

## MULTIPLE WIVES: What is a counsellor to do?

Joel James

Grace Fellowship-Pretoria

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This is an actual problem in African churches, not a hypothetical one, a problem that affects real people. Therefore, the subject should be discussed carefully and thoughtfully, not as an abstract, academic problem easily dismissed with a superficial answer.

### Initial question:

*Is the marrying of multiple wives (or marrying a man who already has one or more wives) legal in the country or countries under consideration?*

- If it is *illegal*, the solution is simple: the man is not legally married to any woman except his first wife. Divorce is not necessary: the subsequent relationships are not valid; they are adulterous.
- If marrying multiple wives is *legal* (usually in the form of traditional tribal practices allowed to exist under national law), then all the wives are *legal* wives under the laws of that country (Romans 13:1ff.). Note: This paper assumes that marriage is an institution given by God to the human race and is governed by *civil authority* (family, tribal, or national government, depending on the context; Gen 2:24), not the church.<sup>1</sup>

### Guidelines for the discussion:

- The authority of Scripture. Bible passages that comment directly or indirectly on the issue must have priority in shaping our view on this matter. We should avoid taking a position based merely on the fact that we are intuitively repulsed by the concept of or difficulties surrounding marrying multiple wives.
- Consistency. Whatever view we take, its foundational principle(s) should be able to be applied consistently to other similar marriage scenarios.

### Note:

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<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that a civil government can declare homosexual "marriage" to be a marriage. Genesis 2:24 refers to a *man* being joined to his *woman*. The institution which God gave to civil authority to govern is *inherently* male/female. A man can no more marry another man than he can marry a rabbit or a kangaroo. However, civil authority does have the responsibility within its sphere of influence to determine its rules and practices regarding male/female marriage.

In this paper, the validity of God's one man/one woman plan for marriage is *not* being questioned. Although not stated directly in Scripture, God's one man/one woman plan is implied repeatedly and is, I believe, unassailable. Our question here is, What do we do when God's plan for marriage was violated *before* someone converts to Christ?

### Three Potential Solutions:

People usually offer one of three solutions to address the problem of a man who legally married multiple wives before he became a Christian (Note: we also have to consider how to counsel a woman who is already a man's second or third legal wife when *she* becomes a Christian. But for simplicity's sake, we'll address the problem from the point of view of a newly converted husband with multiple wives.)

#### **Option 1: Divorce all except the first wife.**

Support:

- God's one man/one woman plan for marriage
- Ezra's example in Ezra 9-10 (After the return from Babylon, Ezra encouraged Jewish men who had married unbelieving, non-Jewish wives to divorce those wives.)

The *unstated principle* behind this position is this: If someone is in a legal marriage, but he entered into that legal marriage in disobedience to Scripture, then the marriage must be ended by divorce.

Problems:

- This position is inconsistent with how Christians handle similar situations (i.e., legal marriages entered into in a disobedient way). In other words, in what other situation would you *require* divorce when God's plan for marriage was violated before conversion? Consider two scenarios:

1) A Christian widow meets and marries an unbeliever, violating 1 Corinthians 7:39, which says that she is to remarry only *in the Lord*. Three years later she starts to attend your church. She is legally married to her unbelieving husband, but entered into that marriage in disobedience to Scripture. What would you do? Would you require that she divorce her unbelieving husband? No. She should acknowledge her sin, ask God's forgiveness, and you would encourage her to remain as she is, being the best wife she can be to her unbelieving husband. You would also ask that she encourage other

widows in the church not to imitate her sinful choice to marry an unbeliever.

2) Two professing believers divorce without biblical grounds. Subsequently, they meet and marry each other. After this unbiblical remarriage they start to attend your church. They have violated God's plan for marriage by remarrying after an unbiblical divorce and their sexual relationship is, in that sense, perpetual adultery according to Matthew 5 and 19. Do you require the couple to divorce? No. They should acknowledge that they have sinned by violating God's plan for marriage and embrace His gracious forgiveness. After that, they remain as they are, legally married under the laws of the land, humbled but rejoicing in God's perpetual grace, freely fulfilling their marital obligations to each other, including sexual relations.

Summary:

Requiring a man with multiple *legal* wives to divorce his subsequent wives because (as an unbeliever) he married in disobedience to God's plan for marriage is inconsistent with how we handle other "disobedient, but legally married" situations.

- Ezra 9-10. Is this biblical narrative prescriptive or descriptive? We have no assurance from a teaching section of Scripture that Ezra's action is to be imitated. In fact, 1 Corinthians 7 says that to divorce an unbelieving spouse who wants to remain married to you is forbidden. Whatever its validity in the OT era, Ezra's solution is unbiblical in a NT context.
- How will the unbelieving family and neighbours of the newly converted man (not to mention his wives and children) respond when the church requires that he divorce all of his wives to whom he is fully and legally married in their culture? They will conclude, "Christianity destroys families." While this concern is not determinative, it does cause us to pause and reflect on the seriousness of this decision.

### **Option 2: De facto divorce.**

The man does not divorce his subsequent wives, but he is required to impose *de facto divorce*: he denies sexual rights and all other normal forms of spiritual and emotional intimacy to all but his first wife. Only financial support is given to his subsequent wives.

Support:

- The general principle of God's one man/one woman plan for marriage.

- The fact that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) leads to avoiding the actual-divorce option.

Problems:

- *De facto divorce* condemns a subsequent wife of the newly converted man to a banished, nun-like status in which she has all the restrictions of marriage, but none of its blessings. She can't have sex, bear children, or enjoy emotional and spiritual intimacy with the man to whom she is legally married. All she gets is an alimony cheque each month. Such banishment puts her in a position of extreme shame in her culture and family. Furthermore, since she is still legally married under the laws of her country, she can never pursue remarriage. She is married without its benefits; single without its freedom. Needless to say, this is an awful situation for the woman.
- At least two OT passages address the subject of the treatment of subsequent wives in a context where marrying multiple wives was not God's plan, but was *legal*.
  - Exodus 21:10-11. The Mosaic law required that if a man took a subsequent wife or concubine, both women had to be given full marriage rights (including sexual relations) even if the first wife was a slave. If the man refused to give these rights, the first woman was to be released from her slavery without the usual emancipation payment because her husband's treatment of her was unjust. Point: If a man had multiple wives, God *required* that both wives be given full marriage rights, including sexual relations.
  - Deuteronomy 21:15-17. The Mosaic law said that the children of neither initial nor subsequent wives could be treated as second-rate children. They had to be given full inheritance rights.

Note: NT believers are not directly under the Mosaic law code, but these laws are at least suggestive as to how God might view the matter today.

- To counsel a man to cease having sexual relationships with his legally married subsequent wives leads to a powerful temptation for the newly converted husband to commit "adultery" with his subsequent wives. But how can this be viewed as adultery if he is legally married to them?

Consider an analogous biblical situation. When David slept with Bathsheba, it was rightly considered adultery and he had to repent. But when David slept with Abigail, whom he legally married as a subsequent wife, Nathan did not confront David nor did David write a psalm of repentance. This was true even though David foolishly and disobediently

ignored God's command in Deuteronomy 17:14-17 that the king should not multiply wives (see also God's comment to David about giving him Saul's wives in 2 Samuel 12:8).

Point:

While marrying multiple wives is not God's plan for marriage, there is little or no biblical precedent for labelling sexual relations with subsequent, *legally* married (*pre-conversion*) wives "adultery." In fact, the OT law forbade a husband to withhold sexual relations from one of his legally married wives.

### **Option 3: Remain as you are.**

The newly converted husband keeps all of his legally married wives (but can seek no more), and fulfills his obligations to all of them, while publicly acknowledging that his pursuit of multiple wives in his unbelieving state was a rejection of God's plan for marriage.

In the case of a wife who is converted to Christ and is one of several wives, she continues to fulfil her marriage obligations to her husband, while acknowledging that her marriage to him (as a subsequent wife) was a pre-conversion behaviour not to be repeated or imitated.

Support:

- While there is no NT text that specifically addresses the issue of multiple wives, 1 Corinthians 7 is the NT passage written to tell believers what to do if they have messed up their social relationships (including marriage) before conversion. Although Paul deals with a number of exceptions to his rule, the baseline principle in 1 Corinthians 7 repeatedly emphasised throughout the chapter is *Remain as you are*.
  - the unmarried and widows (7:8)
  - a believer married to an unbeliever (7:10-16)
  - circumcised or uncircumcised (7:20)
  - slave or free (7:24)
  - married or single (7:26-27, 40)

Paul's summary: ... *as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.* (7:17)

### **Conclusion**

In the only NT passage that touches the kind of scenario we are discussing, Paul's emphatic principle was *Remain as you are*. Furthermore, although the matter of

multiple wives was not under consideration, it is worth noting that Paul discouraged divorce and withholding sexual relations as possible solutions to confused (legal) marriage situations.

Therefore, based on that, and on the suggestive evidence of the Mosaic commands, *Option 3* seems to be the most sustainable option, biblically speaking. It is drawn from the texts that directly or indirectly comment on the subject. It is the only view that is consistent with how Christians handle similar situations, such as a believing widow who has disobeyed married an unbeliever and then starts to attend your church.

Since the man is legally married to all of his wives under the laws of his land, if he or one of his wives converts to Christ, he or she should follow Paul's NT counsel to *Remain as you are*, joyfully fulfilling all of his or her marriage obligations, repentantly acknowledging the wrong choice he or she made before conversion, and living in the perpetual grace of God in his or her disobediently entered, legal marriage.

A counter argument:

It is rightly suggested that the *Remain as you are* option leads to a messy situation in the church when the newly converted man shows up on Sunday with his three wives. True enough. But it is also fair to ask, Are the other solutions any *less* messy?

Consider the chaos and emotional pain that will result when a church requires a new convert to divorce or banish his second and third wives (to whom, let's say, he has been married to for ten years and with whom he has five children). The devastation of an imposed divorce or banishment isn't exactly pretty for that man, his two subsequent wives, and their five children. In fact, their lives have been shattered by the man's conversion to Christ.

There is no clean-cut, easy solution to this problem (so typical of sin, isn't it). However, it seems that in light of 1 Corinthians 7, the messy solution that God instructs the church to embrace is the *Remain as you are* solution.

The wisdom of this is clear. Under this option, *the church* bears the burden and the awkwardness of having an attendee with three wives. The church handles this by providing instruction on God's gracious forgiveness and by teaching a biblical view of marriage. In contrast, in the other two options, *the family* bears, not merely awkwardness, but the shattering devastation of divorce or banishment. If someone must bear the awkwardness in these situations, should it not be *the church*, rather than the newly converted man and his unconverted family?

Paul's *Remain as you are* instruction puts the pressure on the church, the ones most prepared to bear it.

**Subsequent issues:**

- Once a man with multiple wives becomes a Christian, he must be put under church discipline if he pursues further wives (even if it is legal to do so in his culture). If a Christian woman pursues marriage with a man who already has one or more wives, she must be put under church discipline (even if such a marriage would be legal in the eyes of civil authority). *Pre-conversion* disobedient marriages are tolerated under the *Remain as you are* principle of 1 Corinthians 7. *Post-conversion* disobedient marriages are not.
- A new convert with multiple wives must be taught that marrying more than one wife was a violation of God's plan for marriage. He should be encouraged to acknowledge publicly his pre-conversion disobedience and should be encouraged to teach his children and others never to imitate his sinful pre-conversion choices.
- Although the primary point of Paul's instruction about elders does not seem to be the number of wives an elder can have at one time, nonetheless, a man who converts to Christ and is married to multiple wives can never serve as an elder (1 Tim 3:1-2; Titus 1:5-6).