural outlet for his physical passions, a man takes a second wife. "In so doing, he

¹⁶Horner, op. cit., p. 174.

¹⁷Forde, op. cit., p. 79.

evokes no resentment on the part of the first, indeed, she probably has a share in securing one."¹⁸ In connection with his reference to the custom of enforced continence, Parrinder comments,

Again and again when investigating a lapse into polygamy, I have found that the second wife has been taken about the time when the first wife was bearing a child, and the husband was facing a prospect of two or three years enforced chastity.¹⁹

Forde also asserts this fact that the second wife is generally procured shortly after the first marriage.²⁰

One feature frequently omitted when considering the causes of polygamy is that the custom is supported nearly as much by the women. Polygamy is by no means a one-sided affair with the material advantages resting with the men, for it is not uncommon to find that the women are stout protagonists of the practice. Hence the taking of a wife may be individualistic or a mutually cooperative act between husband

¹⁸Basden, op. cit., p. 230.

¹⁹Parrinder, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁰Forde, op. cit., pp. 78-79. In a survey taken in 1939 of the number of wives living with husbands of Ndai patrilineal it is seen that among 121 married men, the polygamy rate tends to be highest among the men of early age, i.e., between ca. 25 and 42 years old, where the mean number of wives per man in a group of 58 men of the age of ca. 26-40 years inclusive is 2.0. Among the 33 older men over ca. 42 years the figure is markedly lower, viz. 1.6. Forde claims that if it can be assumed that the social context of polygamy has been broadly stable over the past fifty years, these rates indicate that, among the Yakö, a man takes fewer wives according to his needs and opportunities throughout his earlier life but that as old age approaches he does not marry again and that where the wives of marriages in earlier years predecease him they are not usually replaced.

and wife. Nau also stresses this fact when he writes,

Polygamy has no stronger advocates than the women in Ibibio land. Ibibio women not only love the chains which bind them, but even kiss them, and would hate him who wants to take them off.²¹

The first wife generally encourages her husband to marry ✓
other women, suppressing whatever jealousy may be involved,
in order to get help for the house and field work she is ob-
ligated to perform. While it is true that the wife wants
companions and fellow workers, she also desires to enhance
her social status. To be an only wife is frequently regard-
ed as humiliating, indicating that her husband is a poor man.
Many a woman would rather be a mistress in control of a num-
ber of other women than be a person of no importance.²²

Mbonu Ojike speaks for his people:

Women prefer a polygamist to a monogamist because the latter is socially regarded as a poor man. The polygamist is a wealthy man whose prestige rises with the number of wives he can support, and whose wives enjoy with him his high reputation.²³

Leith-Ross in her excellent treatise on African love is also inclined to agree that women who have had no contact with Western culture are satisfied with a polygamous order and can derive great vanity and benefits from it.²⁴

²¹Nau, op. cit., pp. 133-134.

²²Basden, op. cit., p. 230.

²³Mbonu Ojike, My Africa (London: Blandford Press, 1955), p. 145.

²⁴Sylvia Leith-Ross, African Women (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1939), pp. 125-126.

Perhaps the greatest single factor for the female advocacy of polygamy is the desire for offspring. Perhaps the heaviest burden a woman can bear is to be childless. It is not only a personal disgrace but an injury to her family and to her husband. The woman who realizes her inability to bear children more than likely will encourage her husband to marry another woman that the children of this union may be regarded as her own children. The custom is found among the Ibibios that the barren wife often personally pays the bride-price of an additional wife on behalf of her husband.

Another contributing factor to polygamy is the tribal custom of Levirate marriage. It must be kept in mind, however, that this marriage is frequently observed more out of duty than out of choice.

Having reviewed some of the more prevalent causes of polygamy because of the benefits which each from its own point of view derives from it, we now present a few important considerations against the total framework of African marriage. One of the most frequently stated causes of polygamy, and cited as fact by anthropologist, missionary and African, is the disproportionate sex ration and the surplus of women. It is argued that polygamy makes marriage possible for all women, for if monogamy were the rule, a large number of women would be husbandless. It is the considered opinion of Basden that this no doubt is the thought at the back of the African mind, namely, that unless polygamy be practiced, many women

would perforce have no chance to marry.²⁵ The horrible thought of spinsterhood is simply no problem among a polygamous people. It is expected that every woman even with inferior beauty, health and mentality will be married, and at a comparatively young age.

The question is legitimate, "Must it be taken for granted that, in order for polygamy to be practiced there must be an excess of women over men?" In order to validate this claim of a disproportionate sex ratio among the African negro race, a statistical study must be furnished as to the proportion between the members of adult men and women. In the absence of trustworthy evidence and inadequate census most available figures are based on guesses and estimates. According to the Census of the Southern Province, Nigeria, 1931, it is noted:

In no part of the Ibo country is there a proportion greater than 25 per cent. . . . In the absence of trustworthy evidence, it would be unwise to express an opinion whether more girls are born than boys. When visiting the compounds and markets, females do seem to preponderate, and that is as far as one dare venture to state. It is commonly held that young men are called upon to meet greater risks in life and, consequently, their numbers fall below those of the girls. This was just possibly the case formerly when inter-tribal warfare accounted for a few lives. In any case, polygamy stands independently of population statistics.²⁶

In treating the problem in Dahomey, Dr. Herskovits notes:

Under supervision of a resident European official in

²⁵Basden, op. cit., p. 231.

²⁶Loc. cit.

Allada one hundred and forty-seven births that occurred between January 1 and June 6, 1931, numbered fifty-three males and ninety-four females. This number is small. It gains some validity from 1931 census of the canton of Alomey, where of 83,654 inhabitants enumerated, 45,320 or 54% were women. . . .²⁷

James also says:

The sexes are almost equally divided, and if statistics show that women slightly predominate, the excess is so small that polygamy would not be generally practiced without having many men to lead celibate or sinful lives. . . .²⁸

The most recent and exhaustive study on the problem has been submitted by Vernon Dahrjohn. Employing every available census of Africa at his disposal he writes in conclusion:

The available data demonstrates that there are more women than men in the various African populations; but that these differences are not enough to account for the incidence and intensity of polygamy in Africa as previously determined in this study. The hypothesis that polygamy is possible because there are more women than men in the African territories is therefore incorrect. We may, however, state that at least part of the surplus of adult women necessitated by widespread polygamous marriage is provided by a "natural" female predominance in the sex ratio of the adult population.²⁹

It is assumed that the birth rate for boys and girls is about the same and that the differences are too slight to account for the high incidence and intensity of polygamy, it is obvious that in a culture where some men number their

²⁷ Melville J. Herskovits, Dahomey (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938), I, 300.

²⁸ James Melville, "Polygamy in West Africa," International Review of Missions, XII (July, 1923), 404.

²⁹ Darjohn, op. cit., p. 308.

wives by the tens,³⁰ and where the majority of those married have two or more spouses, a large number of men must go unmarried. Yet the problem of enforced celibacy is not as great as would be supposed, for the solution rests in part in sex differentials in mortality, Levirate marriage and sex differentials in the mean age of the first marriage.³¹

Another important fact to be considered is that while polygamy is prevalent throughout Black Africa, monogamous marriage is not so alien to African ideas and practice as is generally imagined. Leith-Ross intimates this truth when she writes with regard to women's feelings of being a wife of a polygamist. One informant told Leith-Ross that she was sure the average woman preferred polygamy, but quickly added the proviso, "so long as she was the first wife," which, of course, would give her importance in her husband's eyes and a superiority over the other women.³² In Nigeria, we find the first wife is often regarded as the true wife and has more privileges and authority than the secondary wives.³³ Formerly among the Ibibios the lawful wife was never asked

³⁰The writer met a chief in the British Cameroons who has over 400 wives. Gunther also notes that the kings of former days were notorious for the size of their harems, the number of women often running into three figures. Sultan Moulay Ismail of Morocco is said to have had 549 wives, as well as concubines by the thousand. (Gunther, Inside Africa, p. 44).

³¹Darjohn, op. cit., p. 309.

³²Leith-Ross, op. cit., p. 223.

³³Parrinder, op. cit., p. 10.

to do any farm work, save that of looking after the compound and cooking food for her husband. As head wife, it was her duty alone to shave her husband and to clip his hair.³⁴ Among the neighboring Ibos, similar customs are observed:

A clear distinction needs to be affirmed between an additional woman taken into the house. To all intents and purposes both are wives, and they are commonly called so; the casual observer would notice no difference. In actual fact, under native law and custom, the first woman the man marries alone enjoys the privileges which belong to a legal wife. . . . She alone of the number is qualified to be called "Anasi" (Head-wife = wife approved by the family god) and, in virtue thereof, claims, and is given, a measure of respect greatly superior to that accorded to the other women of the household. . . . She may not always be in prime favor with her husband, but she is what she is by right of being his first wife. . . .³⁵

The most fallacious assumption with regard to polygamy is that added wives increase the reproduction of children. Scientific data can now be produced to prove conclusively that polygamy has a lowering effect on reproduction and that the paramount purpose of African marriage, the production of children for the society, is defeated.³⁶ Among the people of a typical clan, a survey reveals that the mean number of births per wife is 3 (2.95). Only one-third of the women bear more than three live children during their entire reproductive period, and five or more live births are very

³⁴P. Amoury Talbot, Tribes of the Niger Delta (London: The Sheldon Press, 1932), pp. 196-198.

³⁵Basden, op. cit., pp. 228-229.

³⁶Dahrjohn, op. cit., p. 350.

exceptional.³⁷ Also to be considered is the high frequency of miscarriages and stillbirths, together with the high mortality of offspring. Because additional wives are sought out by men who are old and often less fertile, ignorant of the natural laws of procreation, a polygamous marriage is no guarantee of a large family. In fact, R. R. Kuczynski declares that "the real fertility of the monogamous families exceeds that of the polygamous by over 45%."³⁸ To this fact

Norman Horner adds:

The number of children per wife varies in inverse ratio to the number of wives per man. This tends to limit population increase in an area where underpopulation is a serious problem. Presbyterian doctors in 1954 reported a study of 1968 women. The women in polygonous marriages had an average of 1.8 children, whereas those in monogamous marriages had 3.3 children. The same study showed 49% of 240 polygonous women with no children, whereas only 10% of 539 monogamous women were without children.

Admitting the probability of too much generalization from the study of a relatively small number, it is nevertheless true that government studies also indicate monogamous marriages to be appreciably more prolific. The French administration has maintained this from the beginning of its occupation of French Cameroun. This justified an order of September 13, 1919, taxing women with less than two children by saying: "The tax diminishes progressively according to the number of children, because it is a constant fact that the more wives a man possesses, the less these procreate. . . ." ³⁹

³⁷ Forde, op. cit., p. 95. Having personally gone through the family birth records of over 500 marriages in the Ikpene division of Calabar Province, Nigeria, the writer would also attest that almost without exception the rate per wife is unusually low and that the number of children in a polygamist's family is not as large as generally imagined.

³⁸ As quoted by Horner, op. cit., p. 177.

³⁹ Loc. cit.

It has also been proved that polygamy is responsible for constitutionally weak children. Basden claims that comparisons between polygamous and monogamous households would immediately suggest this.⁴⁰ Perhaps one contributing factor is the spread of venereal disease, which is almost inevitable where there is a plurality of wives. It is the common experience of mission doctors to find more syphilis in polygamous households.⁴¹

There is another aspect of polygamy which does not always receive the attention it should, and that is the adjustments which must be made by the several wives over against the husband. While it is true that additional wives are often brought into the compound with the consent, and possibly at the instigation of the first wife, a polygamous household is admittedly a place of strife, unrest, quarrelings and jealousy. In fact, the Efik word describing a polygamous compound is translated, "a family of quarreling and strife." Dr. Nau furnishes an excellent description of a typical polygamous home:

The polygamous home is in reality not a home according to our ideas. It is just a stop for the night, a refuge in rainy weather. The husband has his own room or house for himself. Behind his house are the quarters of his women, together with those of his goats and chickens. Responsibility of the man for his wives and children is unknown. The only thing he provides for them is a small house. They must buy their clothes

⁴⁰Basden, op. cit., p. 236.

⁴¹Horner, op. cit., p. 177.

and earn their food for themselves and their children. . . .

Continual jealousy among the women who live close together, although each in her own compartment, and who struggle and fight with each other in trying to get an advantage for themselves and their children, makes life unbearable in the compound of a polygamist. Distrust and suspicion run rampant and often lead to fist fights and not seldom to poisoning and witchcraft. There is no happiness and contentment; nothing to cheer; nothing to comfort; nothing to encourage; nothing to lift them above the daily toil and misery. . . .⁴²

One truism is that the greater the number of wives married to one man, the more difficult the adjustments which must be made by all members of his compound. Two things that arouse the hatred of the African women beyond all else are when one wife steals from another the love of a husband and when one wife is fruitful and the other is barren. In such a case the favored woman is always in grave danger, for her childless rival will usually go to great lengths in order to destroy her.⁴³ Jufus, love potions and philtres are frequently administered by wives in the hopes of capturing the whole affection of their husbands and of withering up the vital powers of the favored wife, so that the procreation of offspring may be prevented. Mrs. Talbot sees in the prevalent custom a distinct desire among the women for monogamy.⁴⁴ When viewing the great mass of plural matings,

⁴²Nau, op. cit., pp. 135-136.

⁴³Amoury Talbot, Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People--The Ibibios of Southern Nigeria (London: Cassell and Co., Ltd., 1915), p. 131.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 138ff.

either because of complacency or of human ability to make the best of the situation, they must be viewed as permanent ventures which in terms of human adjustment cannot be called failures.

When a wife is not fancied by her husband, there are provisions whereby she may make arrangements for divorce. Yet when marriage is broken, the complications are numerous. The chief obstacle is the repayment of the dowry to the husband. In terms of human love and the emotional bond between children and parents, it must be considered a family tragedy when the mother is dismissed and the children are left behind to grow up in the father's compound. The Church's position of enforced monogamy cannot be based on the assertion that it is not so difficult for a man to get rid of the entanglement of a number of wives in a place like West Africa, where wives support themselves and where, as a rule, no difficulty arises in securing other husbands. Mrs. Talbot gives evidence of the more complete picture when she cites examples of women clinging to their husbands, praying that they would relent and not send them away. In West Africa, a woman has no choice but to go away alone an outcast; since by marriage she has lost all part or lot of her father's property and is no longer considered to belong to her former family. The children she has borne must also be left behind.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 101-104.

When viewing polygamy in the full context of African religion, society and custom, it is clearly evidenced that there are advantages as well as disadvantages to the African. It must be the Church's duty, when confronting polygamy, to view sympathetically the total framework from which it is created and sustained. It cannot summarily dismiss the problem by objecting to

The bestialization of the polygamist, the obvious unfairness and heatheness of a system which deprives many young men of a chance of marriage; the herding together of mates to a man they comparatively seldom see; the destruction of the whole position of the wife as an equal partner in the joys and responsibilities of family life with her husband.⁴⁶

The problem is far more complex.

⁴⁶Grubb, op. cit., p. 61. As quoted from the diary of missionary Studd.

CHAPTER IV

VARIANT ATTITUDES OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH TOWARD POLYGAMY

Not many subjects among missionary problems have been more delicate or evoked more differences of opinion than the attitude which should be taken by the Christian Church toward the question of polygamy. The questions most frequently discussed in the academic climate of Western countries, of whether polygamy is right or wrong or whether polygamy is to be preferred to monogamy for the native of Africa, have seldom concerned the missionary who has dealt with the problem firsthand. Contrary to what the casual critic may suppose, there is absolute agreement, in principle, among the various missions of the Christian Church that Christian marriage consists of one man and one woman, and there is unanimity also in the determination to uphold this ideal of monogamy among the members of the young churches of the mission field.¹ The real question confronting the missionary of West Africa is whether the Christian Church when first established in a country in which polygamy has been woven into the fabric of religious, social and economic life should at once be forbidden or be left to die out gradually, as the Christian ideals and principles are instilled in the minds of the people.

¹Daniel Johnson Fleming, What Would You Do? (New York: Friendship Press, 1940), p. 126.

Because of the complexity of the problems posed by polygamy, together with the multiplication of Christian denominations and sects operating in Africa, divergencies of practice and confusion of thought have resulted. That the Christian Church is not free from embarrassment in this troublesome problem, Parrinder admits:

On the mission field, it can be safely said, no Christian missionary society or Church has permitted polygamy, as long as it has remained in communion with European and orthodox Christianity. Yet, in spite of the fact that the Church leaders, both European and Africans are constantly dealing with problems of marriage and polygamy, there is only a small and uncoordinated amount of reasoned thought and discussion on these matters. And there is a surprising variety of practice in secondary regulations.²

Throughout West African mission history, one can detect two divergent positions held by Christian denominations with regard to polygamy. These can be classified from the extreme conservative to the extreme liberal. In broad outline, the one group condemns polygamy outright as unchristian and tolerates no exception whatsoever on the subject. The other group argues that exceptions must be recognized inasmuch as polygamy is not condemned per se in the Bible. In examining the arguments advanced by the proponents of these two groups, it must again be borne in mind that neither party questions whether members of the Christian Church, after baptism, should be permitted to marry more than one woman, but whether polygamous men and women should be admitted as members without

²Geoffrey Parrinder, The Bible and Polygamy (London: The Church Army Press, Cowley, Oxford, 1950), p. 64.

first dissolving their polygamous marital relation.

Those who take the conservative position are convinced that polygamy is part and parcel of heathenism and, therefore, must be abolished. On the conviction that any compromise with monogamy would weaken the Church from its very beginning, the hard and fast rule has been laid down that any polygamous man who desires to be admitted into the Christian Church must first dismiss all but one woman. Because it is felt beyond dispute that the Church of Christ cannot recognize a polygamist as a member of the visible Church, this rigoristic approach to the problem endeavors to keep the moral precepts of Christianity inviolable and refuses to sacrifice or suspend Christian standards to expediency. Already at the turn of the century, this sharp-lined mission policy was demanded by James S. Dennis in his sociological study of foreign missions. He writes:

While it is recognized that there are sometimes grave and seemingly cruel results involved in the exaction of a monogamous family life as an imperative demand of the Church of Christ, yet it seems to the author to be the burden of Scripture, and the only sound policy in missions, never to put into jeopardy the honor of the Christian Church, or the dignity and purity of the marriage law of the New Testament, for the sake of receiving polygamous families to the communion and fellowship of the visible Church. It is not enough to prohibit a polygamist from holding office; he should not be formally admitted to membership.³

The modus vivendi between the Church and polygamous converts is further described:

³James S. Dennis, Christian Missions and Social Progress (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899), p. 210.

[It is] a combination of official rigor with informal personal kindness and leniency towards those who are involved in the entanglements of polygamy. The Christian Church should withhold official recognition of a polygamist as an accepted member of its communion. It should not even baptize him. If, however, he is inclined to religious fellowship with God's people, he should be treated with social respect and kindly sympathy, and admitted to the privileges of instruction and worship. . . .⁴

The authoritarian attitude is nowhere more clearly summarized than in Daniel Fleming's work of the problem of Christian ethics conflicting with standards of non-Christian cultures.

The generally accepted orthodox church position is that monogamy is an holy estate instituted of God and is in intention lifelong. Morals correspond to something real in the universe to which our lives must conform. According to this the practice of polygamy is not a matter to be left to the individual conscience, nor even to the judgment of a local congregation, nor is it to be considered an optional factor in civilization. The only criterion is the will of God as revealed in Scripture. Monogamy is vital to the church, is necessary from the very beginning if the purity of the church is to be established, and is essential to the full development of personality both for man and for woman. Therefore, the moral and religious aspects of marriage are so important that the church must hold firmly to its ideal. . . .⁵

It appears evident to the defenders of monogamy that every African, who would formally embrace Christianity, is bound by the law of the Bible and the unvarying tradition of Christendom to make a clean and decisive break with polygamy. Thus, it is imperative that the churches in mission lands begin rightly in this matter and in the formative period

⁴ Ibid., p. 212.

⁵ Fleming, op. cit., p. 285.

jealously guard the monogamous state. The introduction of polygamous households into the Church would create dangerous concessions and establish demoralizing precedents. Toleration of polygamy, side by side with monogamy, would result in doubt as to which of the two is the real Christian marriage. Any temporizing or non-committal evasion of the issue would end in a distinct loss of moral prestige and spiritual influence, for it is argued that once polygamy is allowed in the younger Church it will increase in spite of every effort to the contrary.⁶

In answer to those who would denounce the abolition of polygamy as an unjust and arbitrary proceeding, Dr. Paton writes:

Those will be the most ready to condemn us who have never been on the spot, and who cannot see all the facts as they lie under the eyes of the missionary. How could we ever have led natives to see the difference between admitting a man to the Church who had two wives, and not permitting a member of the Church to take two wives after his admission? Their moral sense is blunted enough without our knocking their heads against a conundrum in ethics. In our church-membership we have to draw the line as sharply as God's law will allow betwixt what is heathen and what

⁶Melville James, "Polygamy in West Africa," International Review of Missions, XII (July, 1923), 404. Many examples are advanced by the defenders of absolute monogamy for Church membership in which missionaries struck with the idea that frequently the richest and most influential tribesmen were polygamists felt that it was unfair that they should be refused membership, arguing that they were ignorant of Christian ideals when plural marriages were contracted. Once given membership, younger men soon followed the examples of their elders and reasoned that they too must be given full membership into the Church.

is Christian, instead of minimizing the differences.⁷

Those who see clearly the Christian ideal and defend it with uncompromising forthrightness admit that it may frequently prove costly for a convert to break with native law and custom but contend that there are always brave Christians ready to suffer because of the high standards growing out of their faith. That monogamy is an essential condition of well-ordered society is seen in the testimony of Christian homes where the cleansing and hallowing power is operative. This Christian influence on public opinion is evidenced in every country of West Africa, for the conviction is growing among Africans that a healthy family life is more likely to be found in a monogamous than in a polygamous family.⁸ It is with this in mind that mission authorities claim polygamy to be a habit with which no compromise can be made and further assert that it is no more necessary for the African than for the European. Furthermore, the Church must never think Africans incapable of living up to the same moral standards as do Europeans or compromise where she has never done elsewhere, for this would do the African an injustice. It is further claimed that countless missions which remain firm with respect to the moral demands of the Gospel will some day have the ardent support of its senior

⁷As quoted by Dennis, op. cit., p. 219, from Autobiography of John G. Paton, Part II, pp. 266, 267.

⁸Diedrich Westermann, Africa and Christianity (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 160.

culture. They contend that it is unfair to enforce at once an alien iron-clad code and arbitrarily enforce Western concepts of church discipline upon a people whose ideas of marriage and family institution are at variance with the Christian code. Many missionaries feel it wrong to debar a man who is desirous of being a Christian from the privileges of church membership simply because he cannot bring himself to send away a woman he has honorably married and who is the mother of his children. They contend that the Church should relax its rule on those individuals who are living on the threshold of transition and take into account the obligations which those individuals have created for themselves prior to their acceptance of the Christian rule.¹¹ It has been said that "polygamy is the one reprobated act of which the sinner cannot effectually repent at his own cost alone. The relation once entered brings its own loyalties which

¹¹Fleming, op. cit., p. 29. It must be kept in mind that in most tribes of West Africa, missions have been active for over fifty years. There are relatively few areas completely ignorant of the Church's rule of monogamy. The plea for leniency is not intended for the many young men who have lapsed into the pagan custom, in spite of the fact that they were baptized and schooled in Christian missions. The rule of leniency interpreted for the situation today would be directed at the few outstanding polygamists remaining who have been barred from the Church since the advent of Christianity. The writer personally knew a few of these old chiefs who after years of hopeful waiting are still persistent in their demands for membership. One old man with tears and outstretched hands pleaded for the sacrament of baptism. Another asked to be remembered in the prayers of the Church that answer would come in his dilemma and forgiveness be granted even though he could not see fit to discard his faithful spouses.

demand respect."¹² Furthermore, it should be noted that those who take the liberal view oppose vigorously the lax and wholly secular views on marriage. They believe the purity of the Church can be sufficiently upheld by granting membership to those who were ignorant of the Christian idea at the time when additional wives were taken. Shropshire, speaking in behalf of this view, suggests:

If a native with more than one wife desires to offer himself in preparation for Christian Baptism, the demand should not be made that he must first put away all wives but one. But from the moment he becomes a Catechumen he should not be free to negotiate with regard to further wives. He would thus be brought within the orbit of Christian teaching and the sphere of Christian influence and the sincerity of his motive would have considerable period of testing, after which he might be admitted to Holy Baptism with a view to further preparation for full Church membership. A man must be a Christian before he can become a more perfect Christian. . . .¹³

The dilemma in which many missionaries find themselves--unable to accept a polygamist within the Church for the sake of the ethical standards of the Church, yet admitting that the individual himself is a true believer and follower of Christ--prompts a sympathetic missionary to write:

¹² Thomas Price, African Marriage (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1954), p. 11. Many claim that the dismissal of the wife need not cause much difficulty inasmuch as African society readily dissolves marriage by native law. Yet one must not become insensitive to the family tragedy of a broken marriage to a people even of a lower culture. Supra, Chapter III, p. 33.

¹³ Denys W. T. Shropshire, The Church and Primitive Peoples (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938), p. 425.

For the genuine heathen polygamist I have the greatest sympathy when on his accepting Christian teaching he feels the embarrassment of a snare into which he has ignorantly fallen, and it is only the conviction that the future purity of the Church is imperiled by any other course that makes me feel it right to deny him the sacrament of baptism when he desires it. The case of the professing Christian who lapses into polygamy after baptism is quite different.¹⁴

Because salvation is not dependent on fixed regulations and rigid and uncompromising discipline, to demand separation of husband and wife seems unacceptable or impractical to many. Inasmuch as it seems unfair to make membership in the Church conditional on faithfulness to a standard with which the Church leaders themselves cannot fully agree, "different people have made different assessments of the balance between principle and the extent and intensity of the hurt that its application would cause."¹⁵ Many agree that under no circumstances should separation be compulsory for a person who has entered into a polygamous union as a normal and right procedure and has shared the responsibilities and mutual support of members of the household. One cannot ignore the obligations to the clan which the polygamist has assumed, together with the legitimate rights, wishes and legal status of the individual wives. An African questions:

Is it right to have sent away these women, for no other reason than that the minister wanted their husbands to keep only one wife each in order to become communicants or full members of the Church, or, is it not better to be a non-communicant, with these women, once a man has

¹⁴ Jones, op. cit., p. 407.

¹⁵ Price, op. cit., p. 25.

committed himself to this kind of life?¹⁶

Many missionaries hold that it is unwise to interfere suddenly with the time-honored marriage customs which have created an orderly and well-behaved society. There are worse things than polygamy--promiscuous living on the part of the discarded wife, prostitution, dishonest practices and surreptitious concubinage on the part of professing Christians. Regulations and synodical decrees can never bring about the desired change.¹⁷ The Church is too impatient in expecting people emerging out of pagan culture to conform immediately to high moral standards.

Roland Allen, one of the foremost critics of traditional mission policies, speaks on the question of the Christian

¹⁶S. I. Kale, "Polygamy in the Church in Africa," International Review of Missions, XXXI (April, 1942), 220.

¹⁷Among the churches of Ukpon District, Calabar Province, that the writer served in 1955-1956, there was only one congregation which was not harboring polygamists from the missionary; and this church comprised only women, for the polygamist men in the village voluntarily left the church. The other churches held out in their insistence on protecting polygamists, for prior to the Lutheran Church's coming into the area, an oath was made by the leading polygamist headmen of the villages never to reveal their identity. Consequently the missionaries labored in mistrust of the African leaders, and the members in fear of being called to reveal the names of their respective husbands and wives. In examining the baptism records, he uncovered scores of infants who were baptized under false names. As late as 1948, a teacher was secretly poisoned for exposing the identity of leading polygamists. During the nine months he served in this area, over fifty polygamous men from fourteen congregations voluntarily admitted to him their marital status, after having successfully hidden their identity for over ten years from mission authorities.

standard of morals. In answer to the thorny moral problem of polygamy, he advances the thesis that the standard of morals which the Church in Africa enforces is something less than the Christian standard and that its enforcement presents the Gospel as a system of law. He claims:

There are two ways of maintaining a standard of morals. We may keep the ideal presented to us in Christ ever before ourselves and our converts, and seek ourselves, and teach them, to follow it, or we may define a standard and treat that definition as a law which must not be departed from. In the first case we set before our converts an infinite advance, in the second a finite rule. . . .¹⁸

It is because the demands of the Church are not in themselves unquestionably clear expressions of divine law about which no Christian can have any doubt that the troubled and sympathetic missionary, in dealing with concrete cases of sincere believing polygamists, takes issue with orthodox mission policy. Allen raises the question, "When we are not agreed among ourselves, how can we expect our hearers to accept our demands as divine law, disobedience to which excludes a man from the grace of Christ?"¹⁹ To make the acceptance of mission demands the condition of admission into the Christian Church and to exclude from the means of grace seekers of Christ who are encumbered with the habits and traditions of their people, is to act on the persuasion and absolute conviction that Christ has rejected them.

¹⁸Roland Allen, The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church (London: World Dominion Press, 1949), p. 81. See

¹⁹Ibid., p. 84.

Inasmuch as the heathen as well as converts do not understand the insistence upon monogamy, in the sense that they perceive clearly that it is impossible to be a Christian and to be a polygamist at the same time, it is not surprising that Africans should look on mission rules as an imposition of a yoke rather than as a law of Christ. The result is that they are driven into opposition, not only to Western civilization, not only to missionaries, but to the truer and higher conception of morality. By making acceptance into the Church dependent on an external law, we are in danger of turning the Gospel into a lawbook and the Church into the guardian of a system of laws. In criticism, Allen is prompted to write:

Christ did not come to men with a new lawbook in His hand and assure them that when they would accept and adopt and carry out the law contained in it, He would accept and bless them. . . . He came to men not to direct their conduct by external admonitions, but to inspire and to raise them by the presence and power of His Spirit given to them. He did not begin by telling them in detail what the true moral life is and ordering them to follow it. He began by showing it in His own Person and giving to men a Spirit Who should guide and enlighten them until they became like Him. We are not Christians because we have attained to a standard of morals which can truly be called Christian, but because Christ has given us His Spirit. Our hope now, and for the future, lies not in the attainment of a standard which shall make us fit for His grace, but in the assurance that acceptance of His grace will raise us. . . .²⁰

In answer to the critics who say, "We must maintain the Christian standard of morality," Allen would reply that we cannot,

²⁰Ibid., pp. 92-95.

and the power does not lie with us. We invite disaster and stagnation if we seek a standard dependent on a code. In the Apostolic Church faith in Christ produced a higher morality than the legal code, the abandonment of which seemed to shake the very foundations of all morality.²¹ He concludes, "Inspired by Christ's Spirit, strengthened by His grace, converts from heathenism will advance not to present Western standards, but far beyond it."²²

²¹Ibid., pp. 95-100.

²²Ibid., p. 99.

CHAPTER V

PRACTICES OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF WEST AFRICA WITH REGARD TO THE PROBLEM OF POLYGAMY

Because the Christian Church of West Africa has never adopted a standard or unified practice in regard to this intricate and baffling problem, it is difficult to gain an insight into the overall witness of the Church. Differences of practice and varying attitudes toward polygamy have resulted in something of a patchwork,¹ leading not infrequently to shifts in membership to more lenient denominations or even to the formation of separatist churches. By studying the official practices of some of the leading church bodies in a representative area, a pattern of practice for the Church of West Africa can be determined. The denominations of Calabar Province, Southern Nigeria, will

¹The wide range of solutions can be classified under the following:

1. Refuse to receive, even for instruction, a candidate for baptism who has plural wives.
2. Receive such a candidate for instruction but ask him to wait for baptism until he has freed himself from polygamous ties.
3. Admit all such polygamists to baptism who have entered the relationship with an unenlightened, non-Christian conscience, but withhold church office from them.
4. Grant church membership and the right of church office to such without imposing any condition.
5. Let the decision for entrance into the church rest in the hands of the native church.

serve as basis for this survey.² In lieu of written documents and official pronouncements the writer, where necessary, will supplement the report from his personal acquaintance with these church bodies.

The future course of the principal Protestant groups of Southern Nigeria was determined as early as 1888, when the Church Mission Society of the Church of England passed the following resolution in the Lambeth Conference:

That it is the opinion of this conference that persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ.

Your committee considers it far better that baptism should be withheld from such peoples while, nevertheless, they receive instruction in the truths of the Gospel, than that a measure should be sanctioned which would tend to lower the conception and thus inflict an irreparable wound on the morality of the Christian Church in its most vital part.³

²The first Christian missionary to enter Calabar Province was Hope Waddell, a Presbyterian of the Church of Scotland. However, it was not until almost fifty years later that the famous Scottish missionary, Mary Mitchell Slessor, advanced into the interior of Ibibioland. In 1887, the Qua Iboe Mission, an interdenominational Faith Mission also pioneered work in Calabar Province, together with the Methodists, in 1893. In order not to overlap their work these three missions observed comity. The Ibesikpo clan, among which the Scottish Presbyterian Mission had started work, was assigned to the Qua Iboe Mission. Dissatisfaction arose among the Ibesikpo Christians, with the result that they extended a call to the Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America to begin missionary work in their midst. Today, every major church body in the West has missions represented in Calabar Province and over seventy per cent of the natives claim Christianity.

³S. I. Kale, "Polygamy in the Church in Africa," International Review of Missions, XXXI (April, 1942), 405.

In spite of this seemingly harsh measure to cut off from baptism polygamists who were completely ignorant of the Christian ideal, the Bishop of Lagos, himself an African and native of Southern Nigeria, thirty years later upholds wholeheartedly the decision of the Lambeth Conference when he declares that the decision:

Does not necessarily cut such persons off from the Kingdom of God, but for the sake of the purity of the Church it is wise to deny the outward sign of the entrance therein. If one could feel that a concession on this point would end there, it would be different, but experience convinces me, as the Lambeth Conference foresaw, that it would lead to a lasting laxity with regard to the purity of the Church and the conception of the marriage law.⁴

The Church of Scotland has similarly followed the strict conservative line for well over fifty years. A Nigerian Christian reports:

I am a Presbyterian; in our church one can be a full member of the church only if he has but one wife. Men having many wives are allowed to attend church but are denied Holy Communion while their many wives may partake of Lord's Supper. When I was young, men outnumbered the women in the congregation, but now 85% of the congregation is made up of women. "Where are the men?" you ask. Let them partake of the Holy Communion and back to the fold they will return.⁵

The Qua Iboe Mission has also consistently followed the orthodox principles of monogamy. They adopted the practice

⁴Kale, loc. cit.

⁵The African Committee - Division of Foreign Missions, National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., Africa is Here--Report of the North American Assembly on African Affairs (New York: National Council of Churches, 1952), p. 191.

that where the wife of a polygamist becomes a Christian, she is not persuaded to be separated from her husband, but where the husband is a polygamist and becomes a Christian, he is expected to put away all but one wife, making suitable provision for them.⁶

The first notable group to break with the conservative tradition and attempt toleration was the Methodist Church.⁷

⁶Eva Stuart Watt Marshall, The Quest of Souls in Qua Iboe (London: Morgan and Scott, 1951), p. 95.

⁷Other church bodies throughout Africa also introduced liberal interpretations into their policies on polygamy. The following is an extract quoted from the proceedings of an International Missionary Conference held at LeZoute (as reported in "The Christian Mission in Africa") in 1925.

"Bishop Hening of the Moravians--who of all Protestant communions have the longest experience in Africa--would have liked the conference to accept the following statement: 'Granted that polygamy is a heathen abuse of the divine order of things, we, nevertheless, maintain that the Christian Mission has no right to treat as illegal conjugal unions constructed by heathens according to the legal standards of their people. We further hold that the Christian Mission has no right to refuse to such, if they believe in Christ, the sacrament of Baptism and with it the right to entrance into the Christian Church.' But the other members (so continues the report) of the conference were opposed to such tolerance, believing, not without reason, that it would inevitably lower the ideal of Christian marriage, which at any cost must be maintained."

As quoted by Denys W. T. Shropshire, The Church and Primitive Peoples (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938), p. 390.

When work was first opened up in heathen districts of San Salvador, Portuguese Congo, regulated polygamy was practiced. A polygamist was allowed to become a church member, but he was prohibited from taking further wives. The Christian ideal, however, was always kept before him and once the area had come under the influence of Christianity, all church members were monogamists. R. H. C. Graham, "A Record of Thirty Years' Work Amongst African Women," International Review of Missions, IX (January, 1929), 102.

In 1934, the Methodist Synod of Lagos found itself forced to the conclusion that in the majority of cases it is impossible to insist on a polygamist's putting away his wives. They reasoned that in a large number of cases advanced age, unfaithfulness on the part of the displaced, women and other causes have operated to make polygamy oftentimes more a technical than a real violation of the rule of the Church. Accordingly, a committee was appointed to which "all doubtful cases of spiritual hardship are to be submitted with a view to their admission to full membership."⁸ This policy of restricted and regulated polygamy had vital and far-reaching effects on all other denominations in Southern Nigeria.⁹

The Roman Catholic Church, holding that marriage is at once a contract and a sacrament, is rigorous and persistent in its recognition of marriage to the first wife alone.

⁸James K. MacGregor, "Christian Missions and Marriage Usage in Africa," International Review of Missions, XXIV (July, 1935), 384. This policy has been successfully introduced in other mission fields. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of India resolved in 1906 that individual cases of hardship may be left to the native Christian churches to decide. For example, exception could be made in the case of an old convert who has been living for several decades with his two wives. Turning away either aged woman would mean misery to all three.

⁹The Methodists had difficulty in controlling their policy of controlled polygamy, with the consequence that any polygamist, whether young or old, could gain church membership. The Ukpom District of the Nigerian Lutheran Church, formerly a member of the Methodist Church, has countless polygamists in membership, and they have been the constant cause for concern and disappointment to the missionary.

The Nigerian Lutheran Church, established in Calabar Province long after mission policy had been set down, has consistently followed the policy of strict monogamy laid down by the Scottish and Qua Iboe Missions. Moreover, because the sixteen congregations of the Ibesikpo clan, which formed the basis of the Lutheran Church, were formerly members of the Qua Iboe Mission, Lutheran missionaries had no other course than to accept the existing policy of monogamy.

Because the Lutheran Mission has concentrated its efforts chiefly among third and fourth generation Christians, its policies have never been seriously threatened. Though misgivings, doubts and practical problems may trouble the individual missionary, an attempt to break with conservative tradition has never been considered. Rather through the rigorous, militant and uncompromising efforts of Dr. Nau and others the African has always been unmistakably clear as to the official Lutheran position.

After pioneering mission policy for eighteen months, Dr. Nau records his impressions in one of the few published sources reflecting the Lutheran view on polygamy:

We do not deceive ourselves by assuming that all is well in Ibesikpo as far as polygamy is concerned. No, far from it. Relapses will occur again and again. The missionaries will have to cultivate patience, patience, and more patience. They will have to let the Word of God shine into the dark recesses of the remnants of heathenism. . . . They must, however, never grant them tolerance. There are people in our Ibesikpo congregation who today clearly see that in the matter of polygamy they are face to face not with a church or mission rule, but with the Word of God and that therefore there cannot be a different opinion where it has

spoken.¹⁰

The generally consistent pattern of enforced monogamy practiced by the largest and most influential missions of Calabar Province has provided many sects the best opportunity to enter the mission fields. The Apostolics, Russellites, Christ's Army, the Salvation Army and numerous others have no compunctions about admitting polygamists into their midst and flourish on defections from the disciplined ranks of other church bodies.¹¹

A separatist church body in Nigeria known as the Ethiopian, or African, Church also openly advocates polygamy. This church is made up of disgruntled men and women of various denominations and disclaims any and all connections with

¹⁰ Henry Nau, We Move Into Africa (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), p. 303.

¹¹ Nau, Ibid., p. 279. The Africans are quick to detect a church which condones polygamy. An African recorded a conversation which he had with a Christian friend who had three wives.

"Wait till we succeed in bringing in this town the church, in which we polygamists will enjoy full membership. When that time comes, and you of this particular denomination begin to lose your members rapidly, you will begin thinking of relaxing your discipline."

As quoted by E. Amu, "The Position of Christianity in Modern Africa," International Review of Missions, XXIX (October, 1940), 479.

the Christian Church of the West.¹² This group is considered by the better class of Africans as a corrupt church. Samuel Bill, the founder of the Qua Iboe Mission, commented on the activities of these turn-coat Christians. "This combing out, this divine separation of wheat from chaff was probably the greatest blessing in disguise."¹³

The Christian Church of Southern Nigeria is not always agreed on policies pertaining to the many secondary regulations governing polygamy. Yet it is the agreed opinion of the majority of churches that Christian marriage must have a different emphasis from the customary native marriage if it is to be a permanent, moral and monogamous union.¹⁴ In most churches native marriage is accepted provided it is properly contracted and is lifelong, indissoluble and monogamous.¹⁵ In order, therefore, to establish in the native's mind this essential difference between Christian and native marriage, the practice has been followed that all

¹²W. J. Platt, From Fetish to Faith (London: Corgate Press, 1935), p. 124. The association of the question of polygamy has been clearly recognized and was debated at the Tambaram Conference of Madras, India. The Special African Section reaffirmed that the Christian Church must maintain its insistence on monogamy. International Missionary Council, The World Mission of the Church (New York: n.p., 1938), pp. 132-133.

¹³Marshall, op. cit., p. 95.

¹⁴Thomas Price, African Marriage (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1954), p. 47.

¹⁵Ernest Gray, "Some Present Day Problems for African Christian Marriage," International Review of Missions, XLL (July, 1956), 269.

non-Christians becoming Christian must first receive the Christian marriage in a public church ceremony. This service in no way intends to annul customary law and ordinance marriage, but is rather a formal expression of the couples desire and intention to obey the rules of Christian marriage. The Church, in turn, by solemnizing and recognizing a union already perfected by some other rite, elevates native marriage to the Christian standard.¹⁶ In this recognition service the missions can most effectively achieve Christian marriage without depreciating the significance of native law and custom.¹⁷

Mission practice varies as to the putting away of additional wives, though generally the flat rule is demanded that the extra wives must be sent away before the husband is baptized. It is not enough that the husband no longer has conjugal relations with surplus wives. It is his duty to see that they are all properly provided for according to the provisions demanded by native law and custom, urging them

¹⁶B. G. H. Sundkler, "Marriage Problems in Tanganyika," International Review of Missions, XXXIV (July, 1945), 262.

¹⁷In a desire to be iconoclastic toward every native law and custom, many missionaries have even urged a disregard for bride-price and have actively urged outlawing its practice, condemning it as evil. Yet this excellent native custom can be retained even in a monogamous Christian marriage. It is a security for the custody of the children, a guarantee of good treatment of the wife and a token of honorable marriage. Someone wisely suggests that "it is unfair to assume that the only effective and acceptable marriage is that of our own society, and that everything different is immoral or just wrong." Price, op. cit., p. 12.

either to remarry, to be received back into their parent's home, or to maintain them in a separate establishment. The polygamist must formally renounce his former wives either by public declaration or by written document and profess his earnest desire to follow the Christian ideal in the Christian recognition service.

The question is often raised as to which wife the man should retain. The chief wife, though not necessarily the first wife, is generally chosen. Missions maintain that the first wife freely chosen by the polygamist and properly contracted for through payment of dowery should be the one retained, irrespective of all other considerations.¹⁸

While the churches of Calabar Province are almost unanimous in denying full membership to men with plural wives, little concern, if any, is given to the membership of wives. The Lambeth Conference, when considering the difference of treatment of wives, reasoned that a somewhat different problem arises. It may be said that presumably she does not violate the Christian precept which enjoins fidelity to one husband. Furthermore, she has in many cases no responsibility for his plural marriages. Moreover, while divorce is possible in Southern Nigeria, native law and custom provides the woman with little personal choice to contract or dissolve a marital alliance, and in the event of a dissolution of the marriage her children are always deprived of the

¹⁸Nau, op. cit., p. 302.

mother's love. These considerations prompted a statement on the status of wives of polygamists from Lagos in 1920.

The wife of a polygamist, both parties being heathen when the marriage was contracted, may be admitted to baptism, but if a woman enters into an alliance with a baptized man which is contrary to Christian law she cannot be admitted to baptism.¹⁹

Current practice, however, reveals the missionary to be more energetic and persistent in his dealings with the polygamous husbands while the often offending polygamous wives retain full membership in the church.

¹⁹Kale, op. cit., p. 406.

CHAPTER VI

TOWARD A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF POLYGAMY

Because there are serious and diverse problems from whatever angle the subject of polygamy is viewed, the Christian Church in West Africa has never found a satisfying solution which will give answer to the many questions raised by this complex subject. Moreover, a solution to the problem of polygamy can never be fixed or final, for the principles, factors and forces involved are growing things and not lifeless entities.¹ This chapter gives suggestions for an approach rather than an ultimate solution to the problem, in the hope that they may provoke sounder proposals and better methods of operation in the mission fields of West Africa.

Before any attempt can be made to arrive at some sort of solution to the problem, there is a demand for deep sympathy, infinite patience, honest discernment and insight on the part of the Church. Many missionaries, however, continue to come to West Africa with ready-made solutions to difficult problems and feel little compulsion to expend every effort to gain an honest understanding of the vital issues involved. Charges have been repeatedly leveled against

¹Daniel Johnson Fleming, Contacts With Non-Christian Cultures (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), p. 7.

Christian missionaries that, "They do not know. They have not seen. They do not care."² The result is that natives are frequently repelled by Christianity as they see it exemplified about them. One cannot minimize the harm done by those coming from the West who base their only appeal on uncompromising mission pronouncements handed down to them. Behind detached generalizations and vague abstractions, many have become disinterested, insensitive and unsympathetic to the problem. When the report of the Survey of African Marriage and Family Life of the International Missionary Council was published in 1953, it warned:

We cannot expect Africans to accept without further discussion the position of being in the wrong over polygamy. The matter is not beyond discussion. We have to prove not simply assert that our position is the Christian one. . . . The argument against polygamy is the argument against treating any person simply as a means to our own ends. . . .³

It is easy for the Church, when crossing cultural boundaries, to be exceedingly minute in its discipline and in the multiplication of negative detail, to lose the great positive goal it endeavors to achieve.

There are economic, social and religious factors involved in polygamy which cannot be fully appreciated by the casual observer of African society. Before any solutions to the problem can be found, intelligent study and careful re-

²Sylvia Leith-Ross, African Women (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1939), p. 306.

³Thomas Price, African Marriage (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1954), p. 11.

view must be given to every aspect of tribal life. A militant, yet uninformed, insistence on monogamy can easily take on the appearance of a Western fad or an European imposition, rather than an absolute Christian standard.

A frontal attack alone against polygamy is increasingly recognized to be insufficient. In 1938, African delegates from ten representative areas of the continent unanimously requested the International Mission Council at the Madras Conference to carry out objective studies of marriage customs, in relation to Church discipline and practice. They pointed to the unfairness of basing modern Church discipline upon the inadequate understanding of early missionaries of the inner social structure of African law and custom.⁴

If the Church holds the Christian ideal of monogamy to be in direct opposition to polygamous marriage, it is argued that it is necessary to know the forces arrayed against it. To those who seek answer to the problem of polygamy, there is no escape from a humble period of sympathetic study of African tribal society. An experienced missionary and student of anthropology writes,

Missionaries must at least make this study if they are to be true to their profession; they must have a wide vision, a constructional plan and a knowledge of the material with which they are to work.⁵

⁴J. Merle Davis, New Buildings on Old Foundations (New York: International Missionary Council, 1945), p. 52.

⁵Denys W. T. Shropshire, The Church and Primitive Peoples (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938), p. 426. For the Christian missionary a definite

In an attempt to uproot pagan elements in native marriage, missionaries have frequently revealed an attitude which is contemptuous of native custom and thought. The more unimaginative and uninformed have made little or no effort to adapt to Christian use the innocent elements of the indigenous native culture and have tried to impose Western patterns without any change. The effect has often been disastrous.⁶ In working toward a satisfactory solution to

course in the study of anthropology is a sine qua non. He further explains:

The needs of Africa will not be met merely by intelligent and devoted missionaries but only by men and women fully trained in missionary craftsmanship. For the missionary to have received a general university and a specialized theological training is not enough, for neither of these, in themselves, will give him an exact knowledge of the material with which he is to work. This is essential lest, as a bad craftsman, with no knowledge of the material with which he is working, he renders useless, or ruin, that material, and so do more harm than good. There must then be a serious and systematic attempt to train missionaries in a knowledge of the peculiar qualities of the material they will have to handle in Africa, which, as we have seen, are very different from those in European society. Hitherto this has been largely left to chance and the missionary's own predilections. Ibid., p. 427.

⁶In not having something better to replace the idol it has destroyed, the Church has witnessed a breakdown in tribal morality. The impact of Christian civilization on pagan marriage customs is illustrated by a missionary who made an investigation of his congregational register. In a congregation of 300 Christians, 81 broken families were discovered. In most of these the husband had separated from the wife, in less than one-third the wife had left her husband. The revealing factor is the high incidence of divorce among a society that formerly never practiced divorce even though there was tribal sanction for it. Because men and women entered only a short-range union of a few years, after

the polygamy problem, it is essential for the missionary to make readjustments both of attitude and of approach and to present a full-orbed Christianity which can conserve every noble value to be found in primitive African culture. It is presumption on the part of Western missionaries to assume cultural, social and economic superiority. When operating in a non-Christian culture, the Church has often lost sight of its primary function--to bring the gift of salvation--and has rather concentrated on bringing the "gifts of civilization."

It requires accurate thought on the part of the missionary to distinguish between the universal validity of the saving power of the Christ he preaches and that of the civilization he represents.⁷

which the marriage was dissolved by either divorce, dissolution or infidelity, the Church had not successfully abandoned polygamy. Rather successive polygamy was practiced by many men who had consecutively four, five and six wives. B. G. H. Sundkler, "Marriage Problems in Tanganyika," International Review of Missions, XXXIV (July, 1945), 254.

In the congregations the writer served, "marriage palavers" constituted 60-70% of all the matters treated in the local church councils. In his acquaintance with many young African men between the ages of fifteen and thirty, who were baptized Christians and to whom Christianity was as customary as paganism was to their grandfathers, Christian morality seemed a lighter and less durable code than the pagan morality of their fathers. Where once adultery was punishable with death, and harlotry, as a profession, was unknown, the former stringent enforcement of native law has been relaxed and replaced with an uncontrollable immorality. From the observable decline of morality since the advent of Christianity, it is obvious that Church discipline which does not engage the active support of the living conscience of the tribe is bound to be ineffective and can only lead to a double moral standard and hypocrisy in the congregations.

⁷The African Committee--Division of Foreign Missions, National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., Africa is Here--Report of the North American Assembly on African Affairs (New York: National Council of Churches, 1952), p. 27.

In the absence of anthropological knowledge, past methods of both missions and colonial governments have generally been that of taking an established and preconceived system and imposing it on the natives. It is now the considered opinion of many mission students that monogamy, if it is to grow successfully in West African soil, must first be grafted on the existing stem of African culture. It is further maintained that it is fatal for the Church to cut a man away from his cultural heritage because, in so doing, there is grave danger of cutting away the nerve of reverence to native marriage altogether. It must be the aim of missionaries to help Africans to appreciate the Christian concept of marriage by starting from their own traditional conceptions of marriage and by using whatever in their customs is not inconsistent with Christian teachings. Denys Shropshire says, "If we are to replace old weaknesses with new strength, it is necessary to embody the new in the old."⁸

The only sound way to change a person or a society is to work from the known to the unknown, which way precludes a thorough study of African marriage which realizes and understands the cause of its strength and permanence.⁹

⁸Shropshire, op. cit., p. 424.

⁹James W. Welch, "An African Tribe in Transition," International Review of Missions, XX (October, 1931), 571-572. While anthropological knowledge and technique are undoubtedly necessary, in another article Welch warns the Church against the danger of establishing a syncretistic form of marriage brought about by an idealization of African society.

Because the young African churches are inseparably interwoven in the fabric of cultural inheritance, the sooner the West comes to terms with this fact and presents the ideals of monogamy within the framework of African life, the sooner workable solutions will be found in answer to polygamy.¹⁰ Refusal to recognize and understand those elements which have given strength and permanence to native marriage can greatly endanger the Church's future; for the Church will have succeeded in creating only a veneer which will some day break up when the white man has left the country. Christian marriage in Africa can have vitality only if it is congenial to the African mind and has been created by him. The Church will never find an effective solution to polygamy

He writes:

It is finally what the Christian is to be, not what he was, that is important. While we should, therefore, respect the African past and build on it if possible, and while the anthropology is a great weapon to the service of the Church, the real touchstone of all ideas and suggestions must be the mind of Christ so far as we know it. James W. Welch, "Can Christian Marriage in Africa be African," International Review of Missions, XXII (January, 1933), 10-21.

Dr. Kramer also warns against a kind of romanticism of African institutions by missionaries. While anthropology has made valuable contributions, the more we shall see of heathen society, the more we shall see it from the Biblical point of view as charged with satanic powers and in need of redemption. Hendrick Kramer, The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1938), pp. 339ff.

¹⁰ J. Merle Davis, The Economic and Social Environment of the Younger Churches (London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1939), pp. 11ff.

by flat dogmatic assertion or by wooden translation of foreign formula. Diedrich Westermann claims:

The formal elements of native marriage may be annihilated, but the contents, and the underlying views and sentiments will secretly live on and will thus become far more dangerous than if they were brought into the full light of the new spirit, so that everything might be judged and put into its proper place by the Christian conscience and the Holy Spirit working in the Church. That which is frankly anti-Christian will then be ejected and the good elements be purified and brought to a higher life and their full development.¹¹

Before any workable solution to the problem of polygamy can be realized, it is further held that the aggressive adherents of monogamy should learn first to place more emphasis on the constructive phase of their appeal, building first before destroying. Inasmuch as the problem has a distinct cultural aspect, frontline missionaries should temper their activities with a realization of the fact that sudden changes in social custom and tribal organization are likely to work more harm than good. In trying to force the cultural pace, a noted West African colonial administrator writes:

Customs must inevitably arrange themselves to meet the altered circumstances. Time is needed for readjustment with respect to polygamy as for other customs. Every thoughtful student of affairs is prepared to admit that there are many evils inherent in the system, the polygamists themselves freely confess as much. What has to be realized is that reforms must come slowly.¹³

¹¹Diedrich Westermann, "The Value of the African's Past," International Review of Missions, XV (July, 1926), 436.

¹²Daniel Johnson Fleming, Conflicts in Ethical Cultures (New York: Rumford Press, 1935), p. 21.

¹³G. T. Basden, Niger Ibos (London: Seeley, Service and Company, Ltd., n.d.), p. 258.

MacGregor claims it to be psychologically, culturally and spiritually unsound to force overnight monogamous marriage customs that have evolved since the very Early Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He writes:

While the ideals of a people must be in advance of the practice of the best of the people, the laws of a country and of a church are what people--not the best only, but the so-called average man--can live up to. An ordinance which is in advance of that may easily become a matter of ridicule because of the high-sounding requirements which are more frequently broken than observed, and it may actually hinder growth to a better social life. The aim of the Church and of the Government is to cleanse the practice of the people and to raise it. This cannot be accomplished by legislation which starts at a state higher than the existing practice, but by legislation which teaches what exists, strips it of what is objectional and, enforcing what is good, gives it a chance of developing into a higher state, where a fresh advance is possible.¹⁴

The advocates of slow reform, while never negating the ideals of monogamy, argue that polygamy was not put out of the Early Church by radical and severe enactments, but rather like slavery it disappeared under the dynamic of Christian principles.¹⁵ While Christianity brings about a new

¹⁴James K. MacGregor, "Christian Missions and Marriage Usage in Africa," International Review of Missions, XXIV (July, 1935), 391.

¹⁵Robert A. Hume, Missions from the Modern View (London: Fleming H. Revell, 1905), p. 137. The following is an extract from the Golden Stool, pp. 271-279, as quoted by Shropshire, op. cit., p. 391:

St. Paul's attitude towards the pagan society of his day was very different. Though he knew that slavery was an abominable evil he realized that it was part of the constitution of society and could not be overthrown without serious ramifying consequences. Not only did he not set up a Church rule against it; he

relationship to God which demands a break with sin, the new life is, nevertheless, entered into with a nature which needs constantly to be raised and enlightened by the vivifying grace of Christ and recreated by God's Holy Spirit. As the polygamy which existed before Christ's time was made into that pure and holy relationship which Western Christians now enjoy, even so will the Spirit of God revolutionize West African marriage.

It is the conviction of Dr. Westermarck and others that the solution to the whole question rests with the fact that time will take care of the problem. "Every progressive race tends to adopt monogamy."¹⁶ As monogamy has become the eventual practice among all progressive cultures, even so will monogamy become the eventual practice of West African society.

Primitive tribal life and custom is rapidly disintegrating under the political, economic and cultural impact effected by the West. Within the short span of seventy years, powerful forces of a scientific and industrial civilization have created new conditions of life and work. "For many Africans the conditions in which their polygamous system developed, and for which it provided, are passed away."¹⁷

even sent a slave back to his master. Yet he knew that ultimately the Christian conscience would revolt against and abolish slavery. This should be the Church's attitude toward polygamy.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Parrinder, The Bible and Polygamy (London: S.P.C.K., 1950), p. 70.

¹⁷ Price, op. cit., p. 24.

With the sudden breakdown of African culture is seen a growing disregard for ancestral customs and traditional sanctions. New environmental conditions and population movements to urban areas no longer remind the African of tribal traditions, with the result that they have acquired new notions of what is proper and profitable. Gradually, public opinion will come to the conclusion that monogamy is a better system for the people than polygamy. While the change-over to Christian sanctions is still far from complete, monogamy will become the practice not so much by direct legislation as by indirect influence of changed economic conditions, the increase of individual freedom, the rise of romantic love and the deepening respect for women as individuals.¹⁸

Inasmuch as polygamy does not stand by itself but is bound up with the whole social order, critics claim that it is not enough for the Church to preach against polygamy, but it must accompany the preaching with preventative and curative programs of action. Patience in arriving at workable solutions need not mean surrender for the Church, if it utilizes certain agencies and forces which can aid the natives in embracing monogamy. Mere moral condemnation can be reinforced with positive treatment.

By attacking the problem at its very source, the Church

¹⁸Ernest Gray, "Some Present Day Problems for African Christian Marriage," International Review of Missions, XLII (July, 1956), 268.

has a key to the solution of the problem. The most respectable reason for polygamy is found in cult and worship of ancestors and in the biologic-religious basis of marriage.¹⁹

By removing the possibility and reason for the existence of polygamy, the Church can best overcome a polygamous society.

Shropshire writes,

As long as the worship of ancestors remains in its present form so long will the possibility of a polygamous society be present. Not until ancestor worship has been assigned its proper place in a more transcendent religious system will polygamy be seen to be unnecessary and spiritually injurious.²⁰

This can come about only through the building-up process, when the Africans will come to know God not as "the Besetting One" but as a living Father, who is not only mighty and powerful, but also kind and gracious. In Christ they will find a Savior-Friend, who knows and understands their needs, who teaches that love is greater than clan and demonstrates the way of that love through forgiveness and a cross. In regard to the departed ancestors, they will learn that God is Lord both of the living and the dead and that all the saints in Christ are members of that same Body, here in time and in eternity. The message of the Church in answer to polygamy is strikingly clear. Success can be found in the energetic and faithful heralding of that message.

Moreover, in assisting the Christian proclamation, a

¹⁹ Supra, Chapter II, pp. 11f.

²⁰ Shropshire, op. cit., p. 394.

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curative and preventative program aimed at the secondary causes of polygamy must be introduced. In answer to the African's anxiety for offspring and the preservation of his race, the Church must assist in social, medical and child welfare work. Without taking definite steps to reduce the high infant mortality rate caused by abortions, premature birth, faulty midwifery and antenatal care, improper diet and tropical diseases, polygamy will be quite impossible to suppress. By reducing the mortality rate, the incidence of polygamy will also be lowered and Christian monogamy will not only be accepted but welcomed.²¹

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It is also of paramount importance that the Church pay great heed in its institutions of learning to the truths of natural science, that the false views which are entertained regarding social taboos may be rectified. The superstitious custom regarding the length of the time of weaning can be easily corrected. Puberty ceremonies, initiation rites and other social customs can also be raised through a correspondingly raised educational standard.

One of the most universally neglected areas of church work in West Africa is that of youth work, where the ideal of Christian love, courtship and marriage can be most easily inculcated into moral and spiritual life of young couples. After seventy-five years of organized mission activities,

²¹John Waddington Hubbard, "The Cause and the Cure of African Immorality," International Review of Missions, XXI (April, 1931), 250.

the Church has provided little or no opportunity for African youths to enjoy a public courtship, to learn the elevated concepts of mutual love and respect and to perfect the moral level of society. A vigorous and concentrated ministry to the youth must be enacted if polygamy is to give way to a higher order.

Furthermore, in view of the fact that monogamy already subsists in African society and is found inherent in native marriage,²² the Church should continue to vigorously pursue the Christian view of marriage in all the institutions of native society. With powerful and persuasive preaching, aided by the pressure of the whole economic and moral order and the witness of the Christian home, the African conscience will increasingly revolt against polygamy and accept the divine purposes of Christ.

A challenge is given to the Church by a West African Christian who appraises the present situation of polygamy.

To my mind the aim of the Church of Africa should be and is already, I believe, to make all Christians uphold and practice Christian monogamy. This is not going to be easy to achieve. Laws may make people marry only one wife, but it will be left for the individual to keep or not to the one wife whom he has taken. We may desire that Christian Africans should become monogamists on grounds of conformity or in order to be regarded as full orthodox members of the Universal Church. But this may not carry us near to the Christian ideal. We may wait until, for economic reasons, people cannot afford to have more than one wife. Then there will no longer be any virtue in it. . . . As Christians we are concerned with the question of how to be true to our calling. We see ourselves

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Supra, Chapter III, p. 50.

surrounded, to say the least, by unchristian standards; we know there are Christians all over the world who are legally maintaining a Christian standard and we believe that the African Christian is able in God's strength to be as faithful as any other Christian on God's earth. But before he is well-established he needs the guidance and sympathy of fellow-Christians from outside his own country; he needs guidance based upon real knowledge of all that is involved, and sympathy which is genuine and deep and which is not based upon the false assumption that the African is an inferior being, incapable of controlling himself and of attaining the high ideal of Christianity.²³

The apostle and missionary to the pagan world gives promise and assurance to those of the Church of West Africa

²³ S. I. Kale, "Polygamy in the Church in Africa," International Review of Missions, XXXI (April, 1942), 223. To aid the Church and community in seeking out patterns of Christian monogamy the following guidelines have been suggested by Welch. We summarize:

1. When using native marriage, rid it of unchristian features and confirm it with a blessing in church.
2. Because betrothal is as important as marriage itself, a Christian rite should emphasize this. A solemn ratification might be made in church and prayers offered for the betrothed.
3. Although the Church cannot fix bride-price, it can furnish guiding principles, so that marriage can be made available to all.
4. Church marriage should be publicized and be made mandatory. The spiritual and not merely social aspect is to be stressed.
5. Infant marriage should be discouraged.
6. Continue to employ the clan elders in advisory capacity and have them present in the church ceremony.
7. Stress importance and sacredness of the married state.
8. Provide opportunities for young men and women to meet before the age of betrothal.

Welch, Can Christian Marriage be African, pp. 29-32.

who labor with the problem and have accepted the challenge of polygamy. St. Paul writes, "It is my prayer that your love may be more and more rich in knowledge and all manner of insight enabling you to have a sense of what is vital."²⁴

²⁴ Philipians 1:9 (Moffatt Translation).

The question is raised as to whether polygamy is essential to individuality or is merely a factor in human civilization—whether in the presence of polygamy there is something radically incompatible with a true faith in Christ, and living of a true life in fellowship with Him.

As stated in Volume 1, the Church must maintain its individuality as a society. This is not a matter to be decided by the individual conscience—but determined in the will of God for the people whom He has redeemed and purified in Christ. Polygamy is not a mere factor of civilization; it is a part of the life of the Church and its value has been realized in its own experience. It was taught by the Lord Himself and has Scriptural authority as stated in (Deut. 17:17; 1 Tim. 3:12). Both for men and for women, polygamy indicates a failure to maintain the fullness of life which is in Christ.

It is impossible to conceive of the full development of the personality of the woman under the conditions which she obtains in polygamous life, nor indeed that of the man. Neither monogamy nor polygamy by itself will produce true Christian morality. All men are alike subject to temptation and only in Christ Jesus, the Lord and the Redeemer, can purity of life be maintained. Full Christian scientific teaching on the whole subject of marriage and of sex relationships in general is urgently needed. But the real positive Christian position in this whole matter is that redemption in Jesus Christ means the redemption of the whole man, body, soul and spirit. Christ's call is to "deny yourself, take up the Cross daily, and follow Me." This is costly and can only be done in the power of the Lord Christ Himself. The body is to

APPENDIX

RESOLUTION ADOPTED AT THE TAMBARAM CONFERENCE IN 1938

The following resolution, drawn up by a special group of Christians from Africa and adopted at the Tambaram Conference in 1938, gives testimony of their theological understanding and grasp of the issue involved in the Christian ideal of marriage.

The question is raised as to whether monogamy is essential to Christianity or is merely a factor in European civilization--whether in the practice of polygamy there is something radically incompatible with a vital faith in Christ, and living of a true life in fellowship with Him.

As stated at LeZoute, the Church must maintain its insistence on monogamy. This is not a matter to be settled by the individual conscience--the criterion is the will of God for the people whom He has redeemed and purified in Christ. Monogamy is not a mere factor of civilization; it is vital to the life of the Church and its value has been realized in its own experience, it was taught by the Lord Himself and has Scriptural authority behind it (Eph. 5:31-33; 1 Tim. 3:9,12). Both for men and for women, polygamy militates against the attainment of the fullness of life which is in Christ.

It is impossible to conceive of the full development of the personality of the woman under the conditions which she obtains in polygamous life, nor indeed that of the man. Neither monogamy nor polygamy by itself will produce true Christian morality. All men are alike subject to temptation and only in Christ Jesus, the Lord and the Redeemer, can purity of life be maintained. Full Christian scientific teaching on the whole subject of marriage and of sex relationships in general is urgently needed. But the real positive Christian position in this whole matter is that redemption in Jesus Christ means the redemption of the whole man, body, soul and spirit. Christ's call is to "deny thyself, take up the Cross daily, and follow Me." This is costly and can only be done in the power of the Lord Christ Himself. The body is to

be a temple of the Holy Ghost.

In the Christian ideal of marriage the partners enter into a physical and spiritual bond which makes them truly one (Eph. 5:31), and constitutes a holy partnership in the begetting and rearing a family which bring them into conscious fellowship with the holy purpose of God in creating man, male and female, and giving them the power of voluntarily co-operating with him in the perpetuation of the species.

In its purest form, this instinct and the love of children is so strong that it overcomes the evil attendant on the particular social customs under which the family is living.

In a holy partnership of this kind, the very exercise of the continence necessary at times becomes a spiritual companionship of man and wife in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is exemplified in thousands of beautiful homes in the Church, which bear a gracious testimony to the cleansing and hallowing power of the indwelling Christ; and the spiritual influence brought to bear on the children in such homes is of incalculable value in the on-going life of the Church.

It is such a relationship which the Lord has used as a symbol of His relationship with His Father, whereby the holy bond of Christian matrimony and the Christian family have been given a spiritual significance unattainable under the conditions of polygamy.

International Missionary Council, *The World Mission of the Church* (London: n.p., 1938), pp. 132-133.

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