

LECTURE 8: DIVORCE, POLYGAMY, AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Divorce and remarriage

See esp. John Murray, *Divorce*; also Jay Adams, *Divorce and Remarriage*; also Joe M. Sprinkle, "Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage," *JETS* 40/4 (Dec., 1997), 529-50

In the OT divorce was an option allowed the Israelites, for the cause of עֲרֻוָּה *erwāh*, indecorous, indecent, obscene, disgraceful conduct (Deut 24:1-4). In those cases the divorced persons could not remarry each other after one of them had married another person.

Jesus taught that this allowance of divorce was not ideal (Matt 19:8). He taught that unbiblical divorce put the divorced spouse in the position of becoming an adulterer (along with that person's new spouse), and that it was adultery for the person divorcing his spouse unbiblically to remarry.

Divorce passages in the Gospels:

- Galilean ministry, Matt 5:32
- Peraean ministry, Luke 16:18
- Final Judean ministry, Matt 19:9 = Mark 10:11-12

Other passages:

- Paul on desertion, 1 Cor 7:10-15
- Marriage dissolved by death, Rom 7:1-3

Jesus used an exclusion clause ("except for marital unfaithfulness") in Matt 5:32 and 19:9. That clause is not recorded in Mark or Luke. The term (πορνεία *porneia*) refers to all kinds of sexual sin or perversion.

Paul allows that, in the case of a person being deserted by his spouse, the person may seek a divorce and may remarry, "only in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:15, 39).

In both the above cases, the guilty party has effectively destroyed the marriage already, just as though he had died. For this reason, the Westminster Confession (24:5-6) recognizes these as the only two justifiable reasons for obtaining a divorce, with the consequent right to remarry:

"Adultery or fornication, committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract. In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and after the divorce to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.

"Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage; yet nothing but adultery, or such willful

desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.”

Polygamy

[Good article by R. K. Harrison, “Polygamy,” *New ISBE* 3:901-902]

Polygamy means “many marriages” (πολλοί *polloi*, “many” + γαμέω *gameo*, “to marry”); *polygyny* means many wives, and *polyandry* means many husbands.

God created monogamy with Adam and Eve (Gen 2:20-24). The importance of this beginning is stated by Jesus (Matt 19:8). Since then the birth rate is about 19 boys per 18 girls, confirming the intent of creation. Polygamy, as usually practiced, denies the rights of other men, and requires the unnatural life of eunuchs for many.

In the OT many practiced polygamy: Lamech of the line of Cain (Gen 4:19; there is no evidence of polygamy in the line of Seth, Gen 5); polygamy was indicated in the wicked pre-flood world (Gen 6:2), while Noah and his sons were monogamous (Gen 6:18; cf. 8 people in 1 Pet. 3:20). After the flood polygamy developed again, along with tribal wars, surplus of women, slavery, and concubinage. It was practiced by Abraham (Gen 16:3, but not apparently by Isaac), Esau (Gen 26:34; 28:8-9), Jacob (Gen 29-30, but not apparently by Joseph or Judah). Moses and Joshua were monogamous. Polygamy was practiced by many judges: Gideon (Jud. 8:30), Jair (Judg 10:4), Ibzan (Judg 12:9), Abdon (Judg 12:14), Elkanah father of Samuel (1 Sam 1:2); but Jephthah, Samson, and Samuel were monogamous. Besides various individuals mentioned in the genealogies (the sons of Izrahiah of the tribe of Issachar, and Shaharaim of the tribe of Benjamin; 1 Chr 7:4; 8:8), many kings in Judah were polygamous: Saul (2 Sam 12:8), David (2 Sam 2:2; 3:13-15; 5:13; God “gave” these wives to him, 2 Sam 12:8), Solomon (1 Kgs 11:3; cf. Song 6:8), Rehoboam (2 Chr 11:21), Abijah (2 Chr 13:21), Joash (2 Chr 24:3), probably Josiah (2 Kgs 23:31, 36; 24:18—brother [2 Chr 36:4]). Esther was a part of the large harem of Artaxerxes (Esth 2:13-14). Herod the Great, King of the Jews in the time of Jesus’ birth, was polygamous (Josephus, *Ant.* 17:1:3).

The Mosaic law permitted and regulated some aspects of polygamy:

- Exod 21:10 – Jewish female slave – to be married
- Lev 18:18 – not to marry a wife and her sister
- Deut 21:15-17 – if one wife loved more than another
- Deut 25:5-10 – Levirate marriage; *levir* = “husband’s brother”

However, most Israelites had only one wife (Prov 12:4; 19:14; 31:10-29). And in general the OT showed its approval of monogamy (Ps 128:3; Prov 5:18; 18:22 [19:14; 31:10-29]; Eccl 9:9).

Likewise, the OT gives several laws or examples which discourage polygamy:

- Not a “suitable helper” if part of a harem

- No castrated men (necessary for eunuchs) allowed in the congregation (Deut 23:1)
- Favoring one wife forbidden (Exod 21:15-18)
- Examples of jealousy of wives (Jacob’s wives, Gen 29-30; Elkanah and Hannah, 1 Sam 1:2ff; Rehoboam and Maacha, 2 Chr 11:21)
- Kings not to multiply wives to themselves (Deut 17:17)

After the captivity in Babylon and into NT times monogamy was the rule (cf. Mal 2:15; Ezra 9:2; 10:3; Matt 18:25; 19:3-9; see also Tob 1:11; 2:19; 8:4, 13; Susan 29, 63; Sir 26:1-27). There is no regulation of polygamy in the NT, with the assumption that monogamy was practiced and approved; one wife was assumed (Eph 5:23, cf. 4:4; also 2 Cor 11:2; cf. 1 Cor 7:2; 9:5). Monogamy was explicitly required for church officers (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6).

In the time of Paul, while polygamy was prevalent in Greek culture, it was illegal for Jews and for Romans; and since NT times was not tolerated in the churches. There is no extant case of a baptized polygamist for 1500 years. A prominent case was Philip Landgrave of Hesse, who took another wife on the advice of Martin Luther—the most notorious case in Protestant history.

Statement of conference of missionaries in Calcutta, 1834 (unanimous vote of Baptist, London and Church Missionary Societies, Church of Scotland, American Presbyterian Board):

“If a convert before becoming a Christian has married more wives than one, in accordance with the practice of the Jewish and early Christian churches, he shall be permitted to keep them all: but such a person is not eligible to any office in the Church. In no other case is polygamy to be tolerated among Christians.” (quoted from Brown, *History of Missions* 3/365-366, in J. H. Worman, “Polygamy,” McClintock and Strong *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* 8/366)

Sexual perversion

See J. J. Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, ch. 5, “Homosexuality”; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an OT Ethics*, pp. 114-19, 195-97.

Biblical and Christian doctrine regarding the purpose of sex as created by God are very clear. Sexual union is to take place between man and woman within the bonds of marriage.

Homosexual activity is consistently regarded with loathing in Scripture. Examples of its practice in the OT are in Genesis 19 and Judges 19. It is condemned in the law (Lev 18:22; 20:13) and in the NT (Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). Nowhere in the Bible does any passage approve of homosexuality or regulate its behavior or relations, including those passages which deal with marriage, family, celibacy, slavery, or civil relations. There is absolutely no Scriptural warrant for this activity, but rather universal condemnation. Yet, in spite of the odiousness of this sin, it can be forgiven and cleansed by God (1 Cor 6:9-11).

It follows from the biblical standards for sexual behavior stated above, that any other forms of sexual perversion are entirely against Scripture and against nature. They display the irony of sin: the true and

legitimate pleasure which God has intended is lost, and replaced with behavior that is miserable and degrading, and results in estrangement and death.