

POLYGAMIST CONVERTS.

Shall we Baptize and receive them into Church Fellowship?

By a Missionary who has spent nearly 40 years among a Polygamous People.

This difficult question is one with which every Missionary Society having Missionaries in heathen lands where polygamy prevails has had, and has to deal. The matter has been many times discussed by eminent and learned men, and yet opinion on the subject seems as divided as ever. Perhaps if we could be deprived of the impressions made upon us by our Western law, and by our nineteenth century civilization, and by our Christian training from our youth up, and could be transported to early Christian times minus these, we might be able to arrive at a common solution of this question, which has become such an exceedingly difficult one. But when we Missionaries, carrying with us the effect of our surroundings from our earliest, our education and training, and the impression they have made upon our mind in respect to this subject, are suddenly placed in the midst of conditions of centuries ago, then the difficulties and dangers crowding around the question assume alarming magnitude; and the method of dealing with such persons when they apply for admission to the Church becomes a matter of the greatest concern to the Missionary.

I cannot presume a solution of this extremely difficult question, neither do I suppose that I shall say anything that has not already been said on the subject; but I will endeavour to humbly state what appears to me from the word of God the course indicated therein.

The difficulties that present themselves to the missionary generally place him in a dilemma, so that whichever way he turns he feels that he is confronted with dangers, and it is the attempt to escape from this dilemma that has resulted in the adoption of several conflicting methods which, according as they have been in harmony or discord with the Word of God, have helped or hindered the progress of the Gospel.

Three known methods have been adopted, which we will consider in the following order:—

METHOD I.

The polygamist convert, in order to be eligible for baptism and Church fellowship, is required to put away all his wives but one. (Some say the one retained must be his first, some say he may retain the one he loves best.)

The difficulties created by this method are of a most serious character, and the dangers alarming. That is, when compared with Scripture, and the obligations of the husband and the rights of his wives and children.

I would observe, in the language of the New Testament that “with God is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” From everlasting to everlasting He is perfect; there is no development with Him. What He was in the Patriarchal dispensation He was throughout the dispensation of the Mosaic economy, and is the same in the present dispensation of the Spirit. What is sin in one dispensation is sin in another; and is no more sin in the one than the other. Let me ask, therefore, if polygamy is such a heinous sin as this method would indicate, how is it that it is not denounced by God in any part of Scripture? Even the Law is silent on the subject, neither declaring it lawful or unlawful, and yet the people to whom it was given were a polygamous people, and were still so in the days of Christ. Is it not most significant that nowhere in Scripture is polygamy called sin. Not even once in the New Testament is it singled out as the extraordinary evil this method would indicate. Although the Jews were a polygamous people in the days of Christ, which history confirms, yet he does not refer to the custom. But he does refer to unlawful divorce, which he denounces in the strongest language, saying that “Everyone who divorceth his wife, *saving for unfaithfulness, causeth her to be made an adulteress*” (Matt. v. 32), and when questioned as to the permission given under Moses’ law to give a bill of divorcement, He answered that “it was because of the hardness of your hearts God allowed it,” adding “If a man *put away* his wife, except for adultery, and shall marry another, he committeth adultery, and he that married her when she is put away committeth adultery.” (Matt. xix. 9). Now I infer that, the Jews being a polygamous people, these words applied equally to polygamists and monogamists alike, and in all probability a number of the former were present when they were uttered.

This is by no means an argument in favour of polygamy, neither would we take it as indicating that polygamy is in any wise approved of God. The reference is to unlawful divorce alone, and I take it, considering the then existing conditions, that if any man, monogamist or polygamist, put away his wife for any cause, save unfaithfulness, he was guilty of direct breach of the law. If this be so, are not those who have adopted this method in danger of forcing men and women into grievous sin?

I am fully persuaded that it is far from the intention of the advocates of this method to say that God connived at sin, because He did not reprove for polygamy. Abraham, Jacob, or any of the Patriarchs, or David (to whom God Himself says "I gave thee thy master's wives into thy bosom," 2 Sam. xii. 8, and whose son Solomon [by Bathsheba] is blessed above all his children, and is even chosen to build God's house, a privilege which he denied to David, the man after His own heart), yet is not such a method tantamount to this?

A converted polygamist who applies for baptism to those who have adopted this method, is told that he cannot be baptised unless he puts away all his wives but one, (there is a difference of opinion as to which wife should be retained, some say the first, others the one he loves best), the reason given being, that God does not permit a man to have but one wife, and that he is living in sin in having a plurality of wives, which sin he must abandon. They do not say that he cannot be saved unless he do this, but in order to be a fit subject for baptism and Church fellowship he must do it, as the purity of the Church must be guarded.

The unfortunate man feels as if the door of the Kingdom into which he had been invited to enter had been slammed in his face; his mind is thrown into the greatest confusion, and the difficulties that present themselves before him seem altogether insurmountable, and he answers "How can I do this? What will become of them? and what about the children? besides, my wives would not agree to go, what then?" It is simply useless for the Missionary to attempt to answer these questions, for the moment he attempts to consider them other difficulties multiply without number, and he feels the problem beyond his power to solve, and he gets out of the difficulty by practically telling the unfortunate man that he has put himself into his present position, and must extricate himself as best he can. It seems to me that chaos could be the only result of such a method. But this is not all. What shall be said about the effect on the whole tribe, when it becomes known, and is discussed among them? Would not the barriers intended to guard the purity of the Church become not only a stumbling-block in the way of very many coming to Christ, by creating the impression that to them salvation was an impossibility, and make them absolutely indifferent to the Gospel, but also turn them into enemies?

That such is actually the result, personal observation during ^{fourteen} thirteen years' experience among the Amazulu has abundantly confirmed. I believe it has and is keeping hundreds away from Christ. I am aware that this is a strong statement, but other missionaries have come to the same conclusion. Is not every missionary and native evangelist who visits the people in their homes not only impressed with, but terribly depressed by the absolute indifference to the Gospel shown by polygamists and their wives, and do they not frequently meet with positive opposition? And how often to a man convicted of sin does salvation seem altogether a hopeless thing because of this great barrier put in his way? Now if this be so, is not the position of those who have adopted this method a very serious one, considered in the light of what Christ has said concerning those who cause offence?

To avoid the difficulty by saying that "We do not say that a man cannot be saved, but that he cannot be baptized unless he put away all his wives but one" is to contradict oneself, for does not the greater contain the lesser?

METHOD II.

Mr. R. N. Cust, LL.D., one of its advocates, states it as follows:—"Admit such a man as a catechumen; baptize his wives, two or three innocent women, (they are the wives of one husband) but tell him "You have placed yourself in such a situation that you cannot be admitted into the Church of Christ. We leave your future state to one who cannot do wrong, but we will not have the young Churches defiled by the admission of one who is a polygamist." He further adds that "This is the practice of one great Church in East Africa, the Universities Mission."

With regard to requiring a polygamist convert to put away his wives, Dr. Custs says "Shall we call a man to commit a second sin in order to wipe out a first sin? Shall we call him to put away innocent women to whom he has been married, with their children, and drive them into other sins by living with other men? God forbid! The second alternative of putting away the wives must not be entertained for a moment."

I will adopt the reply of the Rev. Professor T. Smith, D.D., of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, formerly of Calcutta, which reply expresses my own thought exactly. He says "I endorse all that Dr. Cust said with regard to polygamy getting into the Church." It never can get into the Church, because it is an impossibility that any Christian can desire to be married to two wives, and it is an impossibility that any Christian minister can marry a man to two wives." He further adds "The Apostle has put a brand upon bigamy and polygamy by preventing a polygamist from holding office in the Christian Church; but I think that the very prohibition implies that there were men otherwise eligible—that is, that they could be members of the Church, but were debarred from holding office in the Church by that brand being put upon them. "We have no right," continues the Professor, "to exclude polygamists, and certainly no right to require of them to abandon their wives; and least of all can I admit that we should keep them waiting as catechumens for an indefinite period, making their admission to the Church dependent upon the death of some unfortunate women."

The Rev. John Ross, of the United Presbyterian Missionary Society, Manchuria, in support of this, says, "The only practical solution is 'Let those who are truly believers be baptized, if they *are* polygamists, but make short work of a Christian who takes a second wife. In that way you will soon root out polygamy.'"

METHOD III.

We now come to the third and last method, which may be briefly stated as follows:—Believing polygamists may be baptized and admitted to the Church; but they may not hold office therein, according to 1 Tim. iii. 12, and Titus i. 6, but no baptized person, monogamist or polygamist, may add to the number of his wives.

This is the conclusion at which, from a careful study of the Word of God on the subject I arrived some years ago, and it is the only method that appears to me to be in harmony with the light which it throws upon this made-difficult subject. This course appears to me the only one that provides a firm foundation on which to stand in respect of this matter; the only one that opens up a clear course of action, and frees from fear of any difficulties that may be brought by the people when they have learned to read the Word of God for themselves; the only one that bears the stamp of sound common sense, and appeals to reason as right. And be it observed that so far is it from giving countenance to polygamy, that if strictly followed it would now, without doubt, as in the days of the Early Church, speedily accomplish its complete extirpation, and that without violence or harshness to those who had previously been entangled with polygamy.

But it is objected by those who hold the other views that "It cannot be shown that polygamists had been baptized at all in the Ancient Church, and they must not be now; but the purity of the Church must be carefully guarded." On the other hand is not the absence of record most significant and is it not, in the light of the then existing conditions, an argument in proof of the right to do so being beyond question?

That polygamists were admitted to the Ancient Church, the Apostle's specific directions regarding those who should hold the office of Bishop or Deacon, seems to place beyond doubt, otherwise the directions were superfluous. But as the men who should hold these important offices were to be exemplifications of the perfect mind of God, it was required of them to be "perfect," complete. There was to be no deformity, nothing lacking, nothing superfluous, hence a polygamist was disqualified, as under the Mosaic economy a priest having any deformity, or lack, or superfluity in his person was disqualified to minister in holy things, but this disqualification for service did not preclude his partaking of the holy things. Lev. xxi. 17-24.

It is further objected that "if polygamists are admitted to the Church, monogamist members would not be able to understand why they should not be allowed to take a second wife." Well, such a thing is possible, but I have a higher idea of the intelligence of the Amazulu, especially those enlightened by the Holy Ghost. The danger, I am persuaded, is not in the occurrence of such cases, but rather in failing to adhere strictly to the Apostle's directions, and the prompt administration of discipline.

It is also objected that there would be some unprincipled men who would say "We will wait until we have taken two or three wives, and then we will apply for Church membership." But I read in the Word of God that "it is not of him that willeth, or of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy." Besides, as each case would be dealt with on its own merits, would not such persons fall into the snare of their own deceit? and again, would not the fact that polygamy disqualified for office in the Church effectually prevent the occurrence of such cases as these? But above all, we must be careful not to leave the Holy Ghost out of the question.

I have been greatly strengthened by discovering that this method is the one adopted by a number of the most prominent Missionary Societies.

The Rev. J. Hudson Taylor, of the China Inland Mission, speaking on this subject some years ago, said : " I went out to China some 34 years ago, holding very strongly the view that I suppose most hold, namely, that every man having more than one wife, if converted, must be prepared to put them aside. I have read and studied the Word of God on that subject, and I was pleased to see in a pamphlet the other evening the very conclusion that I and many others have been led to express here. This pamphlet is a brief examination of the Old and New Testament Scriptures on marriage, polygamy, and concubinage. There is one sentence in it which gives you briefly the *conclusion that we were led to in considering the matter*. ' Thousands of persons were speedily converted when the Holy Ghost came down, and were received as members, but there is no proof that before they were received enquiry was made as to their previous family arrangements, or that any who were found to be the husbands of more than one wife, were constrained to retain only one, and put the others away. Nevertheless, without violence or harshness to those who had previously been entangled with the sins of polygamy, its speedy extirpation was made.' " And Mr. Taylor adds " I hold that there is no lawful cause to put away a wife, except that of adultery."

In support of these views expressed by Mr. Taylor, the Rev. Francis H. James, of the B.M.S., China, says :—

" I think a common-sense interpretation of the Scriptures, as stated by Mr. Hudson Taylor, is certainly on our side. We do not want to go back to rules made 40 or 50 years ago. We want the teaching of Scripture in its clearest passages, and when we have that we are safe," and continuing, he says, " I believe that in the sight of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the sight of God, those who are in the position of our opponents are wrong, and I hope the day will come soon when they will heartily repent, and change their way of dealing with this matter."

The Rev. John Hewlett, of the L.M.S., Benares, who also holds this view, mentions an aspect of the matter which has received but little attention in this paper. He says : " Sometimes it happens that a man who has two wives becomes convinced of the truth of Christianity, and wishes to be baptized. Some Missionaries would tell him that he cannot be baptized unless he puts away his second wife, although she may have children by him. Other Missionaries would take the opposite view, and I have been compelled to take that view. I feel that the women have rights as much as the men. As all his wives married him in good faith, according to the law and sentiment of the country, have they not rights as much as he? They did no wrong, according to their light, in marrying. As to the children, the husband could keep them, I suppose, but then they would be deprived of the mother's love and care; have they no rights? I believe," he continues, " that the putting away of the wife under these circumstances is revolting to all our best feelings; and if so, are they not revolting to the feelings of the God of Love?" He further adds, " Well, sometimes such a man really embraces Christianity." " But," it has been asked, " would you not only baptize such a man, but also receive him into Church fellowship?" Yes, but I would not give him any office in the Church. " There is another point," he says. " It has been asked, but not answered, would you admit all the wives of such a man into Church fellowship? Yes, if I had reason to believe that all the wives were truly converted."

The Basle Missionary Society also follows this method. The Rev. Paulus Kammerer, of that Society, says " The Basle Mission has settled this question in this way. We admit polygamists to the congregation, but not to any official post, and," he adds, " I think there is nothing in Scripture against this method."

It is the method adopted also by the Moravian Mission. The resolution passed at the General Synod of 1879 read as follows :—

" Baptism of Polygamists and Polyandrists. Polygamy and Polyandry are opposed to the idea of Christian marriage. It is therefore the duty of our Missionaries to bear a decided testimony against these heathenish customs. While it can on no account be permitted that baptized persons form such connections, the Synod was conscious that there might be cases in which it would lead to yet greater sin if a heathen before his baptism were obliged to dismiss all his wives but one, and therefore resolved :—

" That in exceptional cases, and only in such, polygamists may be admitted to holy baptism, but polyandrists in no case. These exceptions are to be considered and determined upon by the Mission Conference of the district in which such cases occur."

“ It is a matter of course that a baptized man living in polygamy cannot be appointed to office in the Church.”

The Swedish Holiness Mission at work in Natal and Zululand has adopted the same method.

In conclusion, I would observe that we, as messengers of Christ, have not come to this land to attack the manners and customs of the people which could only result in making them enemies of the Gospel; but to declare against *sin*, and to proclaim the Gospel of the grace of God, and having baptized those who have believed, to teach them to observe all things whatsoever He has said unto us, and this, carried out according to the perfect Word of God, and in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, can have no other than the designed result.

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