

Polygamy

One common belief that many Christians have is that polygamy is a sin. The only groups I'm aware of that promote polygamy (beside fringe cults) are Mormonism and Islam. Many people seem to have a firm belief that God hates polygamy.

If polygamy is a terrible sin then you'd think it would be easy to find proof of this in the Bible, but that's not the case. In fact, what the Bible actually has to say about polygamy is quite unexpected – and I'd like to spend some time talking about it.

Some people have argued that since God gave Adam just one wife, that proves polygamy is a sin. After all, Genesis says that the man shall cleave to his “wife”, not “wives”:

Genesis 2:23-24: “And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”

If that theory was correct then you would expect there to be some provision in the Mosaic Law which prohibited polygamy. The Law of Moses contains hundreds of laws, many of which prohibiting various types of sexual relations (Leviticus 18). There are regulations about leprosy (Leviticus 13), about what to do if you find mold in your house (Leviticus 14:33-55), about the types of food you're allowed to eat (Leviticus 11), and even about the type of clothing you could wear. Nothing was too small to escape notice, and yet despite all of that *there's nothing which prohibits polygamy*. Instead the Mosaic Law actually allows for cases where a man might have multiple wives:

Deuteronomy 21:15-17: “If a man have two wives, one beloved, and another hated, and they have born him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated: Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn: But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.”

Notice that the passage does *not* say “No man should ever have two wives, period.” Instead it assumes that this will happen and it talks about the inheritance ramifications. Nowhere does it ever imply that having multiple wives is somehow bad.

The closest that the Mosaic Law comes to prohibiting the accumulation of wives is found in its regulations regarding kings:

Deuteronomy 17:14-17: “When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me; Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother. But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way. Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that

his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.”

This may seem like a clear prohibition on having more than one wife, but it's actually not. King David had quite a few wives (2 Samuel 3:2-6 lists a total of six wives), and at one point God said that *He* was the one who gave all of them to David:

2 Samuel 12:7-8: “And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul; And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.”

Let me repeat that: God Himself is the one who gave King David his many wives – and He said that if they weren't enough *He would have given David more*. Deuteronomy 17:17 clearly doesn't limit the king to having just one wife.

Now, that doesn't mean the prohibition had no meaning. King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and the Bible criticized Solomon for that:

1 Kings 11:1-3: “But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites: Of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three

hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart."

Solomon's 700 wives were a serious problem – but David's 6 wives were not. David's sin wasn't polygamy; it was taking someone else's wife and murdering her husband. That's an entirely different matter.

The closest I've found to a verse that prohibits polygamy are these verses from the New Testament:

1 Timothy 3:2: "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;"

1 Timothy 3:12: "Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well."

Titus 1:5-6: "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly."

There's a great deal of controversy over what the phrase “husband of one wife” means. I side with those who believe it's addressing faithfulness, and its real concern is that church leaders should be faithful men who aren't given to fornication or adultery. However, even if the verse is talking about polygamy, these verses are listing the qualifications for bishops, deacons, and elders. That means that it only applies to *bishops, deacons, and elders*. Anyone who isn't a bishop, deacon, or elder isn't affected.

You might argue that “everyone should strive to meet these qualifications”, but that's not true. Elders are required to be

married and have children, but the Bible definitely doesn't require all Christians to get married! Bishops are supposed to be “apt to teach” and many people don't have that ability. Some Christians simply don't meet the criteria for being church leaders and that doesn't make them bad people. (I would be pretty upset with a pastor who argued that since church leaders must be married and have children, *everyone* should be married and have children. That simply isn't correct.)

Some people may argue that God hated polygamy and simply tolerated it, just like He hated divorce but allowed it under the Mosaic Law. The problem with this theory is that the reason we know God hates divorce is because *He repeatedly said that He hated it*. For example:

Matthew 19:7-9: “They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.”

Where are the passages where God said that He hated polygamy as well, and only allowed it because of the hardness of people's hearts? They are nowhere to be found. Instead we see God telling David that if he had wanted more wives than the 6 which he already had, *God would have provided them*. That doesn't sound like a hatred of polygamy to me.

There are many times throughout the Old and New Testament where fornication and adultery are condemned, along with a great many other sins – but polygamy is never mentioned. The Bible simply doesn't condemn it. The fact remains that one of

the blessings that God gave King David was *multiple wives*. That pretty much rules out the idea that polygamy is a sin.

However, let me be clear about something: just because polygamy isn't a sin *doesn't mean it's a good idea*. I want to go on record as saying *it's a really terrible idea*. When you add additional wives to your life you're multiplying the number of problems you have. There are all kinds of problems that come along with having multiple wives. (If you think keeping one wife happy is hard, imagine trying to keep up with 6 of them!) There are quite a few people in the Bible who had multiple wives, and in each case it seemed to have led to a life of endless problems. Jacob had two wives and that led to a lifetime of family strife. There's also the very important fact that *polygamy is illegal* – not just in this country but in many countries around the world.

If you want to argue that polygamy is a terrible idea that makes life much worse then I have no issue with that at all. In a world where there's roughly the same number of men as women it's impractical for *everyone* to have multiple wives. However, it's not true that the Bible condemns polygamy. Having multiple wives isn't a good idea, but it's not a sin.