

RIGHT or WRONG? Polygamy

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The Old Testament talks about polygamy—multiple wives, never multiple husbands. Increasingly, I’m hearing about Christian sects that practice polygamy. State laws preclude multiple spouses, but what is a New Testament/Christian argument against polygamy?

The eyes of Texas—and the world—focused on polygamy this year as people spent days riveted to their television sets watching the unfolding events surrounding Child Protective Services’ invasion of the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints sect in Eldorado. Most people were unaware a large polygamist population still existed in the United States, and uncovering this religious practice led many Christians to examine the issue critically for the first time.

As you mentioned, the Old Testament contains many instances of polygamy. Some of our greatest Old Testament heroes had multiple wives. So, is there anything in the New Testament that addresses the subject? In short, we won’t find a verse that says, “Thou shalt not commit polygamy.” No such direct discourse is available. Neither Jesus nor any of the other writers specifically address the subject.

What they do address is something of the nature of marriage itself. In the parallel passages of Matthew 19 and Mark 10, Jesus comments on the challenge of the Pharisees concerning divorce. He directs them back to Genesis 1 and 2 and reminds them that a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one flesh. In all the discussion, both Jesus and the Pharisees continue to refer in the singular to one husband and one wife. The “two” become “one.”

In addition, these passages discuss the subject of adultery if a husband improperly divorces his wife and marries another (again singular) woman. The admonition against adultery is quite clear, so any meaningful discussion must address this point.

In the family relationship guidelines of Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3, Paul and Peter always use singular or plural nouns together, never a singular “husband” with multiple “wives.”

Paul also refers to polygamy in his requirements of elders and deacons. In Titus 1:6 and 1 Timothy 3:2, 12, he requires that each of these officers be “the husband of one wife.” Literally, the wording describes a “one-woman man.” While these passages often have been used to discuss the concepts of divorced elders/deacons, the passages really speak directly against a polygamist holding these offices. Paul considers a polygamous marriage to fall short of the spiritual ideal.

Anyone could argue these positions fall short of a biblical mandate. Perhaps no mandate, but they certainly do make a strong argument against polygamy.

Van Christian, pastor

First Baptist Church

Comanche

Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.