

# AFRICAN BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY & CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

**Frederick Mawusi Amevenku & Isaac Boaheng**



Foreword by Jonathan Edward Tetteh Kuwornu-Adjaottor

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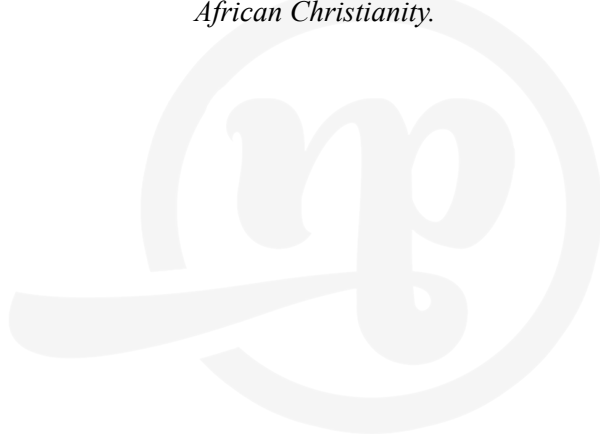
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*We dedicate this book to the teeming youth of  
African Christianity.*



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# Table of Contents

DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
FOREWORD	viii
PREFACE	xi
<b>CHAPTER ONE - CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE</b>	<b>1</b>
The Nature of Christian Marriage	2
What Christian Marriage is Not	5
Customary Marriage and Ordinance Marriage	8
Customary Marriage Rites: Engagement or Wedding?	11
Customary Marriage: Godly or Ungodly?	12
Duplicity in African Christian Marriage	19
An African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony	21
Some Proposals for a New Orientation	25
Conclusion	25
Review Questions	25
<b>CHAPTER TWO - DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE</b>	<b>27</b>
Divorce is not God's Standard	27
Divorce is not Permissible for Every Situation	28
Divorce Leads to Problems	28
Perspectives on Divorce	28
The Position Adopted by this Book	31
Conclusion	32
Review Questions	33
<b>CHAPTER THREE - POLYGAMY (POLYGYNY)</b>	<b>34</b>
Understanding Polygamy	35
Polygamy in the African Context	35
The Old Testament and Polygamy	38
Summary of Old Testament Teachings on Polygamy	42
The New Testament and Polygamy	43
How Should the Church Deal with Polygamy?	46
Conclusion	49
Review Questions	50

<b>CHAPTER FOUR - HOMOSEXUALITY</b>	<b>51</b>
Understanding Homosexuality	52
Homosexuality in the Old Testament	53
New Testament Teachings on Homosexuality	58
An African Christian Response to Homosexuality	62
Conclusion	64
Review Questions	65
 <b>CHAPTER FIVE - BIRTH CONTROL</b>	 <b>66</b>
Methods of Contraception and Birth Control	67
Birth Control and Contraception in Biblical Perspective	68
An Evangelical View on Birth Control and Contraceptives	75
Which kinds of Contraceptives are permissible?	77
Conclusion	77
Review Questions	78
 <b>CHAPTER SIX - USE OF ALCOHOL</b>	 <b>79</b>
What is Alcohol?	79
The Meaning of the term “Wine” Examined	80
The Meaning of Wine in English	80
The Meaning of the Latin Vinum	82
Hebrew Words Denoting the Vine and its Produce	83
New Testament Words for Alcoholic Beverages	84
Biblical Position on Use of Alcohol	88
Conclusion	93
Review Questions	94
 <b>CHAPTER SEVEN - FUNERAL EXPENSES</b>	 <b>95</b>
Expensive Funerals: The Case of Ghana	96
Factors that Contribute to Funeral Expenses in Ghana	98
Economic, Cultural and Theological/Ethical Perspectives on Expensive Funerals	105
Conclusion	110
Review Questions	111
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	 <b>112</b>
<b>SUBJECT INDEX</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>ABOUT AUTHORS</b>	<b>118</b>

# Foreword

Should Africa be Christianized or should Christianity be Africanized? This is a question that needs deep thinking by African Christian theologians and scholars to answer. Many scholars in the Christian past have attempted to answer this question. The book, *African Biblical Christianity and Contemporary Ethics* adds to what earlier scholars have written. The book approaches Christianity from African, biblical and ethical perspectives. African Christianity must be biblical and ethical at the same time. It must be biblical in the sense that in matters of faith and practice the Bible is the standard manual of reference; and ethical in the sense that even though there are right and wrong practices in the Bible, only the right practices must be upheld and promoted. On the other hand, what one might see as a wrong practice in the Bible may be acceptable because of the cultural context in which the incident occurred.

In this book, Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, the authors have discussed topics which when properly understood by readers, will make some Christian practices deeply rooted in their thought; and when applied, will liberate the African church from some Western practices that came to the continent with the gospel. These topics are marriage and divorce, polygamy and homosexuality, birth control, the use of alcohol and expensive funerals.

Africans hold marriage in high esteem because it is the basis of the

family and the community. However, an issue that faces African Christians is whether the customary marriage rite alone is sufficient to give authenticity to marriage in the church. This issue has come about as a result of the church's position that all customary marriages must be brought under the Marriage Ordinance before it could be fully accepted. Whilst this view has some values, it cannot be sustained because the act of bringing a marriage under the Ordinance is not the marriage; it is a "public show" that does not mean anything if after the act, the couple do not live to glorify God. It is important to state here that it is possible that couples who are married customarily, and are willing to make their marriages work, could live exemplary lives in the marriage relationship to please God. So, whilst the church could encourage married couples to bring their marriages under the Marriage Ordinance, the African church should not categorize customary marriage as "second class marriage". Whilst the Bible teaches that marriage should last so long as the partners are alive, there are however, some extreme cases where divorce may be allowed.

Polygamy and homosexuality even though fall short of biblical standards, are practices found in the Bible. We must be very careful not to indulge in such practices because of the consequences. However, in the case of polygamy, polygamous converts to Christianity in the African church should be allowed to decide what to do with their multiple wives rather than the church forcing such men to divorce their wives. Homosexuality is alien to the African religio-cultural context. As such, the African church must not entertain it.

The African society honours childbearing; so does the Bible. However, African Christian parents must recognize that under certain circumstances in one's life, there would be the need to deliberately plan and decide on the number of children to be born or delay the child-bearing process for the health and common good of the marriage relationship. This calls for family planning. The issue however is with the appropriate and ethical method to use.

Whilst the Bible does not explicitly prohibit the use of alcohol, it teaches that drunkenness is a sin against the biblical imperative "do not get drunk" (Eph. 5:1:18). As such, it is better to abstain from the use of alcohol

to satisfy one's pleasure than to get drunk.

When an African departs this world, the corpse is not thrown away; it must be seen off properly to the unseen world. This is done through the performance of funeral rites which is a vital practice in the African religious-cultural context. In contemporary times, funeral expenses have become a worry to the African church and society. Thus, funerals should be organized at a minimum cost so that funds that could otherwise be wasted unnecessarily on funerals could be used for the socio-economic development of society.

I recommend this book as a textbook for students of African Christianity. Pastors, church leaders and lay people who have the liberation and development of the African church at heart would find this book very useful.

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# Preface

This seven-chapter book begins with the thorny subject of marriage. Chapter one deals with marriage as sanctioned in the Bible. Over the years Africans have struggled with what form of marriage to consider Christian. The main argument of this chapter is that the form that marriage rites should take is more of a cultural issue than a religious one. However, the ways in which Christian couples are to live must follow some universal principles laid down in the Bible.

Chapter two focuses on the question of divorce and remarriage. It is evident from the examination of the relevant Bible texts that God's ideal is that marriage should last forever as long as the partners are alive. There are, however, extreme cases where divorce may be allowed. The next two chapters discuss polygamy and homosexuality. Both practices apparently fall short of biblical standards. The study noted that polygamous converts must be allowed to decide what to do with their multiple wives rather than being forced to divorce them.

The fifth chapter, which deals with child birth, argues that while the Bible exalts child-bearing, it also recognises that certain circumstances in one's life may necessitate putting a limit on the number of children born. Similarly, a couple may delay childbearing under certain circumstances as husband and wife seeks to fulfill the mandate of being stewards over creation.

The use of alcohol by Christians is examined in the next chapter. The chapter concludes that even though the Bible does not explicitly prohibit the use of alcohol, it is better to abstain from it in order not to sin by mistakenly getting drunk.

Finally, the study evaluated ethical issues related to funeral expenses in Africa. This is a big issue in contemporary African Christianity. The study contended that funeral expenses should be cut down and funds used rather for socio-economic development. A funeral does not have to be extravagant in order to fulfill its purpose of properly seeing off the departed into the unseen world.

In dealing with the various topics discussed in this book, we have contextualized what the Bible teaches for the African community. There are situations where we found the African worldview as a catalyst for appreciating the gospel. In other instances, however, the African worldview contradicted the gospel message. We have tried in each case to comment on such situations to help our readers to recognise what we consider to be proper contextualisation of the issue.



CHAPTER 1

# Christian Marriage

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Marriage is an essential part of society and the foundation upon which the family is built, and the means by which society propagates and preserves itself. Since its divine institution at the beginning of human history (Genesis 2:18-24), marriage has remained one of the most important institutions in the human society. As a means of procreation, marriage forms the foundation of the continuity of the human race. Unfortunately, marriage has become one of the biggest problems in today's society. Issues such as polygamy, same-sex marriage, and divorce and remarriage confront our society. This situation has prompted theological discussions around the globe regarding a proper Christian ethic of marriage, the Christian church being a major stakeholder in the discussion.

Africans, like people from other parts of the world, hold marriage in high esteem. To say that marriage in Africa is one of the greatest values of the people is not an overstatement. While African Christians love marriage, they are confronted with the question of whether their traditional marriage ceremony is Christian or not. In the midst of the confusion about which type of marriage God requires from the African, most churches (especially mission-founded churches), have taken the position that all customarily contracted marriages should be brought under the Marriage Ordinance before it could be fully accepted. This position is in collaboration with governments which are secular as well. The displeasure of

some Africans concerning this position has led to the call for the contextualization of Christian marriage for Africans. Against this background, this chapter of the book deals with marriage as revealed in the Scriptures and how Africans can contextualise the marriage ceremony to suit the African society from Christian perspective.

### **The Institution and Definition Christian Marriage**

Marriage is the oldest institution. The institution of marriage is narrated in Genesis 2 as follows. After God created Adam, He considered it not good for Adam to live alone. For this reason, He decided to create a helper for Adam from his rib. The first marriage ceremony took place when God brought Eve to Adam as the bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. In this event God commanded, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh” (v. 24). From that time marriage has been with the human race till now.

John Stott defines Christian marriage as “An exclusive heterosexual covenant between one man and one woman, ordained and sealed by God, preceded by a public leaving of parents, consummated in sexual union, issuing in a permanent mutual supportive partnership and normally crowned by the gift of children.”<sup>1</sup> The All Africa Seminar on “The Christian Home and Family Life” defined marriage as “God’s ordinance for man from the beginning of creation, a union properly entered into, with full consent by a man and a woman competent to marry one another, and publicly recognized in the society in which they live.”<sup>2</sup> Kwabena J. Darkwa Amanor views Christian marriage as “the union of a man and a woman who believe in God, who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who join in the worship, ordinance and the fellowship of the Church, and who are not mere professors of the Christian faith, but live their married lives in the light of God’s will for couples as revealed in the Bible.”<sup>3</sup> All these definitions could be summarized as: A Christian marriage is that which is in accordance with God’s principles of marriage revealed in Scripture.

### **The Nature of Christian Marriage**

The nature of Christian marriage deducible from the above definitions is as follows. First, Christian marriage is God-ordained; it is not accidental but something God intentionally created. God instituted marriage and afterwards commanded

<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*. 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 361.

<sup>2</sup> All African Conference of Churches, *Report of All Africa Seminar on the Christian Home and Family Life*, held at the Mindolo Ecumenical Centre, Kitwe, 17<sup>th</sup> February to 10<sup>th</sup> April 1963, 13 quoted in *Trinity Journal of church and Theology*, volume 18, No. 2 (2014) 64

<sup>3</sup> Kwabena J. Darkwa Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites: Pagan or Christian?* (Accra SonLife Press, 2012), 10.

that because of marriage a man will leave his parents and cling to the wife to become one (v. 24). God's act in this direction indicates that even though in all societies marriage is a recognised and regulated human institution, it is not a human invention.<sup>4</sup> This means "Marriage is given by God."<sup>5</sup> The Book of Common Prayer says God instituted marriage in the time of human innocence (Genesis 1-2), "adorned and beautified" it by Christ's presence at a wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11) and symbolised it by the mystical union between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:22ff).<sup>6</sup>

It therefore follows, that those who want to enter into marriage must seek God's direction before carrying out the intention. God instituted marriage for all (Heb. 13:4) because, but for those who have the gift of celibacy, "it is not human to be alone; the man-woman relationship is the right order for creation."<sup>7</sup>

Second, Christian marriage is a union between a male and a female. In other words, Christian marriage is exclusively a man–woman relationship.<sup>8</sup> This is clear both from the fact that God created one man and one woman at the beginning (Gen. 1:27) and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28) and also from the assertion that **a man** will cleave to **his wife** (Gen. 2:24). Therefore, homosexual marriage relation is a deviation from the originally ordained marriage union. Homosexual unions are specifically forbidden in Scripture (see Lev. 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27, 32; 1 Cor. 6:9). Also, polygamy has no place in God's ideal of marriage. Polygamy began with Lamech (Genesis 5:21-25) and has remained with humanity till now. Polygamy was a post-fall practice. Therefore, the fact that polygamy is evident in the Old Testament in no way shows God's approval of the practice. Jesus showed in his teaching that God allowed divorce (and for that matter polygamy) due to the hardness of people's hearts (Matt. 19: 1ff). Christian marriage is therefore an exclusive heterosexual relationship between one man and one woman.

Third, Christian marriage is consummated in sexual union. Sex is God's gift. God wants people to experience the joys of sex within marriage only. Any sexual intercourse outside the marriage relationship is sinful. Sexual consummation in marriage is very important because it provides a degree of intimacy and communion that makes the partners cleave to each other and become one flesh

<sup>4</sup> Stott, *Issues*, 559.

<sup>5</sup> The Methodist Church Ghana, *The Methodist Liturgy and Book of Worship* (Cape Coast: NYAKOD Printing Works, 2014), 180.

<sup>6</sup> The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2007), 423 (pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Jack Dominian, *Marriage, Faith and Love* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Stott, *Issues*, 361.

(Gen. 2:24). The power of sex to unite people is taught by Paul in 1 Cor. 6:16. The command that Adam and Eve should be fruitful and multiply does not only tell us that marriage is heterosexual but also that couples are expected to procreate through sexual intercourse (see Gen. 1:28, cf. 4:1). Marriage, therefore, organises our natural desire for sex<sup>9</sup> without going contrary to God's will. It is for this reason that Paul admonishes every man to have his own wife and each woman her own husband (1 Cor. 7:2-4). In this same passage, Paul encourages each partner to fulfil his/her marital duty to the other, bearing in mind that after marriage one's body does not solely belong to him/her anymore.

Since sex is meant to be enjoyed only in Christian marriage (1 Cor. 7:2), any sexual act outside marriage is wrong. Sexual intercourse involving the unmarried is fornication (Acts 15:20; 1 Cor. 6:18) and that outside marriage is adultery (Ex. 20:14; Matthew 19:9). God, therefore, calls us to honour our marriages and to keep them pure (Heb. 13:4). The Mosaic Law made it obligatory for those who engaged in premarital sex to marry (see Deut. 22:28-29).

Fourth, since Christian marriage is a covenant it requires a lifelong commitment. The Bible clearly states that God intended marriage to be permanent as long as the couples live. Only death can break the marriage bond (Rom. 7:2). Jesus commands that "What God has joined together, let nobody separate" (Matthew 19:6). Marriage is, therefore, indissoluble: a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two become one flesh. The sexual union, consummated, is not just a union of sexual intercourse, but a union of lives until death parts them.

Yet, marriage is not eternal. This means that the marriage union does not extend to eternity. Jesus made this clear when he said that, at the resurrection, humans will be like angels; they will neither marry nor be given to marriage (Matthew 22:30). At death the marriage union is broken so that the widow or the widower is free to remarry (1 Cor. 7:8-9).

Fifth, Christian marriage is not simply a legal transaction which can be broken when the conditions under which it was entered in cease to exist<sup>10</sup> but a covenant with a permanent bond. A contract is an agreement between two or more parties, written or unwritten but enforceable by law. Contracts are often characterised by mistrust and the need for protection and can be ended at any point in time if a party to the contract is in breach. A covenant involves two or more parties bound together, usually in the presence of a witness. It is an agreement and a solemn vow one person makes with another before God. The commitment to marriage as covenant is seen in "the concept of leaving... parents and cleaving

<sup>9</sup> Don Browning, Can Marriage Be Defined? In *Word & World* Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 2003): 7.

<sup>10</sup> Cedric W. Tilberg, *Sex, Marriage and Family: A Contemporary Perspective* (LCA: Division for mission in North America, 1970-75), 9-10.

to one's wife."<sup>11</sup> This meaning of marriage as a covenant of companionship is expressed more explicitly later in Scripture in such passages as Malachi 2:14. God is the principal witness to this covenant (Mal. 2:14) and friends, family members, the church and all others present at the ceremony are secondary witnesses. The "leaving" and "cleaving", according to Stott, "belong together and must take place in that order."<sup>12</sup> The man leaves his love for his parents that has resulted from conception, birth and nurture, to cleave to his wife by virtue of the sexual intercourse accompanying their marriage. The key word "leave" expressed in Hebrew as *aw-zah*, means to release, forsake, leave destitute, or refuse. The man cuts himself off from them, breaks the "union" with them almost in the sense of divorcing himself and becoming "subsequently single." In marriage, therefore, the man replaces his child-parent relationship with husband-wife relationship. That, however, should not mean that marriage means cutting off our relationship with our parents. The responsibility to "Honour your father and mother" (Ex 20:12) is applied by Jesus to adults (Mark 7:6-13). Thus, it means that in marriage "the physical, emotional and social unity of the husband and wife is more profoundly and mysteriously personal than the relationship of children to parents."<sup>13</sup> The "one flesh" expression conveys this fact.

### What Christian Marriage is Not

In his book on customary marriage rites, Amanor outlines some of the things that do not necessarily make a marriage Christian but which have the tendency of being portrayed as ingredients of Christian marriage.<sup>14</sup> First, "a Christian marriage is not necessarily a marriage that is celebrated in the church (with a church wedding)."<sup>15</sup> This implies that the venue for a marriage ceremony does not make it Christian. We learn from the Bible that marriage may be celebrated outside the church and still be valid as Christian marriage. In the Ancient Near East where Christianity had its roots, marriage ceremonies and celebrations were never conducted in religious buildings. Marriage in Ancient Israel was more of a social undertaking<sup>16</sup> than a religious activity. Yet, God was involved. In Genesis 2, it was God who gave Eve to Adam; in Genesis 24, it was God who led Abraham's servant to find Rebekah for Isaac.

The marriage ceremony between Isaac and Rebekah took place in

<sup>11</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options 2nd edition* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010), 301.

<sup>12</sup> Stott, *Issues*, 360.

<sup>13</sup> Stott, *Issues*, 361.

<sup>14</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites: Pagan or Christian?* 9.

<sup>15</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> The social dimension of marriage is implied in the man publicly leaving his parents (Gen. 2:24).

Rebekah's house (Genesis 24). It was a non-religious, social and cultural celebration. Jesus' example in John 2, at the wedding at Cana, signifies that a marriage does not have to be celebrated in the church to be accepted by God. Jesus' presence at this home-based marriage reception should not be regarded as the "Christianisation" of customary marriage.<sup>17</sup> Jewish matrimony was a private affair of the couple and of their respective families and did not require public ceremony, religious or otherwise, for its legalisation and validity. As a matter of fact, the Bible nowhere tells us where God-approved marriages should be celebrated. God-approved marriages in the Bible were celebrated at venues determined by the traditions of the couple. Unfortunately, there are some pastors who erroneously believe that it is wrong for them to officiate at traditional marriages held outside the church because they consider such ceremonies as not matching up to God's standard of marriage.

Second, a marriage is not Christian simply because a pastor said a prayer during its celebration. Marriage celebrations in Ancient Israel were not officiated by religious leaders. At the first institution of marriage, God is not seen as praying over the marriage between Adam and Eve. Of course, that is understandable because, as the addressee in our prayers, God (the Father) could not have prayed to any other being. We cannot, therefore, say that prayers are not important during marriage ceremonies. At the wedding at Cana (John 2), we do not read that Jesus prayed to change water into wine. We do not read that he prayed for the marriage. Yet, we cannot say that he did not pray for the couple, simply because the Bible is silent over it. However, to consider prayers offered over marriage as that which makes the marriage a Christian marriage is not acceptable. While prayer is a necessary part of all that we do as Christians, praying over a marriage does not guarantee that the marriage will continue in a Christian manner. It is therefore wrong, to think that praying over a customary marriage in the church is meant to convert a traditional customary marriage into a Christian one. To be sure, the validity of marriage is wholly vested in the performance of the customary ceremony, not in a pastoral blessing.

Third, a marriage does not become Christian because it is celebrated with the bride in gown and the groom in suit. The Bible does not prescribe any attire for marriage ceremonies. It is however unethical, to wear a provocative dress at a marriage ceremony, just as it is unethical to do so at any other public gathering. Whatever is an acceptable dress for social gathering in the couple's culture must be encouraged rather than imposing on them what is acceptable in another culture. It is encouraging to see many Ghanaians dress in locally manufactured outfits at some marriage ceremonies. The society needs to appreciate the fact that God accepts our

<sup>17</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1965), 109.

culture (which includes our dressing) once it does not contradict his word. We do not contradict God's word simply because we wear locally manufactured attire, but we do so if our body is exposed to the public whether in a foreign dress or local dress.

Fourth, wedding rings do not have power to seal marriages.<sup>18</sup> That a marriage ceremony involves wearing a ring or not cannot determine whether the marriage is Christian or not. The Bible does not give any evidence for the use of rings as signs of betrothal or marriage. The signet ring is mentioned in the Bible but for a different purpose. Abraham's servant, after finding Rebekah, gave her a nose ring to claim her as Isaac's bride (Gen. 24:22). Tamar, the disguised harlot, requested from Judah, her father-in-law, his signet, cord, and staff as a pledge of his promise to send her "a kid from the flock" (Gen. 38:17-18). We know from Jeremiah that the Israelites wore the signet ring on the right hand (22:24). The signet ring was a symbol of authority (Gen. 41:42), dignity, and social status (James 2:2, Luke 15:22) and was used to seal various contracts (Est. 3:10, 12).

The Romans were the first to use the signet ring as a betrothal ring and from them Jews and the Christians borrowed the practice. The practice of wearing wedding or marriage rings among Christians could be traced to the 9th century AD. Christian couples wear the marriage ring to symbolise their unending marriage covenant with their spouses. Yet the covenant commitment is biblical with or without rings because the Bible teaches that marriage is to be a lifetime commitment (Rom. 7:2). There is therefore nothing wrong with wearing wedding rings, provided it is culturally relevant.<sup>19</sup> However, there is everything wrong with making the wedding ring a requirement for Christian marriage. It is also wrong to compel African couples to wear their marriage rings based simply on the belief that the ring has the tendency to discourage married people from practising adultery. It becomes more problematic if people who are allergic to the metallic elements in the ring are forced to wear it at the expense of their health. Couples should not be forced to buy rings for their marriage if they cannot afford it.

The wedding ring is not a biblical requirement. Historians trace the origin of finger rings, seals and signets of ancient authorities to cultural practices of ancient Egypt and ancient Rome. It was used as a symbol of endless love between a man and woman. The people believed the ring finger had a special vein that is directly connected to the heart. Later this concept was passed down to other cultures. The use of rings in wedding ceremonies could be traced to the early part of the fourth century. The important thing to focus on is the couple's identity and commitment as Christians washed by the blood of Jesus. Such persons live conscious of sin and

<sup>18</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> The cultural relevance of marriage rings in Africa is not convincing.

with a determination to be obedient to the Lord in what they do.

Fifth, “it is not marriage that is celebrated with accompanying bride’s maids, best men, flower girls and page boys.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, if such accompanying troupe will add unbearable cost to one’s wedding, it may be wiser to avoid them. After all, it neither makes the marriage Christian nor non-Christian. In fact, if the purpose for getting a troupe to accompany a bridal team is to show off or to exhibit extravagance, then the practice is completely sinful. It is unwise to spend frivolously on a wedding in order to get the ceremony trending on social media.

Sixth, “it is not a marriage at whose celebration (wedding) a marriage register is signed.”<sup>21</sup> The signing of the marriage register is a requirement for ordinance marriage. It makes the marriage legal in the sight of the civil authorities, among other conditions. Customary marriage can be registered (section 15 of PNDC Law 112) as well, though the marriage is valid without it. However, the Christian or non-Christian nature of a marriage is independent of the issuance or non-issuance of a certificate at its celebration. The registration is purely a legal and civil affair, not spiritual.

### **Customary Marriage and Ordinance Marriage**

Three forms of marriage are recognised by the Laws of Ghana, namely, Marriage under customary law, statutory marriage under the Marriage Ordinance (CAP 127), and Marriage according to Islamic rites (CAP 129). There is nothing like Christian Marriage in the laws of Ghana. Our discussion will therefore be based on customary marriage and Ordinance marriage.

### **Marriage under Customary Law**

A customary marriage is one contracted between a man and a woman in accordance with local tradition and custom. In Ghana customary marriages are registered under the Customary Marriage and Divorce Registration Law, 1985 (PNDCL 112). Customary marriage must be registered with the Registrar of Marriages in the district in which the marriage was contracted **within three months** from the date of marriage. Unfortunately, most people do not adhere to this law and their customary marriage registration becomes statute-barred (prevented by law). The registration protects the right of the wife and children if done. Customary marriage is potentially polygamous, since there is no legal limit to the number of customary wives a man may have. Nor is there any limit to the number of such marriages that can be legally registered under the Customary Marriage and Divorce Registration Law, 1985 (PNDCL 112). That does not mean that customary marriage cannot be

<sup>20</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

monogamous; it may be monogamous or polygamous.

The detailed requirement for customary marriage in Ghana varies from one ethnic group to another. However, there are some common elements that are very essential to the process in every culture. Judge Ollenu outlines these elements as follows.<sup>22</sup>

### **Agreement by the parties to live together as husband and wife**

Consent of the family of the man that he should have the woman to his wife; that consent may be indicated by the man's family's acknowledging the woman as wife of the man.

Consent of the family of the woman that she should be joined in marriage to the man; that consent is indicated by the acceptance of drink from the man or his family; or merely by the family of the woman acknowledging the man as husband of the woman; and Consummation of the marriage; that is, that the man and the woman are living together in the sight of all the world as man and wife.

A marriage under customary law may be dissolved by customary procedure or by an action in a District Court. A customary marriage may be dissolved at the instance of either spouse, on several grounds, for example, adultery by the wife, infertility of the wife, impotence of the husband and general incompatibility of the couple. The grounds for valid dissolution of customary marriage (except adultery) contradict biblical teachings.

### **Marriage under the Marriage Ordinance (CAP 127)**

This is marriage contracted in accordance with the Marriage Ordinance, CAP 127 of the laws of Ghana. Ordinance marriage cannot be contracted twice for one person. Thus, until the death of one spouse or the legal dissolution of the marriage those who marry under ordinance cannot validly marry anyone else. Ordinance marriage is an alternative but not supplementary to customary marriage. That is, it does not require that the couple marry first by customary law. Therefore, when a couple marry customarily and then under Ordinance, they have married twice. It is wrong to perceive the ordinance for customarily married couples as a conversion of their first marriage rather than an additional marriage. The problem is that since the person one intends to marry belongs to an ethnic group with its own customs and traditions, it is virtually impossible to get the cooperation of their families without performing certain customary rituals. Does God require African couples to marry first as Africans (customary marriage) and second as Europeans (ordinance marriage)? We shall return to this question later.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted by Quashie, "By Custom and By Ordinance", 64.

Ordinance Marriage may be contracted by one of the following means: Marriage by a Registrar of Marriages; Marriage by a Marriage Officer/Minister and Marriage by Special Licence. A Marriage Registrar is an officer at the Registrar General's Office, Metropolitan, Municipal or District Assembly (MMDA), with responsibility to perform marriages. A Marriage Officer is a Minister of a religious body (Christian or Muslim) who has been duly licenced and gazetted to perform marriages in church or premises licensed for that purpose. Marriage under ordinance is not valid if it is conducted in an unregistered premise or conducted on a holiday. In Ghana, Sundays are holidays and therefore the ordinance marriage may not be contracted on Sundays.<sup>23</sup> Marriage by Special Licence occurs when the Registrar-General, after determining that there is no lawful impediment to the proposed marriage, waives off certain conditions for an Ordinance such as the length of time for notices, or permits a venue (other than the Registrar General's Office, MMDA or church) to be used for the performance of the marriage.

A marriage under the Marriage Ordinance may be dissolved when the marriage has broken down beyond reconciliation. This may be proven in different ways, including (1) one party commits adultery; (2) one party behaves in a manner that the other cannot reasonably be expected to live with that party; (3) there is desertion for a continuous period of at least 2 years; (4) the parties have not lived together continuously for 2 years or more and they both consent to the dissolution or that parties have not lived together as husband and wife for at least 5 years. Like customary marriage, the conditions that allow couples to divorce under ordinance marriage (except adultery) are unbiblical. The conditions under which marriage dissolution is allowed for customary marriage and ordinance marriage reflect African and European worldviews respectively.

In Ghana, the Ordinance Marriage law (CAP 127) was promulgated on November 19, 1884 for two reasons.<sup>24</sup> First, it served as an appropriate form of marriage for European merchants who needed a legal backing for the form of marriage they practised. The second reason was the desire of the missionaries to make available a legal form of "Christian marriage" for African converts who might require it. Daniels, however, contends that the introduction of the ordinance marriage law also aimed at spreading English social ideals which in turn will eliminate African social values.<sup>25</sup> Given that the introduction of the ordinance marriage law has resulted in African low esteem for African customary marriage, it seems the Europeans have achieved what they set out to do. Applying Social

<sup>23</sup> Lawyer Ebenezer Haizel, Lecture in Law for Pastoral Ministry at the Trinity Theological Seminary in 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Quashie, "By Custom and By Ordinance", 73.

<sup>25</sup> As quoted by Quashie, "By Custom and By Ordinance", 73.

Darwinism, they regarded their own culture and civilisation as superior to others and therefore set out to convert Africans both spiritually and culturally. Even though they managed to present ordinance marriage as “Christian” and customary marriage as “pagan”, the fact remains that the latter is no less Christian than the former.

### **Customary Marriage Rites: Engagement or Wedding?**

Amanor defines wedding as the act of marrying or the celebration of marriage.<sup>26</sup> More often than not, in Ghana, the customary marriage is referred to as “Engagement” while the ordinance marriage is referred to as “Wedding”. Broadly speaking, what Ghanaians know as wedding is ordinance marriage celebrated in the church in European fashion. With this “grasshopper mentality”, Africans regard customary marriage blessed in the church as “blessing” (rather than wedding) simply because the couple refuse to sign the Ordinance Marriage Certificate. Are we just ignorant or we are demeaning our African values?

### **What is engagement?**

An engagement refers to a situation whereby two people (usually in a confined audience) agree and plan to marry in the future. Simply put, an engagement is a promise/ agreement to marry. Engagement is usually followed by a period of courtship and eventually the marriage ceremony. In Ghana, for example, when a man meets a woman he wants to marry, he proposes marriage to her. The engagement is that which takes place when the woman accepts the marriage proposal (and both of them assure each other to prepare to get married). The private engagement is then formalised in the presence of the families of both parties. This event serves as the curtain raiser and its form depends on the custom of the people involved. The Akans (comprising Adansi, Akwamu, Asante, Asen Akyem, Akuapem, Awowin, Ahanta, Nzema, Bono, Fante, Sefwi, Kwahu and Twifo) refer to the formal engagement as *kɔkɔkɔ* (knocking).<sup>27</sup> The Eve call it *vɔfofo*. The knocking fee is usually drinks given to the would-be bride’s family to officially announce the intended marriage between the would-be couple.<sup>28</sup> The engagement ceremony for the *Eve* takes place in two stages. The first part takes place when the head of the would-be bride’s family receives a delegation from the would-be groom’s family head. The ceremony takes place at dawn and it is intended to make known the intended married. Drinks or “door-knocking drinks” (*vɔfoha*) are

<sup>26</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> The Ahanta call it *Abisa*, the Akuapem *Opon akyi bo*, the Ga *Agbo shimo* and the Dangme call it *Agbo simi*.

<sup>28</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 29.

offered to the would-be bride's family.<sup>29</sup> After the consent of the would-be bride's family is sought, a second round of drinks and cash (*tabiabia* and *tabianuwo*) are presented to them to end the engagement. By the acceptance of these items the man has the legal right to associate himself with the woman.<sup>30</sup> A date is then set for the traditional wedding and the subsequent consummation of the marriage. The equivalent of this process in the West is the Engagement reception or party organised for the ceremony. At this point, no marriage has been contracted and so it is wrong for either party to claim marital rights.

Then comes the day set for the customary marriage. On this day, the family of the man travels to the woman's household and presents the bride price and all other required items to contract marriage for their son. The woman's family then hands over the woman to the man as his wedded wife. Gifts are given to the newly wedded couple and food and/or drinks are served to the gathering, amidst words of encouragement and advice, music, drumming and dancing. In Africa, both the contraction and dissolution of marriage involve the families of the couple. Therefore, after the wedding has taken place, the couple cannot secretly dissolve their marriage bond. European marriages can be broken without the involvement of the family.

Against the backdrop of the definitions given and the procedures for customary marriage outlined above, there can be no justification for referring to the customary marriage as "engagement". The customary marriage is a (customary or traditional) wedding and must be referred to as such. It is not half marriage but a full one. It does not need any addition(s) for validation. Therefore, after performing customary marriage rites the man has the woman to his legally wedded wife and so the couple has every right to consummate the marriage in sexual union.

### **Customary Marriage: Godly or Ungodly?**

Is customary marriage valid in God's sight? There is a great deal of confusion regarding the ceremonies that Africans must go through in order for their marriages to be accepted before God. The position taken by most churches is that African Christian couples, after their traditional marriage ceremony, must bring their marriages to the church for blessing and Ordinance Marriage registration (an event commonly referred to as wedding) before they can take leadership positions in the church.

The strict monogamous nature of Ordinance marriage as against the potentially polygamous nature of customary marriage has made Ordinance

<sup>29</sup> Chris Abotchie, *Social Control in Traditional Southern Eweland of Ghana* (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1997), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Abotchie, *Social Control in Traditional Southern Eweland of Ghana*, 33.

marriage attractive to the church. Early European missionaries demanded that African converts, who were already married customarily, remarry their wives by the Ordinance Marriage Law.<sup>31</sup> The imposition of this practice on African Christians in the name of Christianity has led “to social and moral dilemmas because of the coexistence of customary and civil systems of marriage-making in African society.”<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, the attitude of early missionaries towards African customary marriage still remains within African churches despite the change in leadership from foreign missionaries to African Christians.

The Methodist Church Ghana and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana, for example, require all their ministers to bring their customary marriage under the Ordinance.<sup>33</sup> Catechists, Presbyters, Lay Preachers, Leaders and Stewards are expected to seek blessing of their marriages in the church or “be excluded from office.”<sup>34</sup> The following statement betrays the Methodist Church Ghana’s preference for Ordinance Marriage: “Owing to its safeguards against polygamy and its protection of the rights of the wife and children Ordinance Marriage offers more support to the Christian ideal of itself...”<sup>35</sup> Of course, this statement says nothing about whether marriage under ordinance is godly or not. Many a church may not administer communion to customarily married members until their marriages are “blessed” or brought under the Ordinance.

Consequent to this tradition, some African churches (directly or indirectly) forbid their member couples from consummating their marriage after performing customary marriage rites celebration before a church “wedding.” In his recent article, John Abedu Quashie discusses the issue of marrying first as an African and then second as an European, which he terms as duplicity of marriage. Quashie begins his study on a very personal note: “I am often confused regarding the date to celebrate my wedding anniversary. ... [because] there were two different marriage ceremonies, both of which were valid.”<sup>36</sup> By two marriage ceremonies, he is referring to customary marriage ceremony and ordinance marriage ceremony. Some ministers were at his customary marriage to offer prayers to invoke the blessing of God upon the marriage union. Something remarkable happened after the marriage: “After the ceremony, one of them [the ministers] remarked in a

<sup>31</sup> Quashie, “By Custom and By Ordinance”, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Onesimus A. Ngundu, “Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage: A History of Church Marriages and a Case for an African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 30.1 (2011) 35-53: 35.

<sup>33</sup> The Constitution and Standing Orders of the Methodist Church Ghana, SO 742 (3a)

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, (3c)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, (2b)

<sup>36</sup> Quashie, “By Custom and By Ordinance”, 62.

personal conversation with me, ‘John, you are married, but be careful.’”<sup>37</sup> What did the minister mean by the caution given to John? This caution signifies that even though the church<sup>38</sup> recognises the fact that by performing the customary marriage rites, Quashie was married, the church would not take it kindly if he engages in sexual union with his wife (and probably impregnates her) before the “wedding” ceremony which was scheduled to take place the following year. John was therefore married but not “properly married” in the eyes of the church.

Amanor rightly observes that “Many Ghanaian Protestant churches do not consider a couple to be properly married until they have satisfied the “church wedding” condition, that is, until they have ‘sent the marriage to the altar.’”<sup>39</sup> Among some churches, “without the wedding, the partners are barred from living together or having any form of intimacy as is expected of married people.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore “[i]f the couple married under Customary Law, should consummate the marriage before ‘sending it to the altar’ they are ‘disciplined’ by the church for having committed fornication.”<sup>41</sup> Defaulters are punished severely to deter others from emulating them. Even in some churches, the “wedding” ceremony is not performed until three months after the traditional marriage has taken place. During this period, the customarily married couples have no right to engage in any sexual act and so people are assigned to monitor them closely to ensure that they adhere to this rule. Churches that go by this philosophy may excommunicate members who are found to have intimacy after their customary marriage but before their marriage by ordinance (“wedding ceremony”).

This raises the question: At what point does God consider the African Christian as married? We must first of all note that African Christians live in three different “worlds”, namely, “the world of the traditional culture to which most people of marrying-age belong; the world of the civil or legal system under which the couple, like other citizens, live; and the world of the predominantly westernized culture that prevails in the church, especially in urban areas, within which the couple generally worship.”<sup>42</sup> Now, “which of these three ‘worlds’ has a right to declare an African Christian couple married” in the sight of God who created marriage?”<sup>43</sup> Is it the traditional world which upon the performance of the necessary traditional rights with the consent of families of the couple hands over

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> The Methodist Church Ghana recognises Customary Marriage as a valid form of marriage. See The Constitution and Standing Orders of the Methodist Church Ghana, 116

<sup>39</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977), 23-24.

<sup>41</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ngundu, “Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage”, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 36

the woman to the husband as wife? Is it the legal world that requires the signing of marriage certificate by the couple and witnesses in the presence of marriage officer? Or is it the church that at the end of a marriage service pronounces the couple “husband and wife”? The uncertainty regarding the answer to these questions also raises another question: What should be the response of African Christian couples when their traditional relatives offer them a single bedroom, expecting them to have their first sexual intercourse as husband and wife immediately after the customary marriage but before a church marriage ceremony scheduled to take place some months after the customary marriage?<sup>44</sup> If the couple consummates their marriage after the customary marriage but before their “church wedding”, do they commit any sin before God? Does God and for that matter the Bible state or imply anywhere that without church wedding marriages are not valid before God?

We have noted earlier that before the introduction of Christianity and legal marriage, a marriage was completed once the customary rites were performed. Christian missions failed to separate their culture from the Christian religion and this has caused us a lot of harm.<sup>45</sup> There are a lot of traditions in African churches which are purely rooted in European culture and have nothing to do with the gospel. For example, the adoption of her husband’s name by the wife after marriage is purely a cultural issue, which according to Amanor, could be traced to 12th century Europe.<sup>46</sup> In the Bible, Sarah was not called Mrs. Abraham, Rebekah was not called Mrs. Isaac, Mary was not called Mrs. Joseph, Bathsheba was not called Mrs. Uriah or Mrs. David. Traditional African wives, like their Jewish counterparts, do not add their husband’s names to theirs after marriage. Sadly, we have been made to substitute our tradition with European practice of adding a husband’s name to his wife’s, a practice that has no biblical basis. Another example is the adoption of “Christian names.” The names we refer to as “Christian names” are just Hebrew or European names. There is nothing like Christian name and non-Christian name before God. Again, the African “grasshopper mentality” makes him/her prefer to be called Jacob (a supplanter or deceiver) instead of *Akpena*, meaning, “Thank him”. At baptism an African Christian is made to add a Hebrew or an European name such as Joseph, Mary, Peter, Bennett, Prince etc. to his/her name because of the feeling that his/her “native African names alone were inadequate designations of his [or her] new status as a Christian.”<sup>47</sup> Africans are made to feel that they must be Europeanised or westernized in order to become good Christians. To this extent, early Christianity in Africa was coterminous (if not synonymous) with

<sup>44</sup> Ngundu, “Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage”, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 6

westernisation. The prohibition by some churches against the use of African attire or non-Western outfit to mount the pulpit is unacceptable by biblical standards. Yet, Ephraim Amu was “disciplined” for using African cloth to mount the pulpit. These are but few of the areas where further research has to be conducted. To be sure, these practices are not biblically sanctioned.

We now evaluate customary marriage through the biblical lens. Customary marriage exhibits the following characteristics of biblical marriage. First, customary marriage recognises God as the creator of marriage. Long before Christianity was introduced to Africans, their marriage ceremonies included the invocation of God through pouring of libation. Second, customary marriage by its definition, involves man-woman, not man-man or woman-woman union. Africans strongly frown upon same-sex marriage. It is a taboo even to conceive of the idea of same-sex marriage in Africa. This does not mean that there are no perversions to this value among Africans. Third, customary marriage provides the medium for couples to satisfy their sexual desire with their spouse (s). Africans subscribe to the idea that sex is to be enjoyed in a marriage union. Extra marital affair is unacceptable. In some societies, the punishment for extra-marital affair could be stoning, burning, canning or banishment. Fourth, customary marriage is a permanent bond, which breaks only at the death of one spouse unless there is mutual consent by the contracting families to dissolve the relationship on some mutually acceptable grounds (usually understood to be violations of the marriage bond). The covenant involved in the marriage bond is witnessed by the Supreme God, lesser divinities, the living and the living dead. Even though customary marriage may be dissolved under certain conditions, Africans do not take delight in the dissolution of one’s marriage. That is the reason why it is easier to get people gathered to celebrate marriage than to dissolve it. The basic elements of the customary marriage as outlined above do not contradict God’s will about marriage.

The main challenge with customary marriage is its potentially polygamous nature. The Bible is clear that the ideal marriage must be monogamous. In this wise, customary marriage has an unbiblical element. Some scholars, such as William Abraham, have erroneously assumed that African marriage is “polygamous in definition”<sup>48</sup> or African marriage is inherently polygamous. Though some Africans are polygamous, polygamy is not considered by Africans as the ideal form of marriage<sup>49</sup> and that is the reason why most Africans are monogamous rather than polygamous. In line with this thought, some African proverbs caution people against the practice of polygamy.<sup>50</sup> For example, the African proverb “the man

<sup>48</sup> As quoted by Quashie, “By Custom and By Ordinance”, 66.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

who has two wives has two tongues”, point to the dishonesty associated with a polygamous relationship.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, in Africa polygamy is not considered the norm.

We admit that Ordinance marriage is more effective in preventing polygamous marriages than customary marriage. We admit that Ordinance marriage offers more protection to the wife and children than customary marriage does. Yet, ordinance marriage cannot be regarded as more biblical than customary marriage because it does nothing more than force monogamy on people against people’s consciences. Unbelievers who marry under Ordinance do not become monogamous because they fear God but simply because the Ordinance Marriage law does not allow them to do otherwise. In other words, the Marriage Ordinance does nothing more than legally forcing monogamy on people without allowing them to come to the realisation that with or without law, monogamy is God’s ideal for marriage. The Ordinance Marriage law does nothing to change people’s heart. That is the reason why, like the customary marriage, ordinance marriage has no efficiency in preventing the couples from engaging in extra marital affairs. It is therefore wrong, to perceive the Ordinance marriage as godly and the customary marriage as ungodly. Anyone who truly accepts monogamy as God’s ideal for marriage will be monogamous regardless of how his/her marriage is contracted. Therefore, rather than using legal means to prevent polygamy, Christians must be taught to accept God’s ideal of marriage as monogamous. The consequence of the church’s failure to do so is the numerous extra marital affairs in the world today involving Christians.

Therefore, the (African) Church must not force a borrowed culture on African Christians by demanding that they remarry their customarily married wives by the Ordinance. History tells us that the early missionaries failed in their fight against polygamy because they forced monogamy on Africans. The missionaries could have avoided forcing monogamy on the indigenes by allowing their conscience to evolve a solution. African churches are repeating the same error by indirectly forcing monogamy on people through the addition of ordinance marriage to customary marriage. We must learn from Barrett’s assertion that “Missions in most cases ... appear to have made a fundamental mistake on this issue by attempting to force African society to abandon polygamy too rapidly, instead of allowing the indigenous Christian conscience to evolve its own solution.”<sup>52</sup>

In Africa, a valid marriage is said to have been contracted and considered legitimate only when the necessary customary rites have been performed and accepted. The Bible, the basis of Christian faith and practice, does not teach

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, 117-118.

anything to invalidate marriages contracted customarily. Amanor notes that “While God has directly spoken in the Bible to husbands and wives, to show them how to live godly lives with one another he has indirectly spoken through the various customs of our cultures to show how marriages are to be celebrated.”<sup>53</sup> That is the reason why marriages are “celebrated all over the world according to the customs of the particular people-grouping, whether European, Australian, Asian, Polynesian, or African, and even within those larger people-groupings whether they are British, French, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Ghanaian Ewes, Ghanaian Akans and Ghanaian Gas.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore “Once Christians in Ghana go through the customary marriage, God and the laws of Ghana consider them to be married. Marriage under ordinance is optional though useful for legal and documentation purposes.”<sup>55</sup>

Biblical examples show that customary marriage is valid before God and hence can be consummated without incurring the wrath of God. According to Hebrew custom a woman joins her husband for the consummation of their marriage union immediately after customary marriage rites are performed.<sup>56</sup> For example, when the family of Rebekah received her bride price, she came with Abraham’s servant to Isaac who took her to his mother’s tent to consummate the marriage (Genesis 24:64-67). He did not wait for any religious leader to come and bless their union before consummation of the marriage.<sup>57</sup> This does not mean that the marriage was not blessed. Amanor points out that God blessed the marriage union once the father legally handed over Rebekah to Isaac (through Abraham’s servant).<sup>58</sup>

African customary marriage rites were considered intact and without any fault until they were introduced to western civilisation, culture and lifestyles. Traditional marriages between couples with support from the families were considered valid and there were no mistakes about them until Europeans introduced their “weddings”. From these facts and the discussions above, we find no biblical warrant for the church to prevent customarily married couples from consummating their marriage in sexual union simply because they have not performed a “wedding” ceremony in the church. This denial by the church implies that the church does not recognise customary marriage as valid before God. But as we have shown above, customary marriage is no less Christian than ordinance marriage is. Even the conditions under which ordinance marriage is dissolvable are not biblically sanctioned. Neither ordinance marriage nor customary marriage

<sup>53</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 16-17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 32

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

is perfect. However, the imperfection in one marriage rite must not amount to the demand that another imperfect marriage system be added to it, especially when the two forms of marriage rites fused together still gives an imperfect system. Certainly, such an idea is unacceptable. Neither is the idea that customary marriage is ungodly acceptable. Therefore, African Christian couples, after their customary marriage, must be considered as fully married and allowed to consummate their union with clear conscience before God.

### **Duplicity in African Christian Marriage**

The church's requirement that marriages contracted customarily must be brought under the Ordinance leads to duplication of marriage. The church, in accordance with African customs and traditions, requires every would-be couple to perform customary marriage first before bringing that marriage under Ordinance. African Christians who bring their customary marriage under the Ordinance marry twice, the customary marriage being the first and the Ordinance marriage, the second. There are some couples who register their customary marriages, follow it up with the Ordinance marriage in court or the local assembly, and then eventually come to church for "blessing". The process described above amounts to marrying the same partner three times!

It has been argued that the Ordinance marriage is not an addition to customary marriage. Rather, the customary marriage is converted to Ordinance marriage so that there is only one marriage. This argument does not hold for the following reasons. First, the laws of Ghana recognise customary marriage as distinct from Ordinance marriage. There is no marriage such as the conversion of customary marriage to Ordinance marriage or the combination of the two marriage rites. Second, the Liturgy of most churches supports the idea of duplication of (or even quadrupled) marriage rites. For example, in declaring the purpose of gathering on an event of the solemnisation of Holy Matrimony (wedding), the minister says "Now [names of the couple] are bringing their Marriage under the Ordinance (CAP 127), and seeking God's blessing for their union as Christian marriage."<sup>59</sup> This statement means that the minister recognises the customary marriage union right at the beginning of the service. Yet, the minister makes certain pronouncements which directly or indirectly either invalidates the customary marriage or adds another marriage to it. In the Liturgy for the Presbyterian Church of Ghana the minister declares the purpose as follows: "Dear beloved, we are gathered here in the presence of God and before this congregation to join together this man (Name) and woman (Name) in marriage."<sup>60</sup> Obviously the purpose declared by the minister

<sup>59</sup> The Methodist Church Ghana, *The Methodist Liturgy and Book of Worship*, 180.

<sup>60</sup> Presbyterian Church of Ghana, *Worship Book Ordinances*, 90.

is in reference to the contraction of Ordinance marriage. But why do we say the man and the woman are going to be joined together again and yet deny that we are adding a new form of marriage to the first (customary marriage) to make it two? The minister continues. “Wherefore if anyone can show any just cause why they must not be lawfully joined together in marriage let him/her now declare it.”<sup>61</sup> The equivalent for the Methodist Church is “THEREFORE, if anyone can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together in Matrimony, let that person now declare it, or else hereafter maintain his or her silence.”<sup>62</sup> We see again that as far as these liturgies are concerned, the man and the woman are yet to be joined together in marriage. Assuming that someone gives a just reason for which the couple cannot be joined together in Ordinance does it invalidate the customary marriage? Do they return home as unmarried persons?

Another indication of duplication is found in the question “have you come here in the presence of these/this witnesses/congregation freely to give yourselves to each other in marriage?”<sup>63</sup> The man and the woman respond “We do.” This question makes it clear that the man and the woman are yet to marry and afterwards freely give themselves to each other. But should that be the case? After asking whether the man and the woman have been married in accordance with Customary Law, the minister goes on to ask them in turn, “Do you take this [man or woman], to be your wedded wife; and do you in the presence of God and before this congregation promise and covenant to be to [him or her] a loving, faithful and dutiful husband/wife, until God shall separate you by death?” The fact that a new form of marriage is going to be contracted seems evident. To deny that another marriage is being contracted at the “wedding” ceremony is to say that the church does not recognise customary marriage and so the man and the woman are considered unmarried until the Ordinance is complete. Here again we ask, in case one of them says “no” to this question, would the man and woman be considered unmarried?

Later in the ceremony the minister (who at the beginning of the ceremony declared that the couple are bringing the marriage under ordinance) pronounces them as husband and wife saying, “... I pronounce that they [man and woman] are husband and wife from today, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Those who God has joined together let no one put asunder. Amen.”<sup>64</sup> This raises questions: What was the man to the woman before the church service

<sup>61</sup> Presbyterian Church of Ghana, *Worship Book Ordinances*, 90.

<sup>62</sup> The Methodist Church Ghana, *The Methodist Liturgy and Book of Worship*, 180.

<sup>63</sup> Presbyterian Church of Ghana, *Worship Book Ordinances*, 92

<sup>64</sup> The Methodist Church Ghana, *The Methodist Liturgy and Book of Worship*, 185. See also Presbyterian Church of Ghana, *Worship Book Ordinances*, 94.

started? Were they friends and not couple? Surely, they were husband and wife. How then can the couple be married already and then be pronounced later, after the Ordinance that they are husband and wife? Is that not a contradiction? By so doing the minister overlooks the legitimacy of the customary marriage and yet claims he/she upholds it. Because the congregation normally hears the minister pronouncing the man and the woman as husband and wife only at the “wedding” and after the vows, it appears to them that they have no right to consummate their customarily marriage before the church wedding. The statement, “Those who God has joined together, let no one put asunder”, heard only at the church wedding but not at the customary wedding also makes people think that the church wedding is a Christian marriage which should not be dissolved but the customarily married couple were not put together by God. For this reason, it is difficult for most Africans to come to terms that the customary marriage is a valid marriage. The duplication (or even tripling) in African Christian marriage is evident and must not be denied.

### **An African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony**

The marriage ceremony of African churches does not seriously take the African culture into consideration. For example, the statement “you may kiss the bride” which encourages the couples to hug and kiss each other before their parents, relatives and the general public is not African. Hugging and kissing people in public is uncommon in traditional African society.<sup>65</sup> To encourage this in the church is to discount African custom and tradition. What the church has done is to normalise a European form of marriage for African Christians without taking into consideration the fact that Africa and Europe have different worldviews. We have stated earlier that African marriage involves two families, not two individuals, because Africans believe in communal living, as captured in the Ubuntu philosophy “I am because you are and you are because I am.” J. V. Taylor has rightly observed that in Africa, “an individual who is cut off from the community organisation is a nothing....”<sup>66</sup> Yet, the marriage liturgy of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana gives evidence of individualism by stating that the marriage transaction is between “this man” and “this woman.”<sup>67</sup> The MCG contextualises the individualistic worldview behind the Ordinance Marriage ceremony by stating that “The Marriage of A.B. and C.D. unites your families and creates a new one.”<sup>68</sup> More so, the families of the couples

<sup>65</sup> J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “Greetings with a Holy Kiss: A study of 1 Thessalonians 5:26 in some Ghanaian Mother-tongue Translations of the Bible”, *European Scientific Journal* Volume 10 Number 10 (2014):530-538.

<sup>66</sup> J.V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religion* (London: SCM, 1963), 100.

<sup>67</sup> Presbyterian Church of Ghana, *Worship Book Ordinances*, 90

<sup>68</sup> The Methodist Church Ghana, *The Methodist Liturgy and Book of Worship*, 185.

are made to stand and make pledges to support the marriage. This also promotes the African worldview. Yet, on the whole, there is the need for contextualisation of marriage for African Christians. We propose a contextualised African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony comprising three main features:

1. The recognition and registration of customary marriage;
2. An expression of covenantal faithfulness in marriage; and
3. The invocation of God's blessing on marriage through prayer.

### **Recognition and Registration of Customary Marriage**

Most of the moral difficulties encountered by African Christian couples at marriage arise from lack of the recognition of customary marriages by the church. Having shown that customary marriage is biblical, the church must recognise customary marriage as proper, complete and legal as the State does, and as biblical as Jesus does. A public recognition of the African customary marriage banns should be read or published in church for three consecutive Sundays before the customary rites are performed. The church should be encouraged to fully attend customary weddings. The church should recognise customary marriage as wedding, but not as an “engagement”.

There should be a marriage register to be signed by the couple, reflecting the exact date the marriage took place, thereby removing the confusion that surrounds the marriage date for most African couples. There should also be a formal introduction of the couple in the church when they attend church for the first time after their marriage so that those who could not attend the ceremony will also recognise what has taken place in their absence.

### **Expression of Covenantal Faithfulness**

As part of the ceremony there should be the expression of covenantal faithfulness, preferably after the customary rites are duly performed. The officiating minister should lead the groom's family to declare publicly that they have released the man to go and start his marital life and hence their acceptance of the bride into the groom's family. The following words could be used for the declaration by the groom's parents:

We, as parents (family) of A.B. (groom), publicly declare in your presence (bride and her relatives, groom and his relatives, church representatives, etc.) as witnesses that in recognition of our son's new relationship with his bride, we joyfully release him to enter into a husband-wife relationship with, C.D (bride). That unique and special relationship, according to God's word, requires him “to leave his father and mother and join himself to his wife, and become one flesh.”

Therefore, we now publicly release him to that exclusive husband-wife relationship. It is our desire not to interfere with the new marriage relationship of these two. We publicly accept, C.D, the bride, as our daughter-in-law. Son, we publicly wish you well as you go into this husband-wife relationship with your bride. Through your marriage to your bride, C.D., we have gained a wonderful daughter-in-law. We welcome her into our family.<sup>69</sup>

After that the minister may ask the groom to make their personal and public declarations that could read something like this:

I, A.B. (groom) would like you witnesses present to know that when I approached C.D. (according to African courtship procedures) for marriage she accepted my proposal after seeking God's guidance and family advice. I am grateful to my in-laws for allowing me to enter into an exclusive marriage relationship with their daughter, C.D. By their acceptance of the [customary] transactions as a token of my deep appreciation for their part and role in the upbringing of C.D., they gave me permission to marry their daughter. I would also like to publicly thank my parents for their support and consent to my marriage to C.D. I further make a public commitment in your presence as witnesses to the exclusive covenantal faithfulness relationship that I am entering with C.D.

Now to you, C.D: Our courtship was a private matter, though it was in full view of God and our key respective relatives were aware of it. Today, I, A.B. publicly take you to be my lawful wedded wife and declare solemnly that I would love you, C.D., honour and keep you, be faithful to you, remain a husband to you alone and to live together with you in accordance with God's instruction on marriage within our cultural context, till death shall separate us. So, help me God!<sup>70</sup>

After that the minister may ask the bride to make her personal and public declaration that could read something like this:

I, C.D. (bride) would like you witnesses present to know that when A.B. first approached me (according to African courtship procedures) for marriage, I sought God's guidance and family advice on the matter. I am grateful to my parents for their support since my birth, and for their consent to my marriage to A.B. My parents' acceptance of A.B.'s customary transactions is an indication that the two families are in agreement to this union. As a Christian bride, I would like to make a public commitment in your presence as witnesses to the exclusive covenantal faithfulness

<sup>69</sup> Modified from Ngundu, "Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage", 48.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

relationship that I am entering with A.B.

Now to you, A.B, today, I, C.D. publicly take you to be my lawful wedded husband, and declare solemnly that I would love you, honour and keep you, be faithful to you, remain a wife to you alone and to live together with you in accordance with God's instruction on marriage within our cultural context, till death shall separate us. So, help me God!<sup>71</sup>

Then the groom and bride would make a joint statement to members of the community present. The statement could take the following form:

We, A.B. and C.D, ask you all present, as witnesses to our marriage commitment, to pray for us. As we start our new home, we are both thankful to our parents who brought us up and groomed us for adulthood. We are also grateful to the leaders of the church for preparing us for the marriage. As a young couple, there will be times when we will need your wise advice and counsel on issues of life. As a Christian couple, we submit ourselves to God's instruction on marriage, through our church leaders and family members. So, help us God!<sup>72</sup>

After the ceremony, the couple would sign an official customary marriage certificate with some relatives also signing as witnesses.

### **Invocation of God's Blessing**

Even though the offering of prayer over a marriage does not necessarily make it Christian, it is very necessary that the minister seeks God's blessing on the marriage. This way, the couple would be satisfied that their marriage is divinely established by God. The minister must declare "I pronounce that they [man and woman] are husband and wife from today, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Those who God has joined let no one separate. Amen". In the African setting, the prayer should cover areas such as good health, peace, financial breakthrough, and childbearing. After the occasion, there may be refreshment for the gathering.

The contextualised Christian marriage ceremony proposed in this study recognises the validity of customary marriage in African society, takes seriously the centrality of divine blessing, and the State's laws on marriage. It also deals with the issue of duplication of marriage ceremonies. Further, it gives us that opportunity to have the actual date for the marriage appearing on the marriage certificate. More so, it clears doubt about the legitimacy of customarily married couple to consummate their marriage after the customary ceremonies but before

<sup>71</sup> Modified from Ngundu, "Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage", 49.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

a church wedding takes place. This marriage is less expensive than combining customary marriage and ordinance marriage rites.

### **Some Proposals for a New Orientation**

- The Church can and ought to help members deal with the dilemma regarding marriage.<sup>73</sup>
- The church must recognise customary marriage as proper, complete and legal as the State does, and as biblical as Jesus does. Nobody should therefore be denied any position in the church on the grounds that he/she is not married under ordinance.
- The church should recognise customary marriage as wedding, but not as an engagement.
- The church should not demand that prospective couples marry under ordinance law after customary marriage.
- The church must appreciate the fact that there is nothing inherently Christian about ordinance marriage, even when celebrated in the church. It is more of civil and legal activity than a spiritual activity required by God.
- The church must be present at customary weddings and the offering of prayer to invoke divine blessing upon the union should form an integral part of the celebration for African Christians. To ask the couple to come to the church for a second blessing makes it look as if the first prayer was inferior or that God blesses only marriages celebrated at the church in the presence of reverend ministers.
- The church should consider replacing the engagement ring, the wedding ring, bridal white gown, bridal veil, etc. with culturally meaningful marriage artefacts that can acknowledge and honour God in an African way.

These steps when taken will encourage many young people to marry with ease since their customary marriages would be fully recognised by the church. They can therefore save money for other life issues and church work.

### **Conclusion**

Marriage is God's idea, not ours. God instituted marriage for companionship (Genesis 2:18) and as a way of ensuring the continuity of the human race (Genesis 4:1). Marriage may, in fact, hamper a person's unconditional readiness for the call of God, and there are those who have the gift of celibacy (Matthew 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7). God instituted marriage for the good of humankind.

The moral difficulties surrounding marriage in Africa seems to be the result

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<sup>73</sup> First four points were reworded from Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 33.

of misunderstanding of what is revealed in the Bible about marriage. It is also the consequence of our inability to dichotomise culture from religion. Ghanaians seem to have confused what is biblical wedding with Western-type church wedding.<sup>74</sup> We therefore call for religious emancipation from the mental slavery of Western culture.<sup>75</sup> To this end, we must cherish every aspect of our culture that does not contradict God's word and promote it rather than create the impression that everything European is superior to everything African. African Christians must desist from holding European type of marriage, "wedding" in high esteem while putting down African type of "wedding", and calling it "an engagement."<sup>76</sup> We Africans must appreciate that God did not make us inferior to Westerners and that we can remain African and still serve God. We contend that the African Customary Marriage Law is more suitable for us than the European Ordinance Marriage Law because "under the Ghana Customary Marriage Law, marriage is considered to be between two families but not two individuals, that is why all the two families must be present at the traditional wedding to be witnesses, and the bride price and 'drinks' must be brought by the groom and his family and received by the bride's family as testimony to the marriage."<sup>77</sup> The African communal worldview underlying the Customary Marriage Law makes the European Ordinance Marriage Law, based on individualistic worldview, unsuitable for Africans. We agree with Ephraim Amu that "It is not Africa that must be Christianised, it is Christianity that must be Africanised"<sup>78</sup> for Africans. Marriage is not an exemption.

### Review Questions

1. Which type of marriage does God recognise, customary, court or church?
2. When is an African Christian couple considered married?
3. Explain the nature of biblical marriage.
4. Is customary marriage godly or ungodly?
5. How can the church curb polygamy among Christians?
6. How should African Christians marry to be accepted as full members of the church?

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<sup>74</sup> Amanor, *Customary Marriage Rites*, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 6

## CHAPTER 2

# Divorce & Remarriage

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This chapter is a continuation of what was discussed in the previous chapter. Here, we examine divorce and remarriage. Like any other theological subject, views on divorce are varied. The chapter begins by surveying areas of general agreement among scholars. It then proceeds to consider divergent views on the subject. It ends with a discussion of remarriage. Throughout the point is made that divorce is a deviation from God's ideal, but remarriage may be permitted by God under certain circumstances.

### **Divorce is not God's Standard**

Divorce is a departure from the purposes of God. Many incidences of divorce can be found in the Old Testament OT. In fact, divorce was allowed in the OT. This makes people think that God sanctions the act. It is important to note that even in the Old Testament where divorce was allowed, God made known his hatred for divorce (Mal. 2:16). Robert Antwi laments how the devil has succeeded in making people think divorce is normal before God.<sup>79</sup> He attributes this situation to the devil's scheme to destroy God's people and to send them into the kingdom of darkness. Jesus taught that like polygamy, divorce was contrary to God's ideal for marriage. Jesus explained that divorce in the Old Testament was a way of accommodating "the hardness" of people's hearts (Matthew 19:8). Jesus said, "Therefore, what

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Antwi, *The Works of the Enemy (Satan and His Demonic Forces): The Work of Satan* (Bloomington: Author House, 2015), 34.

God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt. 19:6; NRSV cf. Mark 10:6-9). The Church, therefore, should seek always to discourage divorce as a solution to marital problems. The Bible teaches that even when a Christian is married to an unbeliever, the Christian should continue to live with his or her mate if at all possible (1 Cor. 7:12-13).

### **Divorce is not Permissible for Every Situation**

There is a general agreement among Christians that not all bad situations in marriage warrant divorce. Jesus gave one condition under which divorce was permissible, marital unfaithfulness. Jesus said in Matthew 5:32 and again in Matthew 19:9 that a person is not to divorce his spouse except for *porneia*, marital unfaithfulness. This allowance is not seen in the parallel passages in Mark 10:6-12 and Luke 16:18. Divorce is expressly denied for the immediate purpose of marrying someone else (Mark 10:11-12). Apparently, divorce should only come as the last resort. When one partner commits adultery, the offended party is permitted, though not required, to get a divorce. If an unsaved husband or wife refuses to continue to live with his or her partner and departs, the believer may agree to this separation: “But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace” (1 Cor. 7:15; NIV). Such separations may result in divorce, and in that event the Christian is guilty of no wrong.

### **Divorce Leads to Problems**

Divorce may be intended to solve marital problems, but it also creates a lot of problems. This is not surprising because divorce is not God’s will. Nor is divorce God’s standard. Once we deviate from God’s ideal, we are bound to encounter problems. Many life experiences can be shared to educate us on the challenges associated with divorce. For example, single parenthood can lead to waywardness of children.

### **Perspectives on Divorce**

#### **Divorce is Strictly Prohibited**

Some Christians believe that there are no biblical grounds for divorce. This position is based, first, on the fact that divorce is a deviation from God’s ideal for marriage. God intended marriage to be a lifelong relationship (Matthew 19:6; Rom. 7:2). To divorce is to violate God’s rule. The second point is that divorce breaks the couple’s vow which was made before God (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). The marriage vow is a sacred one which when broken has negative consequences. This position

also contends that Jesus gave no room for divorce. In two passages (Mark 10:1-11 and Luke 16:18) Jesus condemned divorce without any exception. The view further contends that the so-called exception clause (Matt. 19:1-9; cf. 5:32) refers not to divorce for adultery but to an annulment of betrothal vows due to fornication before marriage (v. 9). The point is that Jews were expected to remain virgins until marriage. Now as part of their customs a woman was betrothed to a man who was then referred to as her husband even though they are not married at this point (see Matt. 1:18-25). The woman was to prove herself a virgin after the marriage, or else she would be stoned to death (Deut. 22:13-19). It seems very likely that this law was not in force at the time of Christ because as far back as the time of Hosea, even an adulterous wife was sought and brought back home rather than having her stoned to death (Hos. 3). In the New Testament it was assumed that divorce was the only penalty for adultery. Argument for “no divorce” is also adduced from 1 Corinthians 7:10-11: To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband 11(but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband). In verse 12-13, Paul teaches that “...if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.”

Paul teaches that Christians should not be “mismatched with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14) in life. Similarly, Christians should do all they can to preserve their marriages, both for the honour of Christ and for the spiritual good of spouse and children (1 Cor. 7:14). But if the non-Christian spouse decides either to desert the marriage or to seek divorce, the Christian does not need to work to preserve the marriage. The believer is free to grant a divorce or seek a divorce based on “willful desertion”; and, having been granted that divorce, is free to remarry—but only to a fellow Christian. The deserted and divorced spouse falls into the same category as a widowed person: free to remarry, but “only in the Lord,” that is, to another Christian (1 Cor. 7:39–40).

On the issue of remarriage, this position holds that there cannot be remarriage since divorce itself is prohibited. Those who hold this position will not admit a divorcee into their church whether he/she has remarried or not.

This position does well to put weight on the fact that the Bible is strictly against divorce. Marriage, as God intended it is supposed to be lifelong (Genesis 2:24) and for this reason God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). To divorce is to break God’s rule. However, it can be shown from the Bible that with God’s grace, remarriage is permissible under certain circumstances. We have already acknowledged that God wants marriage to last for life. This ideal, like God’s ideal related to other

issues, is not always achieved in this world. From the ethical point of view, we must do the next best thing when we fail to achieve the ideal thing. It has happened to Israel before. They could celebrate the Passover in the second month when their uncleanness in the first month made it unsuitable to observe it in that month. Of course, we agree that the Passover is different from marriage but we are dealing with the application of ethical principles. Another example is found in Jesus' assertion that Moses allowed the Israelites to divorce due to the hardness of their hearts (Matt. 19:8). Though God never intended divorce, it was allowed when the people failed to achieve the ideal. Similarly, while God never commands remarriage, he may permit it. God will never tell anyone to divorce his/her spouse but may permit it under certain circumstances. The "no divorce" position fails to deal adequately with the question Jesus was asked in Matthew 19:7. D. A. Carson is right to state that "... any view of divorce and remarriage (taught in either Testament) that sees the problem only in terms of what may or may not be done has already overlooked a basic fact—divorce is never to be thought of as God-ordained, morally neutral option but as evidence of sin, of hardness of heart."<sup>80</sup>

### **Divorce is allowed for only one reason, but remarriage is not allowed**

According to this view divorce is permissible only for adultery. Remarriage of divorced persons is not allowed, since such an act is sin before God. This view claims support from Jesus' statement in Matthew 19:9. The NIV translation which agrees with this view reads: "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." In this rendering, the Gk. *porneia* is translated marital unfaithfulness, making it equivalent to adultery. *Porneia* has been used elsewhere to mean illicit sexual relations of both married and unmarried persons (see Acts 15:20; Rom. 1:29). Churches holding this position will admit a person who has divorced an adulterous spouse to fellowship with them but will subject the person to church discipline if he/she remarries.

This position's limitation of the meaning of *porneia* to adultery alone is questionable. A different word for adultery, *moicheia*, was available to Jesus if he strictly meant adultery. *Porneia* could mean fornication. Jesus used both terms in Matthew 15:19. Only Matthew mentions the exception clause. It is safe to conclude that only Matthew found it necessary for his audience. If so then the meaning of the term was peculiar to the Jews to whom Matthew wrote his gospel. As we have pointed out earlier, Jesus was referring to Deuteronomy 22:13-21. Matthew needed to explain his statement with this exception clause because his audience had this rule in custom from the OT. Besides, after God forgives our sins, our position

<sup>80</sup> D. A. Carson, Matthew" in Matthew, Mark Luke. Vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 413.

before him changes. Divorce is a pardonable sin. The core of the Christian message is that God welcomes repentant sinners. After repentance and confession, all debts are cancelled<sup>81</sup> but the implications remain.

### **Both Divorce and remarriage are allowed**

Apart from adultery some proponents of this position consider other conditions such as mental illness, desertion, abandoning of faith etc. as legitimate grounds for divorce. They argue: When one spouse is guilty of sexual immorality and is unwilling to repent and live faithfully with the other partner, and second, when one of the spouses is an unbeliever who willfully and permanently deserts the believing partner (1 Cor. 7:15).<sup>82</sup> Moses permitted divorce due to human weakness; in the same way God permits divorce in our time due to our weakness. God “divorced” Israel for unfaithfulness (see Jer. 3:8; Isaiah 50:1). This is metaphorical but still instructive. It is written for our learning. This position does not take the permanence of marriage seriously, laying undue emphasis on the justifiability of divorce. It is true that the marriage vow cannot be kept by only one partner when there is desertion because it is a mutual vow. Yet, we must not be quick to divorce when such things happen. We must always seek reconciliation. We should emulate Hosea who forgave and received back his adulterous wife (Hos. 3).

### **The Position Adopted by this Book**

Marriage is expected to last if both couples continue to live. Churches must teach this essential truth and encourage members to obey it. It would be unjust for the church to preach the indissolubility of marriage without doing her best to give theologically grounded teaching about the true life of the family well beforehand. Christians must commit themselves to the covenant nature of love and to marriage as a sacred union blessed and instituted by God. Only those who are determined to keep their marriage covenant throughout their lives should go into marriage.

Divorce is a deviation from God’s ideal. It is never commanded, and never encouraged, in Scripture. There is no justifiable reason for divorce, not even adultery. Divorce should not be understood as a necessary option in cases of immorality. We could trust in God’s grace and exercise forgiveness, for mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). Even if we take it that Jesus granted divorce for marital unfaithfulness, we know that he did not command it. He did not say

<sup>81</sup> J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “Are Sins Forgiven or Loaned? Translations and interpretations of Matthew 6:12 by Some Dangme Scholars”, ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, XLII (2) (2010): 67-81.

<sup>82</sup> For further discussion on this consult James C. Dobson, *Love Must Be Tough: New Hope for Marriages in Crisis* (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishing, 2007)

one must divorce whenever the partner is sexually unfaithful. In cases of being divorced by an unbelieving spouse our goal should be to seek for peace and allow the unbeliever to leave without a fight.

We must always seek reconciliation when breakdowns occur. Tony Evans notes that even though God has given the church authority to rule in matters related to divorce, “No believer should head downtown to divorce court until he or she has brought his or her case to the church for determination of the facts and a ruling. Now, if the church finds no ground for divorce, the person might still choose to go ahead and get divorce downtown. But they do so at their own spiritual peril.”<sup>83</sup> To avoid these breakdowns people should acknowledge, confess and forsake their sins in marriage. Couples must learn to forgive their partners when confession takes place.

The couple may be asked to live separately during the period of making reconciliation. This sometimes helps heal their heart and makes it easier to come together again. However, at a point when all attempts at reconciliation have failed, probably due to “the hardness of heart” (Matthew 19:8) divorce as a concession may be allowed as the last resort. This means that even though divorce is never justifiable, it is permissible in some situations and always forgivable upon repentance and confession. Divorce should therefore not be seen as the “biggest” sins in the church. We cannot, however, prescribe conditions that warrant divorce. Setting general rules for divorce and remarriage is not helpful. Each situation must be dealt with according to its merits.

When divorce happens at this point, remarriage should not be rushed into. Though forgivable, no one should commit the sin of divorce repeatedly.

## Conclusion

Divorce and remarriage should not be left in the hands of individuals. It requires both pastoral leadership and ecclesiastical discernment. Churches must have the courage to teach that divorce is a sin and outside God’s will for humanity. The church is expected to balance mercy with righteousness. The church must not be so merciful that it condones divorce. After considering divorce as the last resort, remarriage may become necessary depending on individual situations. While remarriage is permissible, one must not rush into it.

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<sup>83</sup> Tony Evans, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), np.  
<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=wOq6xtrAuf0C&pg=PT23&dq>

**Review Questions**

1. Is divorce permissible by God? Explain your answer.
2. Can an adulterous partner who is divorced remarry? Explain your answer.
3. To what extent is customary marriage a Christian marriage?
4. Adduce arguments for or against the assertion that: “African Christians who bring their marriage under Ordinance marry twice.”
5. How would you counsel a couple who want to divorce on the grounds of childlessness?



## CHAPTER 3

# Polygamy & Polygyny

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The issue of polygamy has been of much concern for a long time, particularly in African Christianity. The missionaries who introduced Christianity to much of Africa took a unanimous uncompromising position against polygamy and denied converted polygamists the right to full church membership status. The church's effort in fighting polygamy in African churches has not yielded much fruit because the practice is well rooted in the culture and/or religion of Africans.

In Africa, polygamy is not just a type of marriage but a part of a value system which is socially acceptable due to its potential of providing economic security, increased social prestige and power, satisfaction of the desire for large families, and a solution for barren women.<sup>84</sup> Like many other theological issues, scholars are divided as to whether polygamy should be allowed in African churches or not. One view is that no polygamist can be a Christian.<sup>85</sup>

Another view holds that a polygamist can only be a Christian if he divorces all but one wife.<sup>86</sup> Some scholars are of the view that polygamy is an accepted practice from the Bible and should not be questioned by humans.<sup>87</sup> Finally, some

<sup>84</sup> Y. Hayase and K. Liaw, "Factors on Polygamy in sub-Saharan Africa:\ Findings Based on the Demographic and Health Surveys," in *The Developing Economies*, 3 (1997), 293.

<sup>85</sup> Lynoid Harries, *Christian Marriage in African Society, Marriage Survey of African and Family Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

<sup>86</sup> Alan R. Tippet, "Polygamy as a Missionary Problem," *Practical Anthropology* 17 March-April (1970): 79

<sup>87</sup> Stephen Nell, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964).

scholars contend that Christianity and polygamy are not mutually exclusive because Christianity should be contextualised.<sup>88</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the acceptability or otherwise of the practice of polygamy among Christians in Africa. To this end, we attempt to answer questions such as: Is polygamy an acceptable Christian practice? How should the church deal with the issue of polygamy among Christians without contradicting the teachings of Scripture?

### Understanding Polygamy

From its Greek origin, the word polygamy refers broadly to any simultaneous multiple marriage unions for one person. It is “the multiplicity of partners in the family relation by one of either sex.”<sup>89</sup> It involves marriage to more than one spouse (wife or husband) simultaneously, as opposed to monogamy where each person has only one spouse at a time. There are at least four forms of polygamous marriages. The first one is polygyny which refers to the practice of a man marrying more than one wife at the same time. This is also referred to as simultaneous polygamy, that is, a man, while still retaining his lawful wife, marries one or more additional wives. The second is consecutive polygamy or serial monogamy which is the practice of divorce and remarriage. Thirdly, we have polyandry, the practice of a woman having more than one husband. In polyandry the men are all husbands to the woman just as the women are all wives to the man in polygyny. There is a fourth type, polygynandry or group marriage, which refers to a situation in which two or more women are simultaneously married to two or more men.<sup>90</sup> Consecutive polygamy or serial monogamy and polygyny are common practices in Africa but polyandry and polygynandry have not been very much practised. The term polygamy has normally been used synonymously with polygyny, although it could also be used to encompass polyandry<sup>91</sup> and polygynandry.

### Polygamy in the African Context

Polygamy existed in sub-Saharan Africa before the earliest European explorers visited Africa in the fifteenth century. Some scholars trace the beginning of African polygamous practice to the period when tribal wars were common.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Oswald C. Fountain, “Polygamy and the Church”, *Missiology* 2, January, (1974), 111.

<sup>89</sup> C. Caverno, “Polygamy” in *The International Bible Encyclopedia* vol. 4 edited by James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 2416.

<sup>90</sup> A. Al-Krenawi, J. R. Graham and V. Slonim-Nevo, “Mental health aspects of Arab-Israeli adolescents from polygamous versus monogamous families” in *Journal of Social Psychology* 142(4) (2002): 446-460.

<sup>91</sup> C.E. Welch III, P.C. Glick, “The incidence of polygamy in contemporary Africa: A research note”. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 43(1) (1981):191-193. The word polygamy and polygyny tend to be used inter-changeably for the sake of this paper the word polygamy alone will be used.

<sup>92</sup> Caverno, “Polygamy”, 2416.

After conquering a village, great numbers of the men were slaughtered, leaving children and women. The conquerors took majority of the women and children away. The women then became concubines, slaves and in some cases mistresses of the conquerors. The chief, who usually led his people to war, then took the choicest women after which the strongest man was also given the opportunity to make his choice. This was followed by the choices of other men who took part in the war. As other wars were fought more women were added and, in some cases, some of them were even given as gifts to others. Gradually, polygamy became part and parcel of African cultural framework.”<sup>93</sup>

Polygamy is not prevalent in many African societies for nothing. Certain factors promote African inclination to the practice of polygamy. Firstly, polygamous marriage is regarded as a social asset. Among traditional Africans it is prestigious to marry many wives, bear many children and ably cater for them. People desire to have many children because children are regarded as the glory of marriage, and the more children one has, the greater the glory.<sup>94</sup> The more children a family has the more respect and prestige they command.<sup>95</sup> Polygamy therefore becomes the means by which a man can have many children and attract public recognition.

Polygamy also gives economic advantage to people who engage in agricultural activities. In Africa, where majority of people undertake agricultural activities, the many wives and numerous births associated with polygamous marriage is considered as a blessing that makes large scale farming possible. The contribution of the many wives and children to the economic gains of the family makes it possible to provide food for the whole family and even have surplus. More so, polygamy is more common where custom dictates that women have an equal or a greater share than men in the agricultural work. In northern Ghana for instance, the role of men in farming is to prepare the land for cultivation and leave the rest to their spouse(s) to take care of. In this case, the husband may act as a supervisor for his wives. Besides, if many girls are born through the polygamous marriages, the man gets more dowries from their husbands. The numerous children can also carry out economically profitable work to improve the family's finance.

Besides, polygamy is used as an expression for a man's wealth. In circumstances where a wealthy man lacks an outlet to spend his wealth, he

<sup>93</sup> N.K. Taryor, *Impact of the African Tradition on African Christianity* (Chicago, IL: Strugglers' Community Press, 1984), 112.

<sup>94</sup> E.C. Iloghalu, "Polygamy in Igboland, Nigeria and Salvation in the New Era of Evangelisation" (Doctoral Dissertation submitted to Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis, Rome, 1986), 25-26. See also J. Arthur, *African Women Immigrants in the United States: Crossing Transnational Borders* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 167.  
<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=ARnIAAAQBAJ&pg=PA167&lpg=PA167&dq>

<sup>95</sup> Arthur, *African Women Immigrants in the United States*, 167.

may resort to marrying another wife as a means of investing his wealth. In this sense, additional wives are considered as having both economic value and as a manifestation of the husband's wealth.

In addition, polygamy ensures constant availability of sexual companionship for the man. A monogamous man is faced with the challenge of abstaining from sex during certain periods such as menstruation, pregnancy, or lactation due to health and cultural reasons. The lactation period in traditional African societies is about two years and there is a common African belief that considers it a taboo for a husband to have intercourse with his lactating wife. Therefore, a monogamous man has to abstain from sex for at least two years when the wife is lactating. During this period the man may be tempted to commit adultery, which is usually considered a serious taboo in many African societies. In some societies, a man guilty of committing adultery may be whipped, stoned to death or burnt. This challenge is overcome by marrying many wives so that at least one of them will be available any moment the man needs a sexual companion. Polygamy therefore makes it possible for one wife to help as a substitute for another wife who may be ill or away and to carry on the necessary household duties.

Some African societies believe that women may no longer engage in sexual activities once they have entered the period of menopause. G. Kimathi explains: "Menopause among many ethnic groups brought an end to the need for sexual activities. A woman with married daughters and sons was regarded as somebody who had finished her sexual role in marriage."<sup>96</sup> Such a person is now seen as too old for sexual encounters. Some old wives may therefore ask their husbands to get a new wife who can satisfy them sexually. This belief and practice also promotes polygamy.

Again, African culture holds that polygamy serves as guaranteed security. The security of many societies is believed to be in the male children who are expected to work hard and look after their parents in old age and to succeed their fathers. Therefore, when a man finds that his wife is not bearing sons, it becomes a headache for him. Polygamous practices afford the man the opportunity to have children with other women, one of whom could possibly give him a son. It also serves as security for women to be part of the family of a well-to-do man, even when he already has a wife. Polygamy provides protection and security for an infertile wife and serves to prevent illicit sexual unions and prostitution. It creates social security for widows and orphans when a man from the family of a deceased husband is allowed to marry the widow and cater for her and the children.

More so, in traditional African societies, where barrenness is one of the

<sup>96</sup> G. Kimathi as cited in Elijah M. Baloyi, "Critical reflections on polygamy in the African Christian context", *Missionalia* 41:2 (2013) 164–181:169.

most severe psychological traumas that a woman can suffer, polygamy affords women the opportunity to avoid this trauma through the company of the children of their rivals. That is, the first wife can be comforted as well, bestowing her affection upon children of her co-wives. For this reason, old wives who are barren would usually ask their husbands to get a second wife who can bear children for the family. This practice is similar to Sarah asking Abraham to have a child with her maid, Hagar. Polygamy also fosters strong family relationships as many inter-marriages take place. It is the very foundation of the extended family, clan and tribe.

Yet polygamy has many negative effects as well. There is always jealousy between the co-wives due mostly to resentment the wives feel from sharing the right of sexual access to a husband with other wives and unequal distribution of the husband's resources. This leads to permanent hatred and friction. Some women even mastermind the death of their rivals through the practice of witchcraft. Also, through the practice of polygamy, women are considered as instruments to produce offspring and means for the gratification of the man's lust. Women are also "sold" to wealthy men at a huge bride price only to become second, third, fourth or even fifth wives. In the contemporary society, polygamy may lead to the cycle of poverty as people are not able to give proper education to their numerous children, a situation which eventually leads to high school dropout rates and poverty. Having discussed polygamy in the context of Africa, we now proceed to consider what the Bible teaches about it.

### **The Old Testament and Polygamy**

We begin our examination of the Old Testament teachings on polygamy by looking briefly at the first marriage God instituted. God, after saying that it is not good for Adam to live alone took one of his ribs and used it to form Eve as Adam's helper. Having brought her to Adam, God joined them together in a marriage union (Gen. 2:18-25). We deduce the monogamous nature of the original marriage as follows. First, God intended to make "a helper" for Adam, not several helpers. Had God thought of marriage as polygamy, he would have made as many helpers for Adam as he desired. Second, from one rib God made one woman for Adam. For this reason, the pattern of marriage comprises a man leaving his family to "be joined to his wife," not wives (Gen. 2:24). This union is then described as becoming "one flesh." Certainly, the first marriage was completely monogamous. Nonetheless, the Old Testament presents us with a number of examples of polygamous marriages. We now examine some of the polygamous practices in the OT.

**Lamech (Genesis 4:19-25)**

The Old Testament mentions Lamech as the first polygamist. He had two wives, Adah and Zillah (Gen. 4:19). He was a vengeful man following the steps of his great ancestor, Cain (v. 24-25). The fact that Lamech was one of the unrighteous descendants of Cain has the tendency of leading many interpreters to associate his polygamous practice as wrong. The problem with such a view is that Lamech also produced musical instruments and metal work (vv. 21-22) which, no doubt, are good. It is also problematic to base our denunciation of polygamy on the ungodly character of Lamech because polygamy was also practised by many people described as righteous.<sup>97</sup> Given that the moral character of many other polygamists in the Old Testament is very different from that of Lamech, we should not use Lamech's character as the basis for determining the morality of polygamy otherwise we shall conclude that polygamy is good for the righteous but bad for the ungodly.<sup>98</sup> Fidelity in interpretation implores us to consider the passage as a narration which is stating facts rather than prescribing what should be done or what should not to be done.

**Abraham (Genesis 16-17; 28-30)**

Abraham married his half-sister, that is, the daughter of his father but not of his mother (Gen. 20:12). This makes it very likely that Abraham came from a polygamous family.<sup>99</sup> Abraham had a principal wife, Sarah, and two secondary wives (Gen. 16:3; 25:1). His marriage to his first secondary wife, Hagar, was the result of his impatience and Sarah's encouragement to him to have a second wife (Gen. 16:1ff). Later Sarah became jealous, asked that Hagar be driven away and then referred to her as a concubine. Abraham married Keturah not when Sarah was alive but seven years after Sarah's death. It seems clear that it was not part of Abraham's plan of life to go in for a second wife. It was prompted by Sarah's strong desire to have children, who she could consider her own.<sup>100</sup> We do not see God explicitly condemning Abraham's behaviour as immoral. God insists that it is Isaac, rather than Ishmael who is to be the heir of Abraham and through whom the Messiah would come.

**Esau, Ishmael and Jacob**

Esau was polygamous (Gen. 26:34); so was Ishmael (Gen. 28:9). Jacob married

<sup>97</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2008), 228.

<sup>98</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 229.

<sup>99</sup> Sereno Edwards Dwight, *The Hebrew Wife, Or the Law of Marriage Examined in Relation to the Lawfulness of Polygamy, and to the Extent of the Law of Incest* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Company, 1836), 7.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=EjQZAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA7&lpg=PA7&d>

<sup>100</sup> Dwight, *The Hebrew Wife*, 7.

two sisters, Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:23-30; 30:4-9). Jacob's case is one of the complicated ones due to Laban's deception. Jacob, who actually wanted one wife, ended up with two wives and two concubines by the combination of trickery and jealousy. Some commentators condemn the polygamous acts of Esau and Ishmael while defending that of Jacob (himself a master deceiver) on the basis that Jacob's case resulted from the deception of his father-in-law but those of Esau and Ishmael were deliberate. Sereno Edwards Dwight states that, "Laban and his children were idolaters, yet polygamy was not part of Jacob's plan of life. Leah was put upon him by a fraud, to which he must submit, or hazard the loss of Rachel."<sup>101</sup> It is obvious however, that Jacob's polygamous practice is as condemnable as those of Esau and Ishmael.

### **Levirate Marriage**

The Old Testament principle of levirate marriage could potentially lead to a polygamous marriage (see Deut. 25:5-10). God commanded that a man marries his brother's wife if his brother died without a son or an heir so that the family line of the dead man could continue and that the widow would be catered for. Failure to impregnate the widow, to possibly get an heir for the deceased, was regarded as social injustice and was punishable (vv. 8-9).

The first levirate marriage preceded the Mosaic Law (see Gen. 38). Onan was made to marry his late brother's wife Tamar. The second case of levirate marriage involves Ruth whose husband died in the Land of Moab. She followed her mother-in-law to the land of Judah. There was no surviving brother-in-law who could marry Ruth and so she turned to Boaz as her "kinsman redeemer" (Ruth 3:9) to marry her. Eventually, Ruth became a second wife to Boaz. Kunhiyop opines that since God permitted levirate marriage which sometimes led to polygamy, polygamy was not adulterous before God, or else God's holiness is contradicted.<sup>102</sup> He further asserts that polygamy was legally and culturally accepted. However, polygamy could be adulterous and at the same time permitted by God only for a period. Like incest, God permitted levirate marriage at certain periods for a purpose. Once the purpose was accomplished, it became sinful. If polygamy were the norm, as Kunyihop claims, then the levirate law (Deut. 25) would be impossible to operate. Imagine that the dead brother had five wives. Which of them will the surviving brother marry? The text that instituted the levirate marriage referred to the "wife" not "wives" of the deceased brother, thereby pointing to the fact that God expected each person to have a wife, not wives. More so, the tenth Commandment '... You shall not covet your neighbour's wife [singular] ...' (Ex. 20:17) also presupposes

<sup>101</sup> Dwight, *The Hebrew Wife*, 7.

<sup>102</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 232.

the ideal that there is one wife, not wives. Yet, it has to be admitted that even if a person covets one out of the many wives of his neighbour, the woman so coveted would still be the husband's *wife* (singular) and not wives.

The period within which levirate marriage was permitted is past now. That is why Paul could therefore say that if a woman's husband dies, she is free to marry whoever she chooses as long as he is a believer (1 Cor. 7:39). The responsibility for taking care of widows falls first on the family (1 Tim. 5:8), and, then on the women of the family (1 Tim. 5:16). If this is not possible, then the church takes on the burden.

### King David and Polygamy

David was Israel's most excellent king. He was "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22). Yet David had, at least, Michal (1 Sam. 18:27; 25:44), Abigail (1 Sam. 25:39), Ahinoam of Jezreel (1 Sam. 25:43), Eglah (2 Sam. 3:4-5) and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:24) as wives aside numerous concubines. Certainly, David and his son, Solomon, broke the command to kings not to have many wives (Deut. 17:17). The polygamous practice of these kings is a cause of their backsliding and the troubles and calamities associated with their rule (2 Sam. 5:13; 1 Kings 11:1-3).

God's declaration that he "gave Saul's wives into David's arms" (2 Sam. 12:7-8, NIV) seems a direct challenge to our contention that monogamy is God's ideal. This passage raises an obvious question: Did God sanction polygamy or at least David's polygamous practice by giving him Saul's wives? "No"! God did not condone David's polygamous act. However, by the custom of the people the wives and concubines of a deceased king were automatically entrusted to the care and protection of the successor.<sup>103</sup> Otherwise, whoever marries a king's widow was entitled to claim the throne as well. It is for this reason that Solomon got alarmed when Adonijah suggested marrying King David's youngest wife, Abishag. Solomon understood this to be a plot to overthrow him (1 Kings 2:22).<sup>104</sup> The rule was therefore that once a woman became a king's consort, she had the right to retain that status even when the king died. This explains why Absalom wanted to sleep with David's wives to claim the throne (2 Sam. 16:21-22). A son would however, avoid committing incest if he succeeds his father as a king, and therefore treat the widows as "respected prisoners in the palace" instead of marrying them.<sup>105</sup> In effect, when God claimed to have given Saul's wives to David, he was actually saying that he gave the throne to David. This passage must be understood in the light of the fact

<sup>103</sup> Gleason L. Archer Jr., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 123.

<sup>104</sup> Archer, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, 123.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

that even though God's intention was for marriage to be monogamous, he allowed polygamy due to the hardness of human hearts.

### **Malachi 2:10-16 and Polygamy**

The teaching of Malachi 2:10-16 supports the idea that God intended monogamy to be the ideal marriage. Throughout the passage God keeps referring to the *wife* (not wives) of the man. In verse 14 we read "You ask, 'Why?' It is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant" (NIV). The author continues, "Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth" (NIV). These verses remind us that God made one man and one woman in the beginning and joined them in a marriage union. Answering the question as to why only one woman was made, the writer says God did so in order that a godly seed might be obtained. In other words, the seed that comes from polygamy is not godly. Verse 16 also points to monogamy: "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her", says the Lord, the God of Israel, "covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So, guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

### **Summary of Old Testament Teachings on Polygamy**

We cannot deny that polygamous marriages can be found in the OT story, though in most cases, Solomon and David being exemptions, we have evidence for bigamy rather than polygamy. Yet, the Old Testament data on polygamy points to the fact that it is not God's ideal for humanity. The following facts make it clear that monogamy was God's model of marriage.<sup>106</sup>

From the beginning God set the ideal pattern by creating a monogamous marriage relationship between one man and one woman (Gen. 1:27; 2:18-24). The Mosaic Law forbade the king from multiplying wives, "lest his heart turn away" (Deut. 17:17, cf. 1 Kings 11:25). This does not mean that only kings are exempted from polygamy. It is to show how the Mosaic Law tries to affirm the initial ideal of monogamy.

Polygamists in the Old Testament paid dearly for their practice. Solomon, for instance, had his heart turned away from God due to the influence of his numerous wives (1 Kings 11:1-2).

The Old Testament usually places polygamy in the context of sin. For example, Abraham's marriage to Hagar was the result of a carnal act of unbelief (Gen. 16:1ff); Jacob's polygamous practice was prompted by the trickery of his

<sup>106</sup> The first six points were gleaned from Norman Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 204-5.

father-in-law, Laban.

The polygamous relation was not up to the ideal. Jacob, for instance, is said to have loved Rachel more than Leah (Gen. 29:31); Hannah is said to have a “rival”<sup>107</sup> who usually provoked her (1 Sam. 1:6), a story that vividly illustrates the potential agonies bigamy can bring.

Polygamy is always referred to using the conditional clause (If ...) rather than an imperative (must or should). For example, “If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights” (Ex. 21:10; NIV). Of course, this text is an example of a casuistic law of the Mosaic code which shows a remedy prescribed for a civil wrong conditioned upon a specific conduct. God, therefore, never commanded or encouraged polygamy in the OT, though he permitted it. God even discouraged it by putting several obligations of the husband towards the additional wives. God hates polygamy the same way he hates divorce because it destroys his ideal for the family (see Mal. 2:16).

While polygamy is evident in the Old Testament there was a trend towards monogamous unions that is explicitly taught in the NT.

## **The New Testament and Polygamy**

### **Jesus’ Teaching on Polygamy**

As the fullest revelation of God to humanity, Jesus’ teaching on every subject is crucial for the formulation of any sound doctrine. In his encounter with the Jews concerning divorce and remarriage (Matt. 19:3–6), Jesus gave the clearest evidence that monogamy is God’s ideal for marriage. The main question was whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for every reason. Jesus’ replied that God did not intend divorce to be part of human life but Moses allowed it due to people’s hardened hearts. He then states that divorce and remarriage is lawful only if there is evidence of unfaithfulness on the part of one partner. Even then, divorce is not required or commanded. He assigns the following reasons for his point.<sup>108</sup> First, God created one man and one woman and joined them together in marriage. Jesus cited Genesis 2:24 to make the point that God intended marriage to be a life-long monogamous relationship. Jesus shows that it was God, not Adam, who made the statement, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Jesus noted, “He who made them at the beginning said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’” (Matt. 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12).

This fact means, first, that at the beginning of human history God

<sup>107</sup> The word rival connotes enmity, opponent etc.

<sup>108</sup> Dwight, *The Hebrew Wife*, 10.

commanded that one man will leave his parents and join one woman to form a marital union. This is the Great Law of Marriage binding humanity.<sup>109</sup> It was given at the original institution of marriage to our first parents who represented the whole human race. By the terms of it, Adam and Eve were exempted from the operation of this Law because they were already married before it was pronounced and Adam had no father or mother and so could not leave his parents as commanded.<sup>110</sup> The law was, therefore, meant for posterity, for all men and women who are about to contract marriage. Second, that, God at the time of instituting marriage declared, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.” Thus, the two people become one after marriage. Third, that all those joined together in marriage have been united by God and should not be separated by anyone.

Jesus’ response leads to this conclusion: Marriage as appointed by God is the covenant for life between one man and one woman, who then become one flesh after marriage.<sup>111</sup> Before the marriage the man by virtue of his filial affection cleaved to his parents as a son, but now with conjugal affection, he cleaves to his wife as a husband.<sup>112</sup> To take another woman means leaving his wife and cleaving to another woman, “in the very point which the Law respects.”<sup>113</sup>

The statement, “But it was not this way from the beginning” (Matt. 19:8; NIV) could equally be applied to polygamy as Jesus applied it to divorce. Judging from God’s reason for allowing divorce, we see that God also allowed polygamy because of the hardness of the human hearts. The New Testament condemns both practices. In other words, polygamy like divorce was permitted due to the hardness of the human heart but it was not so from the beginning<sup>114</sup> and it is not intended to be so in the end.<sup>115</sup> They were temporary concessions to the hardness of people’s hearts. This point becomes clear when one considers the fact that there were progressive stages in the spiritual development of Israel.

### **Paul’s Teaching on Polygamy**

Another important biblical teaching is the parallel of husband and wife with Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5:22–33. In verse 23, Paul says, “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, he himself being the

<sup>109</sup> Dwight, *The Hebrew Wife*, 8.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 264.

<sup>115</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* updated edition (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 132.

Saviour of the body” (NASB). Paul’s contention in this verse is that, “there is but one true church and that it stands in a relationship to the heavenly Bridegroom like that of the wife toward her husband.”<sup>116</sup> In other words, monogamous marriage foreshadows the relation between Christ and his bridegroom (singular), the church. Just as Christ is not the head of many churches so is the husband not the head of many wives. Paul also wrote: “Let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2; NIV). This statement emphatically excludes polygamy.

Nonetheless, the New Testament alludes to the existence of polygamists in the early church. Paul says that no one who is married to more than one person can be involved in church leadership because the leaders must set the example for the rest of the church and (as far as possible) reflect God’s intention for what the Christian family of the church should look like in their own family lives at home (1 Tim. 3:2-5, 12). Paul goes on to explain marital duties in terms that make sense only with one husband to one wife. It follows from Paul’s statement in 1 Timothy 3, that there were people in the church who could be church leaders were it not for the fact that they were married to, or sexually involved with more than one person. Yet, these people could be a part of the church fellowship. They were not excommunicated from the church. Nor were they second class members, they were full members.

We shall use Paul’s teaching on marriage and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:12-24 to deduce a principle for dealing with polygamous converts. According to Paul, a Christian is not expected to marry an unbeliever. Yet if a couple are unbelievers and one becomes a Christian, he/she is not expected to divorce his/her unbelieving partner. However, the believer was free to divorce his/her unbelieving partner if the latter wished to divorce. It is clear from this scenario that “personal commitments undertaken *before* conversion should be honoured from the new Christian’s side.”<sup>117</sup> This means that it is better for the partner (now a new Christian) to remain married to an unbeliever than to initiate divorce.<sup>118</sup> Paul would have, arguably, adopted a similar principle and toleration to the converted polygamist.

We find support from Paul’s advice to the Corinthian Church: “Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him” (1 Cor. 7:20, NIV). This would mean that if you are already married to more than one person then you should stay married to all spouses and seek to live as best you can to honour God and fulfil your duties to your family, not showing favouritism to one spouse over another (cf. James 2:1). It also means that polygamy should not be

<sup>116</sup> Archer, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, 122.

<sup>117</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Nottingham: Inter-varsity Press, 2004), 351.

<sup>118</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 351.

recommended to unmarried believers or monogamous believers. The pattern of polygamy must stop and not be passed on to children. Children will need to have the reasoning explained to them carefully. By doing this, people can demonstrate true repentance and be used by God to help others to make good decisions in their lives.

Some African Christian leaders have recently argued that polygamy is to be allowed for cultures which accept it because polygamy is a cultural rather than a religious issue.<sup>119</sup> Daniel Eshun observes that Eurocentric missionary hegemony is responsible for the introduction of monogamy to Africa. In his historical survey across various Christian epochs, Eshun argues that the Mosaic Law did not prohibit Israelite polygamy, nor was there moral liability for the practice previously.<sup>120</sup> From Leviticus 18:1-18, Eshun argues that polygamy was prohibited only if the subsequent marriage (s) was/were incestuous.<sup>121</sup> Eshun also notes that the practice of Levirate marriage also promoted polygamy among ancient Israelites.<sup>122</sup>

In response to these and other issues, we place on record that the instances of polygamy referred to are all post-fall events. They cannot be considered as ideals. Ancient Israel functioned to God both as nation and church therefore, OT narratives usually make no effort to distinguish between what is strictly cultural and what is religious. Therefore, to argue that polygamy should be accepted because it is a cultural rather than a religious issue is not convincing. We have already pointed to the pre-fall ideal as monogamy. And Jesus, the Messiah who came to restore God's Kingdom and clarified things, did refer to the pre-fall practice of monogamy as the ideal.

### **How Should the Church Deal with Polygamy?**

From the perspective of the Bible polygamy is morally defective in comparison with God's intention for monogamous marriage. There is no way one can read the entire Bible without gathering from it the conviction that polygamy was not the rule but the rare exemption. Therefore, the Christian must not choose to be a polygamist. The problem, however, exists when a man who is already a polygamist becomes a Christian convert. How is the church expected to treat such a person and his polygamous marriage? A survey of various church policies on converted polygamists summarises as follows:

1. The polygamist cannot become an active member unless he puts away all his

<sup>119</sup> Daniel Eshun, *Christian Marriage: How did Polygamy become a Sin?* (Accra: Eshun and Sons Co. Ltd, 2016).

<sup>120</sup> Eshun, *Christian Marriage*, 4.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

wives but the first.

2. The polygamist must seek the consent of his wives before putting them away.
3. The polygamist may be baptised with his wives and children, but he cannot attend the Communion. His first wife and the children are the only members of the family who qualify as full members.

On the first and second policies, we remark that the church must take into consideration the fact that the polygamist has a social responsibility towards his wives and children. Asking him to divorce his wives (except the first), with or without their consent, may put the women into social difficulties and in the end expose them to moral danger, including stealing, prostitution or destitution.

From the wives' viewpoint, this amounts to replacing a lesser evil with a far greater one. Divorce is also against God's plan for marriage; a sinful divorce cannot correct a sinful second marriage. Colenso is very right in asserting that to require a polygamist "to put aside all but one of his wives as a condition for baptism [and full membership] is theologically inconsistent, for it is asking him to commit the sin of divorce to remedy the offense of polygamy."<sup>123</sup>

On the third policy, we observe that it is inconsistent with biblical teaching to prevent a baptized believer from attending the Holy Communion. It is only when the person, after becoming a full member, deliberately elects to be a polygamist for some reasons that, he/she may not partake of the Eucharist. In the case of the polygamist, who is baptised and never allowed to take the Eucharist one may ask: what qualified him for baptism and could not qualify him for Communion? We, however, agree that he may not take certain responsibilities just as Paul taught (see 1 Tim. 3).

These policies, in many instances, also lead to deceit and hypocrisy. In an attempt to win the church's favour, a polygamist may lie to the church that he would send his extra wives away, but in fact would only provide them with temporary accommodation to occupy until his baptism is over.<sup>124</sup> Sadly, the church baptises the person, administers the Communion to him and receives him into full membership only to find out later that he did not divorce his wives. Rather than impose monogamy on converts the church must allow the converted polygamists' conscience to evolve a solution.<sup>125</sup>

### **Recommendations for dealing with polygamous converts**

<sup>123</sup> Colenso as cited in Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 176.

<sup>124</sup> Thielicke, Helmut, *The ethics of sex* Translated by John W. Doberstein (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1978), 180.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=3wQ8iJCZutUC&pg=PA180&lpg=PA180&dq>

<sup>125</sup> David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Lusaka: Oxford University Press, 1968), 117-118.

First, the church must affirm that monogamy is God's ideal plan for marriage according to the overall teaching of Scripture. Therefore, it is wrong for a Christian to enter into a polygamous marriage whether through the normal process of paying bride price, inheritance, or gift.

Second, a pagan polygamist upon conversion should be received into the church with his wives and children. The church should baptise him without discriminating (in accordance with the command of Matt. 28:19-20, Mark 16:15) without asking him to divorce all but his first wife before qualifying for baptism and consequently church membership. We have shown that even though polygamy fails to meet God's ideal standard of marriage, polygamists in the Old Testament, were full members of God's people.<sup>126</sup> We can infer from the New Testament that polygamists were disqualified from eldership but were still full members of the church.

Third, the polygamous convert must be allowed to be a full church member and continuously be taught God's ideal model for marriage and his purpose in their lives. This will help those who intend to be polygamous realise that it is against God's plan. Those in marriage will, hopefully, stick to their marriage vows and realise that adding another wife does not solve marital problems but it instead adds to the problems. It is hoped that as the church teaches God's ideal for Christian marriage the problem of polygamy would be reduced to the barest minimum by the second and third generation.

Fourth, the issue of participation in the Lord's Supper must not be decided by the church but by the polygamous converts themselves after a close examination of the life and the teachings of Scripture.

Fifth, the church must avoid discriminating against polygamous converts and rather accommodate them and show them the love of Christ.

Sixth, monogamy as an ideal is practised not under Law but under grace. The tendency towards monogamy grows as one matures in Christ and gains a loving understanding of his gospel.<sup>127</sup> Monogamy must therefore arise out of love and grow as a "fruit"<sup>128</sup> of love.

Seventh, childlessness is a critical pastoral problem in African society because the idea of procreation in marriage still dominates and overshadows the solid principle of authentic married life. Marriages in Africa rarely last without children. The church should encourage "adoption" within the clan as an alternative to childlessness in marriage. Customary adoption is recognised under Ghanaian law, though most people are more comfortable with adoption by judicial decree.

<sup>126</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 241.

<sup>127</sup> Helmut, *The ethics of sex*, 180.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

Eighth, the church should set up vocational training centres for unmarried women and widows so that they will not become a burden to the society and be tempted to become second and third wives for mere survival. In this regard, the church should also set up a fund to support widows.

Ninth, the case of a Christian who lapses into polygamy should be studied and judged on its own merits. However, it must be noted that lapsing into polygamy may not necessarily be different from lapsing into any other kind of sin, such as hidden adultery.

Tenth, the church should actively pursue policies which will help eradicate polygamy. Effective teaching is the key to the eradication of polygamy from among Christians.

### **Conclusion**

Monogamy is God's ideal for marriage. But polygamy is practiced among African Christians. Polygamy, while culturally acceptable is inconsistent with Christianity. However, God in his own wisdom and sovereignty permitted polygamy (Genesis 4:19; 16:1-4; 29:18-29) due to the hardness of people's hearts. The New Testament reinstitutes monogamy as God's original standard of marriage. Yet, to ask a polygamous convert to divorce all his wives but one before qualifying for baptism is not different from asking a pregnant prostitute, upon conversion, to abort her baby and stop prostitution. Just as the abortion is a sin on its own, so is the divorce. There is no justification for committing one sin to remedy the offense of another sin. We therefore, suggest that, first generation polygamous converts must be accepted into the church with their wives and children without discrimination. The church may prevent polygamists from fulfilling their calling if they are considered as second-class Christians. The church should put measures in place to help second and third generation Christians to avoid polygamy.

### Review Questions

Read the following case study carefully and answer the question that follows. Kwaku Bekoe married Ama Serwaa fifteen years ago when both were not Christians. After several years of marriage Ama could not be pregnant. Ama was mocked by other women because she was barren. After some years, in accordance with the custom of their people, Ama's family suggested to Kwaku that he should marry Ama's sister Akosombo, so that she might bear children for him. Upon the consent of both Kwaku and Ama Akosombo was brought into the house as Kwaku's second wife. Today Ama is still childless, but Akosombo has five children and the whole family is living happily and peacefully. Kwaku and his family have recently become Christians. His children and first wife have all been baptized, but the church says Kwaku cannot be baptised or allowed to participate in Communion until he divorces his second wife, Akosombo. Kwaku does not want to divorce the mother of his children because he thinks divorce is a sin.

1. How would you handle this case if it were brought before you?
2. Should polygamists in the church divorce all but their first wives?
3. Can a polygamist be a full member of the church?
4. What factors promote polygamy in your community? Examine four of them.
5. Critically examine Jesus' teaching on polygamy in Matthew 19 and its implication for contemporary African Christians.
6. If polygamy is wrong, why do we find it practised in the Old Testament?
7. "God does not hate polygamy because most righteous men in the Bible were polygamists." Discuss.
8. In what ways have your thoughts about polygamy been affected by the analysis of biblical data on the subject?
9. How does polygamy contradict or support God's institution of marriage in Genesis 1-2?

CHAPTER 4

# Homosexuality



One of the most controversial issues confronting the 21st century church is homosexuality. Political, social and religious bodies of the world have all contributed to the subject of homosexuality because of its global concerns. One of the key issues that brought homosexuality to the centre stage was the election of a gay bishop, Gene Robinson, by the Episcopal Church in the United States of America in 2003. Today, gay and lesbian groups are speaking up and seeking legislation to protect homosexuals. Homosexuality has becoming more and more accepted in certain parts of the world, especially in the developed countries. In the Netherlands, Belgium, five Canadian provinces (Manitoba, Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec, and Nova Scotia), one Canadian territory (Yukon), and a USA state (Massachusetts), same-sex couples are allowed to marry. All over the world people now talk of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender queer culture) rights.

In most traditional African societies, however, homosexuality and lesbianism, same-sex intercourse and same-sex marriages are strongly rejected. Homosexuality contradicts African norm and traditional life. Some pro-homosexual governments have threatened to withdraw their support from anti-homosexual governments of Africa. These donor countries are ready to give their Aid money only to developing countries with liberal attitudes towards LGBTQ rights. This has the tendency of forcing so-called third world countries to accept the practice in order to enjoy the support of developed countries.

Yet, except for South Africa most African countries are skeptical of

legalising same-sex marriages. The late President Atta Mills of Ghana stated that “Africans and Ghanaians for that matter frown on homosexuality and if the people do not wish to legalise homosexuality, no responsible leader will go against the wishes of his people.”<sup>129</sup> This statement is a direct expression of a very strong opposition to the prospect of accepting homosexuality in his country. The immediate past Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church Ghana, the Most Reverend Titus Kofi Awotwi Pratt, declared the church’s strong opposition to the practice of homosexuality as inconsistent with biblical teachings.<sup>130</sup> Homosexuality, according to the Bishop, is alien to the cultural orientation of Ghanaians and Africans in general. This, of course, does not mean that there are no Africans who practice homosexuality.

Discussions of the Bible’s position on homosexuality are often very bitter and Africans have not published as much on the subject as can be found elsewhere. To give a Christian position on homosexuality, this book offers a critical examination of all the major biblical texts that touch on the issue. The chapter achieves its purpose by attempting to answer questions such as: Does God accept homosexuality? Can a Christian be a homosexual? How is the church expected to relate with homosexuals? Can a homosexual be a member of the Christian church?

### Understanding Homosexuality

Homosexuality is the expression of sexuality towards a person of the same sex. General agreement exists that homoerotic attraction to some degree occurs in some males and females in all cultures. Female homosexuals are referred to as lesbians while male homosexuals are referred to as gays. Homosexuals may be perverts or inverts. By perverts we mean persons of either sex who, as adults, engage in sexual activities with persons of the same sex. Inverts are those who are believed to be inborn reversal of gender traits. Bisexuals are those with sexual preference for both sexes. Heterosexuals are those with sexual preference for the opposite sex.

The concern of this book is not with homosexual orientation or preference (for which the person may not be responsible) but with homosexual practice (for which the person is responsible). Those with homosexual preference may not be blamed for what they are, though they may be blamed for what they do.<sup>131</sup> Thus, for our discussion, to be fruitful, there is the need to distinguish “being” from “doing” or one’s personal identity from his/her activity or sexual preference from

<sup>129</sup> President John Evans Atta Mills, “Ghana still frowns at homosexuality”, *Ghana News Agency*, Wednesday 1st February, 2012

<sup>130</sup> The Most Reverend Titus Kofi Awotwi Pratt made this statement during the inauguration of the Gaoso Diocese of the Methodist Church Ghana on Sunday 8th November, 2015.

<sup>131</sup> John Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today*. 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 446.

sexual practice.<sup>132</sup> While it is not sinful to have sexual preference for one's own sex (because a person might not be responsible for that trait), it is wrong to allow such preference to lead to homosexual practices. The reason is simple: "Whatever our inclination, we are to bring every thought captive to Christ and recognize that sexual intercourse is a joyful celebration of the unity between one man and one woman."<sup>133</sup> A person with high sex drive cannot justify his adulterous act or fornication with his "genetic make-up."

### **Homosexuality in the Old Testament**

There are four passages in the Old Testament which are often quoted in any discussion of homosexuality. Two are prohibitions in the law against homosexual activity. The other two are historical events: Sodom/Gomorrah and Gibeah. We note that these passages occur within the context of historical narrative of the Old Testament. This means that the narrators also interpret the history for the benefit of readers. We shall endeavour in the section to discuss each of these passages within its own context to assess its relevance to the subject.

### **The Story of Sodom (Genesis 19)**

The background to the story in Genesis 19 about the sin of Sodom is very necessary to the present discussion.<sup>134</sup> Before giving the accounts of the destruction of Sodom, the writer of Genesis makes it clear that "the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD" (Gen. 13:13, NIV). The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah was "so great and their sin so grievous" that God decided to find out how far the people had sinned (Genesis 18:20-21).

God sent two angels to carry out this assignment. When the two angels arrived at Sodom, Lot met them and invited them to spend the night in his house. At first the two angels declined Lot's offer but later decided to accept it. The significance of Lot's hospitality in the specific cultural context cannot be overstated. If you invited someone into your home for a meal, you were obligating yourself for the person's safety and security. Soon men from the city surrounded Lot's house and demanded that the two male angels be handed over to them so that they "may

<sup>132</sup> Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today*, 446.

<sup>133</sup> Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today*, 446

<sup>134</sup> The OT gives us another example of inhospitality and attempted homosexual rape in Judges 19. We can glean the following from the passage and make similar arguments like Gen. 19. The wicked men pounced on the door and demanded that the male visitors be brought out so that they would have sex with them (19:22-23). They raped and abused the traveler's concubine all night and caused her death (Judges 19:25-30). The rest of the tribe of Benjamin refused to turn these men over to punishment (Judges 20:13). For the sake of convenience our discussions will be based on the Sodom story.

know them” or “can have sex with them” (19:5, NIV). Lot, horrified at the ungodly attitude of the men of the city, suggested that the men take his daughters to satisfy their lust, but these ungodly men did not agree. The two angels then drew Lot back into the house, shut the door and struck the men and boys of Sodom with blindness. They also asked Lot to flee from the city due to the impending judgment. The following day the whole city was burnt into ashes.

The most fiercely contested question as far as this story is concerned is the sin that led to the destruction of Sodom. The traditional interpretation of the text holds that God destroyed Sodom because the boys and men in the story were homosexuals who wanted to have sex with male angels. This interpretation finds support in Jude 7 where Sodom’s sin is linked with sexual immorality: “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (NIV).

This traditional view on the sin of Sodom has been challenged by recent scholarship on at least two grounds. First, it is argued that the Hebrew word *yadha* should be understood as “becoming acquainted with” (19:5) rather than “having sexual intercourse” because in majority of its occurrences in the OT, *yadha* refers not to sexual intercourse but to the *general* relational meaning of “know.” In fact, of its 943 occurrences *yadha* refers to sexual act about 10 times (see for example Genesis 4:1; 17; 25). According to John Boswell, Lot, a stranger of the city, was guilty of ignoring the custom of the people which demanded that hospitality to strangers is only possible after permission has been sought from the elders of the city.<sup>135</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is understandable why the men came to Lot in anger. Their demands were legitimate because without examining the credentials of the strangers they (they strangers) could be dangerous to the life of the community. Therefore, the men came to Lot’s house to know what kind of people he was entertaining just as their custom demanded. If anything at all, the sin of the men of the city must be seen as inhospitality rather than sexual immorality. With this background Boswell argues further that the demand that the strangers be brought out to the men so that “‘they may *know* them,’ means no more than to ‘know’ who they were.”<sup>136</sup> Joseph Walter Miller cites Lings as sharing Boswell’s view. Lings, according to Miller, argues that the men of Sodom went to Lot’s house to inquire

<sup>135</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 93-94.

<sup>136</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 94.

about the strangers who had visited him.<sup>137</sup> In other words, when the men of the city asked that the angels be brought to them, they intended to know them not in the sense of having sexual intercourse with them but in the sense of becoming acquainted with them.

The second argument against the traditional interpretation is that Sodom's sins mentioned in other biblical passages do not include homosexuality. They include pride, gluttony, lack of concern for the poor and needy (Ezek. 16:48-49); hatred of strangers and cruelty to guests (Wisdom 19:13); arrogance (Sirach/Ecclesiasticus 16:8); evil-doing, injustice to the oppressed, the widow and the orphan (Isaiah 1:17) and adultery, as well as lying (Jer. 23:12).

Are the arguments against the traditional interpretation valid? First, determining the meaning of the word *yadha* based on statistical data does not do justice to the context of the text. The meaning of a word must be determined by its context, not statistical data. It is true from statistical data that *yadha* means "have sexual intercourse" in only a minority (about 10) of its 943 occurrences. However, six of these ten occurrences in which *yadha* means "to have sexual intercourse" are found in Genesis and one of these is in the Sodom passage itself (about the daughters of Lot who had not "known" men (v. 8)). This fact makes the traditional interpretation more likely. Also, it seems from the context of the passage that *yadha* means no less than "to have sexual intercourse." When the men of Sodom demanded "to know" the two male angels, Lot offers his two virgin daughters so that the men of Sodom can "know them" instead. It makes no sense for Lot to offer her two daughters in the stead of the two men if he understood "to know" as "to be acquainted with someone." After all, knowing who Lot's daughters are has nothing to do with knowing who the strangers are. More so, Lot regarded the men's desire to know the angels as "wicked" (v. 7). What is wicked about asking to know who someone is? Lot's description of the men's demand as wicked should tell us that he understood the request to know the angels as a request to have sex with them. From the context, it is clear that the men attempted to gang-rape the two visitors. Stretching this argument further, some have said the sin intended was rape and nothing more. It is however, more convincing to suggest that the sin was intended homosexual rape because the men knew that the visitors were male.

Second, while it is true that in the given cultural context hospitality was very important (cf. Genesis 18), as pro-homosexuals argue, the use of expression like "wicked" (Genesis 19:7), detestable and vile" (Genesis 19:23) and "grievous" (Genesis 18:20) makes it unlikely that Sodom's sin was just inhospitality. It is hard

<sup>137</sup> See Joseph Walter Miller, *Homosexuality: A Scriptural Way Forward for the United Methodist Church* (Gonzaler, FL: Enerpower Press, 2015), 40.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=-hW8DAAQBAJ&pg=PT2&lpg=PT2&dq>

to conceive discerning readers that a simple breach of hospitality would prompt God to pour down brimstone on the cities. Sodom's sin included homosexuality but was not limited to it. Therefore, the other sins found in other passages must be taken as additional sins of Sodom rather than the only sins Sodom committed. In Ezekiel 16, for instance, even though Sodom's sin is mentioned as pride, gluttony, lack of concern for the poor and needy (v. 48-49), the story goes on to include haughtiness and doing "abominable things" (v. 50). The "abominable things" in the context of the Genesis passage refers to "men, sleeping with men" or at least, the desire of men of Sodom to have sex with the male angels. This same expression is used in Leviticus 18:22 in reference to homosexual prohibitions. Unfortunately, pro-homosexuals do not appreciate this fact. Their argument, based on verse 48-49 alone, becomes weak when one considers the next verse (v. 50). In addition, both 2 Peter and Jude link Sodom's sin with sexual immorality rather than inhospitality or social injustice. The fact that a biblical writer does not mention a particular sin of homosexual act does not mean that he condones it. It simply means that his focus, based on what he wanted his audience to know, was not on that sin.

### **The Holiness Code (Lev. 18 & 20)**

Leviticus 18 & 20 form part of a section referred to as the Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26). In Lev. 18, laws are given to ensure that the sanctity of marriage, as divinely instituted in Genesis, is maintained.<sup>138</sup> These laws have their foundation in the creation order set up in Genesis.<sup>139</sup> The command "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev. 18:22, NRSV) comes in the midst of a list condemning incest (v. 6ff), and adultery (v. 20). In Lev. 20, the punishment for violating the law prohibiting "lying with a man as one lies with a woman" is given: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (Lev. 20:13, NRSV). A sound interpretation of these passages must be informed by the sexual practices of the nations that surrounded Israel. In the customs of the Hittites of Mesopotamia, the Canaanites and the Egyptians, homosexual relation seemed quite acceptable within certain limits. Israel could easily copy homosexual practice from these nations.

Anti-homosexuals consider Leviticus 18:22 as unambiguous prohibition of homosexuality—straightforward laws prohibiting all homosexual acts— with no differentiation between consensual and non-consensual acts. This prohibition comes in the midst of a section of laws related to sexual relationships. No

<sup>138</sup> Josh McDowell & Bob Hostetler, *Handbook on Counseling Youth: A Comprehensive Guide for Equipping Youth Workers, Pastors, Teachers, Parents* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 319.

<sup>139</sup> McDowell & Hostetler, *Handbook on Counseling Youth*, 319.

consequence is given here in each verse for the individual laws, but rather they are all listed as things that must not be done. All the items in this chapter's list are said to "defile" (Lev. 18:24) and are called "abominations" (Lev. 18:27, 30).

The word "abomination" comes from the Hebrew *to'evah* which comes from the root meaning of the word "to hate" or "to abhor." This is a reference to something detestable to, or hated by God. The word abomination connotes something more than going contrary to a Jewish law or custom. This word is very strong and carries the idea of something that contradicts God's nature.

Pro-homosexuals, on the other hand, argue from the view that the texts are part of ceremonial laws in the Holiness Code which is out-dated. They cite laws condemning the eating of pork and shrimps, tattooing, round shaving of beard, wearing multi-coloured clothes, fortune telling, playing with the skin of pigs as part of the laws stated in this code which are not obeyed today. Since these laws are no more in force today, they argue, the law on homosexuality should not be singled out and enforced. In other words, these laws only applied to ancient Israel.

Another argument is that the law prohibiting homosexuality was necessary in Israel because heterosexuality was the only means by which the Messiah could be born (cf. Genesis 3:15). Therefore, every Jewish woman was expected to give birth (cf. 4:1; 25). The emphasis that the Old Testament placed on childbearing makes it natural that homosexuality, from which no child could be born, will be frowned upon. In today's society where there is a strong advocacy for birth control and population reduction, the prohibition against homosexuality due to its inherent inability to bring about procreation is invalid.

In addition, it is argued that, these verses do not condemn homosexual behaviour in general, but only the cultic prostitution connected with pagan temples. Therefore, the homosexuality that must be condemned is one that is associated with idolatry (1 Kings 14:24) and homosexual acts have nothing to do with idolatry. A further argument has it that the Hebrew word *to'evah* does not always refer to something horrific or inherently evil such as theft or rape. It may refer to something unclean as well, as used in the following texts from the Pentateuch: for unclean food (Deut. 14:3); idolatrous practices and child sacrifice (Deut. 12:31; 13:15); magic (Deut. 18:12); remarriage of divorced wife (Deut. 24:4); idols (2 Kings 23:13; Isa. 44:19).

We find the contention that the prohibition against homosexuality was rooted in the connection that homosexual practices had with idolatry as not compelling. It is clear from the text that it refers to lying with a man "as with a woman." The immediate context describes other forms of sexual sin (such as incest, adultery and bestiality), none of which has anything to do with pagan temples or

idolatry. These prohibitions are moral principles applicable to Christians today rather than outdated ceremonial law.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, Leviticus 20:13 highlights both male parties equally, again suggesting general, consensual homosexual activity (as opposed to gay rape or a forced relationship).

Simply because the law prohibiting homosexuality is mentioned along certain other laws that are no more in force does not mean that the law against homosexuality is no more relevant. If it were so, then rape, incest and bestiality will be morally acceptable today because they are also listed in the same section of the law as homosexuality. No homosexual will argue that rape, incest and bestiality are moral. In his recent work on hermeneutics, William J. Webb contends that the issue here is primarily one of sexual boundaries: “The incest laws protect the boundary between parent and child; the bestiality laws protect the boundary between human and animal. Similarly, the homosexual boundaries prohibit intercourse between members of the same sex.”<sup>141</sup> Rather than being culturally limited, these boundaries are transcultural, prohibiting such activities in every society.<sup>142</sup> Again, though homosexuality and other ceremonial laws appear in the same context, the punishment for homosexuality is different from that of the other sins. For example, the punishment for eating pork or shrimp, was a few days’ isolation, but that of homosexuality was capital punishment (Lev. 18:29). To be sure, the dietary laws are no more in force because the New Testament brought them to an end (Mark 7:18; acts 10:12-25), but the moral prohibitions against homosexuality are renewed in the New Testament (Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10; Jude 7). There is therefore, no valid basis to discount the seriousness of the sin of homosexuality as pro-homosexuals would have us believe.

## **New Testament Teachings on Homosexuality**

### **Jesus’ Teachings on Homosexuality**

We begin our study of New Testament teachings on homosexuality from what Jesus taught us. We admit, first of all, that Jesus said nothing directly about homosexuality. However, this does not necessarily mean we cannot learn anything from him about homosexuality. Jesus did teach on sexuality, which by logical consequence speaks (implicitly) to homosexuality. Jesus’ citation of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to answer the trap-question of divorce (Matt. 19: 1-9) gives us a clue. In his answer, Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 to make the point that marriage is expected to be contracted between a man and a woman. It is the same heterosexual, monogamous marriage that offers the couple opportunity for legitimate sexual expression. We can legitimately conclude that the marriage between two men or two women is a deviation from

<sup>140</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, 2nd edition (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010), 284.

<sup>141</sup> As paraphrased by Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today*, 452.

<sup>142</sup> Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today*, 452.  
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God's standard.<sup>143</sup>

Similarly, sex between two males or two females is also a perversion.

### **Paul's Teachings on Homosexuality**

#### **Rom. 1:18-32**

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul demonstrates the sinful nature of all humanity in God's sight, and therefore their need of salvation. In Romans 1:18-32 he zeroes in on the Gentile world and accuses them of having suppressed the truth that God has revealed about himself in creation (vs. 18-20). Verses 26-27 (NRSV) read, "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another."

Anti-homosexual understanding of the text is that homosexual acts are against God's creation order and purpose for marriage. Paul states that the sexual perversion (in v. 26-27) is the result of shameful lusts (v. 25). This, according to anti-homosexuals, means homosexual desire is not what God intended from the beginning. Paul, therefore, points out that human desire has been distorted by sin and this has made the women exchange "natural intercourse for unnatural" and the men give up natural intercourse with women and begin to burn with passion for one another.

Contrary to the above understanding, pro-homosexuals argue that "nature" in Paul's thought is not a universal moral order but a personal nature of the Gentiles concerned.<sup>144</sup> The expression "against nature" signifies that which is unusual, unexpected or different from what is common in the normal order of things rather than that which is "immoral."<sup>145</sup> Paul's reference to homosexual acts as "unnatural" simply means that these acts are unexpected, unusual or uncommon sexual acts, not immoral sexual acts. They are unexpected among Paul's heterosexual audience. Homosexual desire is unnatural to the heterosexually inclined person. Similarly, heterosexual desire is unnatural to the homosexually inclined person. Paul, it is argued, does not condemn homosexuality in general but condemns homosexual acts among heterosexuals.<sup>146</sup> Thus, it is wrong for a heterosexual person to engage in a homosexual act. It follows that Paul would condemn heterosexual practices

<sup>143</sup> Also, Jesus condemned lust (Matt. 5:26-28) and this applies to both heterosexual and homosexual desires and relationships. The Bible is clear that Jesus condemned all forms of sexual immorality (cf. Mark 7:20-23).

<sup>144</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 110-111.

<sup>145</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 112.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

among apparently heterosexual persons. If that is the case, then it is wrong to force a homosexually inclined person to become heterosexual since “there is no clear condemnation of homosexual acts in the verses in question.”<sup>147</sup> Therefore for homosexuals, who act in accord with their nature (not against or beyond their nature), same-sex practice is not sinful. Therefore, people with natural inclinations to homosexuality should not be prevented from doing anything consistent with their natural orientation. The church must accept them as they are because their preference is not contrary to the natural order.

When scrutinised, the pro-homosexual argument is not supported by the immediate context of the passage. The men who “were consumed with passion for one another” (v. 27), are homosexuals, not heterosexuals. They are people who are led by their lust to perform homosexual acts. Also, the meanings of the expressions “natural” and “against nature” do not depend on our subjective experience of what feels natural to us, but to the fixed way of things in creation. The “nature” that Paul says homosexual behaviour contradicts is God’s unchanging purpose for us, revealed in creation and reiterated throughout Scripture. By nature, sexual intercourse is only permitted within the marriage between one man and one woman. That is the reason why God created one man and one woman at the beginning (Genesis 1-2, cf. Matthew 19:1-9). While it is true that the expression “against nature” can mean “unexpected” or “uncommon” this meaning is unlikely within a context which deals with the unrighteousness of fallen humanity in the sight of a righteous and holy God. Paul’s main concern was the distortions of the original/natural creation order and sexual relations which God established.<sup>148</sup> He uses three examples to illustrate this point: God’s glory has been exchanged for images of creatures (verse 23); God’s truth for a lie, resulting in idol worship (v. 25), and “natural” relations for “unnatural” ones (v. 27). On this, Robert Gagnon notes, “Quite appropriately, an absurd exchange of God for idols leads to an absurd exchange of heterosexual intercourse for homosexual intercourse. A dishonouring of God leads to a mutual dishonouring of selves. A failure to see fit to acknowledge God leads to an unfit mind and debased conduct.”<sup>149</sup> These exchanges have led to “being given over” to shameful lust. This means that the desires of the people “being given over” are hardly freely chosen. Yet, humans have no excuse because the “exchange actions” are ours, and the divine actions of “giving up” are the consequence. Therefore, Paul is saying that same-sex desire and practice is the direct result of a God-disowning a culture that exchanges the worship of the Creator with worship of creation (v. 25).

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today*, 461.

<sup>149</sup> As quoted by Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today*, 452-453.

### 1 Cor. 6:9-10

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul describes different kinds of people who (unless they repent) will be excluded from the kingdom of God. Among other groups are idolaters, adulterers, “men who practise homosexuality” (ESV) or “male prostitutes [*malakoi*] and homosexual offenders [*arsenokoitai*]” (NIV). The meanings of the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*<sup>150</sup> are very crucial to the present study, yet very difficult to determine. The literal meaning of the Greek word *malakoi*, translated “male prostitutes” is “soft”, though it also became a prerogative epithet for (younger) men who were “effeminate.” Homosexual relations between young boys and older men were common in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>151</sup> But the problem is that the word “*malakoi*” was not an ordinary word for such homosexual behaviour, making it very difficult to determine what it means exactly in this passage.<sup>152</sup> The young men sold themselves as “mistresses” (boy-wives) for the sexual pleasure of men older than themselves. The NRSV’s and NIV’s choice of “male prostitutes” as a translation for *malakoi* seems convincing because “it is immediately followed by a word that does seem to refer to homosexuality, especially to the active partner.”<sup>153</sup> *Malakoi* therefore refers to a passive male homosexual partner.

Regarding the meaning of *arsenokoitai*, Amevenku has argued that it refers to the dominant male partner in a homosexual relationship.<sup>154</sup> He was examining the meaning of the word in the I Corinthian context. Since *arsenokoitai* is also used in I Timothy, we shall discuss its meaning and relevance for the current subject in the next section below.

### I Timothy 1:9-10

The term *arsenokoitai* is also difficult to translate. It was not used by Greco-Roman writers who wrote about homosexuality. *Arsenokoitai* is a compound of “male” (*arsen*) and “intercourse” (*koites*, literally “bed”). The uncertainty about its meaning lies in whether the male is a subject or an object. If it is a subject, then it will be translated as “a man who has intercourse with another man” but if it is an object then it is to be translated “intercourse with males.” It is likely that Paul or some early rabbi coined *arsenokoitai* (from “*arsenos*” and “*koiten*”)

<sup>150</sup> J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, A Study of the Translation of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in some Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Bibles. *Journal of African Biblical Studies*, Vol. 5 (2014): 102-125.

<sup>151</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthian in The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 243.

<sup>152</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthian*, 244. Paul could have used terms such as *paidērastes* (lover of boys) *arrenomanes* (mad after males) to express the idea of homosexuality.

<sup>153</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthian*, 244.

<sup>154</sup> F. M. Amevenku, “Contemporary Pro-homosexual Hermeneutics and the Rise of Homophobia in Africa: A Biblical Response”. *Journal of Biblical Studies*, Vol. 5 (2014):126-151

which then became unknown to the non-Jewish world. Against this backdrop, it seems to us that the most likely translation of *arsenokoitai*, should be “to lie with a male” or male same-sex or homosexual offenders (NIV), an expression which, according to Norman L. Geisler, means actively participating.<sup>155</sup> In the Septuagint, these two words are translated by the Hebrew expression “lying with a male” (cf. Lev. 18:22; 20:13), suggesting that Paul is linking back to those two passages.<sup>156</sup> By using these two words, Paul addresses both the active (*arsenokoitai*) and passive partners (*malakoi*) in homosexual relation.

One question that needs to be addressed is whether the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* refer generally to all homosexuals or more specifically to homosexuals whose homosexual activities are abusive. Pro-homosexuals argue that in 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul speaks only against “homosexual offenders” but not homosexuality per se. Therefore, there is no condemnation for homosexual acts that do not offend anyone. But as Geisler points out, the expression “homosexual offenders” refers to “the offense of homosexuality, not an offensive act by a homosexual as opposed to an offensive one.”<sup>157</sup> Geisler’s understanding corroborates what Paul has already said on why same-sex relationships are wrong in Romans 1:24-27. In the view of Robert A. J. Gagnon, Paul’s concern about homosexuality was the fact that “the participants were members of the same sex rather than the opposite sex.”<sup>158</sup> Therefore, the question Paul was dealing with, was not whether the parties involved in the sexual act consented or one was abused.<sup>159</sup> It is not about whether the sexual intercourse takes place between two people of the same age or different ages, or whether the sexual act has procreative capacity or procreative incapacity.<sup>160</sup> Rather, Paul’s concern is the wrongness of any homosexual act.

### **An African Christian Response to Homosexuality**

The church must not abandon the biblical position that God’s ideal for marriage is a heterosexual relationship between one man and one woman. In this regard, the fact that the Bible is the final authority for making decisions must be maintained and not compromised. The Bible explicitly teaches that homosexuality is a sin in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the condemnation of

<sup>155</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 285.

<sup>156</sup> Paul has already just made a connection with Leviticus in the previous chapter, where he condemns the church’s acceptance of a man living with his father’s wife (cf. Lev. 18:7-8).

<sup>157</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 285.

<sup>158</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), np.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=o2axakq56X4C&pg=PT243&lpg=PT243&dq>

<sup>159</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, np.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

homosexuality is found both before the law was given and under the law. This is true for consensual and non-consensual cases. In the New Testament, God maintains his standards of holiness and declares the immorality associated with homosexuality. The New Testament speaks of homosexuality as a “shameful lust” (Rom. 1:26), a “shameful act,” an abandonment of “natural relations” (Rom. 1:27), a “wrongdoing” (1 Corinthians 6:9), and “sexual immorality and perversion” (Jude 1:7). Sexual intimacy is to be confined to marriage, and marriage is to be only between one man and one woman, following the pattern established by God in creation. We have adequately refuted pro-homosexual arguments aimed at discounting the normative value of the prohibitions against homosexuality. Therefore, Christians should not condone homosexuality. Since the Bible is against same-sex relations, the church cannot accept same-sex intercourse and same-sex marriage as moral.

One of the dominant emphases of Scripture is that God’s love steadfastly endures. The Bible also explicitly teaches that God offers his grace to redeem and reconcile every kind of sinner through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers the “good news” of forgiveness of sins and real hope for a transformed life to homosexuals as well as to all sinners. Jesus’ teaches us by words and example to be welcoming and accepting to all people, including those who live on the fringes and the periphery of society. Rather than condemning the so-called “tax collectors and sinners”, Jesus accommodated and became friends with them. In Matthew 5:44-48, Jesus teaches us to love even our enemies from God’s merciful nature. Jesus showed mercy to the adulterous woman and asked her to go and sin no more (John 8). As a Jew, Jesus was not supposed to speak with the Samaritan woman as a true rabbi (John 4: 1-42) because Jews considered them as impure, more so a woman prostitute. In the end the woman got converted and then proclaimed the good news to the whole village (John 4: 39). As a matter of fact, all these point to the fact that Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). It is worthy of note, that while Paul condemns homosexuality and other sins, he nowhere states that certain categories of people cannot be saved because of the gravity of their sins. In our view, accepting homosexuals into the church will give us the opportunity to evangelise them hoping that one day the God who justifies the ungodly will justify them as well.

Therefore, while never affirming homosexual conduct as morally right, the church should always act with love and compassion towards homosexuals. In our view, the church has failed to show love to homosexuals, considering them as objects of scorn and insult. We, therefore, call on the church to “love, accommodate and embrace homosexuals as God’s creation.”<sup>161</sup> In as much as the church does not shun

<sup>161</sup> Amevenku, “Contemporary ‘Pro-Homosexual Hermeneutics and the Rise of Homophobia in Africa: A Christian Response”

alcoholics or adulterers or fornicators or corrupt public officials or clergypersons who commit immoral acts or people addicted to pornography or contractors who offer sub-standard services, or teachers who play lackadaisical attitudes towards work, “even though society frowns on these attitudes (and rightly so)”, the church should not shun homosexuals.<sup>162</sup>

## Conclusion

Can homosexuals be members of the Christian church? This chapter has argued that homosexuals should not be rejected but accepted in the church and helped to receive Christ and the biblical teachings about marriage. That does not mean that we consider the homosexual as saved in his/her state of practising homosexuality. Rather, we accept them into the church with the hope that through our teachings, the Holy Spirit will lead them to salvation. Unless the homosexual repents of his/her sins and becomes saved he/she is not accepted by God and what awaits him/her is judgment. Jesus welcomed sinners in order to transform them not to leave them alone in their sins. Therefore, the church must do all it can to lead homosexual members to repentance and salvation.

Is it acceptable for Christians who have homosexual orientation to continue to participate in same-sex erotic activity? The core of Jesus’ message to the repentant sinner is “go and sin no more.” The Christian with homosexual orientation should not indulge in homosexual practices. To persist in homosexual practices because of one’s homosexual preference is no less sinful than persisting in fornication or adultery because of one’s high sex drive. The person should try to change his/her homosexual preference through prayer, counselling and determination. Until that is achieved, Christians practicing homosexuality should seek to practise sexual abstinence. The church is expected to disciple such people and help them live according to the will of God.

To this end, the church must intensify teaching on sexual ethics. The fact that some people are born to be eunuchs and the need to abstain from all ungodly sexual conducts must be stressed. Chastity must be advocated. The church needs to be compassionate about homosexually inclined people and to help them to change their sexual preference or to abstain, and to appreciate that singleness and sexual abstinence are the only options for those who are not married. The causes of such preference should be assessed and each situation appropriately dealt with. The church must not lose sight of the fact that some homosexuals may not be responsible for the condition, though they are responsible for the practice. Inverts deserve our understanding and compassion and not our rejection. Unless we show

<sup>162</sup> Amevenku, “Contemporary ‘Pro-Homosexual Hermeneutics and the Rise of Homophobia in Africa: A Christian Response”

love and mercy to them (inverts), any attempt to urge them to be celibate and abstain cannot be effective.

Therefore, the church must also avoid being judgmental and rather concentrate on how to effect transformation and reconciliation of all manner of people to God and other humans. Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. We must, therefore, respect them as we would any other human being. Therefore, Christians must not abandon or condemn homosexual family members and friends. The neighbours Jesus commands us to love include everyone regardless of their sin. For this reason, embracing homosexuals and helping them to reform is far better than rejecting them to struggle on their own.

### **Review Questions**

1. Explain the term homosexuality.
2. Does your society accept homosexual acts? Why?
3. What does the Old Testament teach about human sexuality?
4. How do you expect the church to react towards homosexuals?
5. How do you think Jesus would treat homosexuals if he met them in his time?
6. Do you agree or disagree with the idea of accepting homosexuals into the Christian church? Support your answer with Scriptures.
7. Should a Christian with homosexual orientation, who has received God's call into the ministry, be ordained? Explain your answer.

CHAPTER 5

# Birth Control

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Over the years, the use of contraceptive and other birth control measures in Christian marriage has been fiercely debated. Christian couples are pulled in different directions by different arguments and circumstances. Those who do not want to have children, or at least do not want to have them urgently or anymore, sometimes choose one form of contraceptive or the other to avoid unwanted pregnancy without much knowledge about the theological and biblical implications of their decisions. Like many other theological debates, two views stand out in the contraceptive debate.

One side of the debate decries all use of birth control measures, devices and procedures whereas the other side argues that a couple may, under some conditions, chose to control their family size. What makes the debate much complex is the lack of explicit biblical teaching on the subject. Christian decision on the subject, therefore, requires great wisdom. With this in mind, the current chapter seeks to provide general biblical principles regarding contraceptive and other birth control measures for Christian living. To this end, we shall attempt to deal with questions such as: Should sex be separated from procreation? Is the natural birth control the only acceptable form of birth control? It will be argued that while the Bible exalts child-bearing, it also recognises that certain circumstances in one's life may necessitate putting a limit on the number of children born. Subsequently, delaying

childbearing as a couple seeks to fulfil the mandate of being stewards over creation may also be necessary under some conditions.

### **Methods of Contraception and Birth Control**

Strictly speaking birth control and contraceptives have different meanings. Birth control refers to the process of preventing the birth of a child and may include terminating a pregnancy. It refers to everything from abstinence to abortion. Contraception on the other hand, refers to the prevention of fertilisation or conception (i.e., contradicted conception). However, these terms have been used broadly to refer to techniques that allow sexually active people to decide when or if they want to have children. Here we adopt the broader sense(s) of the term (s) synonymously.

The methods of birth control may be physical or chemical. Physical methods of birth control are categorised into natural methods, barrier methods and surgical methods. Natural methods of contraception involve choices on when a couple enjoys intercourse or not. They include the rhythm method, by which sexual intercourse takes place only during the woman's non-fertile period. Scientific study shows that there are periods in the month when a woman ovulates and becomes fertile and there are other times when she does not have any fertile egg released. Therefore, if couples have sex during the non-fertile period then they can avoid pregnancy. Another natural means is *coitus interruptus* which involves the withdrawal of the male organ from the female organ at the point of ejaculation in order to prevent the sperms from entering the uterus. Barrier methods use some form of barrier to prevent the sperm from coming into contact with the egg. For men, this involves condoms. For women, it includes the diaphragm, contraceptive sponges, cervical caps, and female condoms.

Surgical methods, called sterilisation, include tubal ligation (in women) and vasectomy (in men). In women it involves occluding (blocking) the fallopian tubes permanently so that no egg is released into the uterus to make fertilisation possible. In the case of men, the tube which conducts semen, the *vasa deferentia* is cut so that sperms are not released to bring about fertilisation. These methods are permanent ways of preventing pregnancy. To choose such a method is to accept that one will not give birth again no matter future circumstances.

The chemical methods of birth control are grouped into two. The first is intra-uterine device (IUD) which is inserted into the uterus through the cervix to prevent any fertilised egg(s) from implanting itself/themselves in the womb, thereby aborting it. It neither prevents fertilisation, nor disrupts the menstrual cycle. This method combines both chemical and physical methods. Another chemical method

is the use of spermicides usually in the form of jellies, suppositories, creams and foams which can be inserted into the female organ before sexual intercourse, to kill sperms and prevent them from reaching the egg. There are also “morning after” pills or “emergency contraceptive pills” (ECPs) designed to prevent ovulation, fertilisation and possibly post-fertilisation implantation of an embryo on the womb. Contraceptive injections are also available for preventing ovulation.

### **Birth Control and Contraception in Biblical Perspective**

What does the Bible reveal about birth control and contraceptives? We approach this question by stating the argument against birth control and then following it with the response from the other side. This method offers us the opportunity to discuss the same passages from two sides at the same time.

### **The Statement “Be Fruitful and Multiply” (Genesis 1:28)**

Genesis 1:26-28 presents humankind as the bearer of God’s image and the crown of creation. God instructed humankind to subdue the earth and gave them the mandate to populate the earth. There is no doubt that Adam and Eve were expected to have numerous descendants: “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen. 1:28, NRSV; cf Gen. 9:1). In this text, God gives humankind two main mandates through five imperatives: procreation (be fruitful, multiply, and fill) and dominion (subdue and rule).<sup>163</sup> There are two other statements containing the expression “God blessed.” God blesses the animal world with the ability to reproduce, using the same three imperatives (Gen. 1:22). The blessing is for all creation rather than for humanity alone.<sup>164</sup> God blessed the seventh day as well at the end of the week of creation (Gen. 2:3).

There are many issues associated with this short but important passage. The question as to whether the statement in Genesis 1:28 is a command or blessing is crucial for the present discussion. Anti-contraceptive Christians argue that, the statement “Be fruitful and multiply” is a command by God for all couples to have children. Their regard for the statement as an absolute command for creation leads to the conclusion that any form of birth control method is disobedience to God. Their support is found in the use of imperative in the statement “Be fruitful and multiply.” The statement sounds like a command. But pro-contraceptive advocates

<sup>163</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, “The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17” in *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (NICOT) series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 139.

<sup>164</sup> Frank E. Gaebelein (ed), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 38.

say the statement is a blessing rather than a command. M. O. Vincent rejects the anti-contraceptive view, saying, “Here [in Genesis 1:28] we note that ‘be fruitful and multiply’ was given by God more as a blessing than a commandment, and certainly not as a curse... But God did not say whether we were to multiply by one, two or ten.”<sup>165</sup> Raymond Van Leeuwen also argues that the subject of the text is what God does for and through humanity rather than what humans ought to do for God’s approval.<sup>166</sup> He reasons further, “Fertility is not a command but a blessing that God gives to his creatures, to animals as well as humans (Genesis 1:22). The filling of the Earth is a gift of God’s wisdom and shows forth his glory as Creator (Ps. 104:24, 31; Isa. 6:3).”<sup>167</sup>

The wider context supports the view that the statement is a blessing rather than a command. God repeats the statement in Genesis 9:1 and in Genesis 35:11, both times in the context of blessing (blessing of Noah and Jacob). In Genesis 24:60, Rebekah’s family sent her off to marry Isaac: “And they blessed Rebekah, and said to her, ‘Our sister, be the mother of thousands of ten thousands; and may your descendants possess the gate of those who hate them!’” (RSV). The first part of the blessing (“be the mother”) sounds like a command. But it is not. The Hebrew grammatical structure for the blessing in Genesis 1:28, is similar to that of Genesis 24:60: “may your descendants possess” (RSV).<sup>168</sup> The reason God does not say “may you be fruitful and multiply” is that he is the one who blesses and ensures that the blessings are given.<sup>169</sup> In the case of Genesis 24:26, Rebekah’s family are asking God to bless her and so they use the appropriate word “may” to indicate that it is their wish but they cannot offer the blessing themselves. One conclusion is obvious: “God does not command humans to be fruitful. Rather, he himself will bless his creatures and see to it that they are fruitful.”<sup>170</sup> Also, For example, as part of his blessing on Jacob, Isaac declares: “Be lord [imperative] over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down [jussive—mild command] to you” (Gen 27:29; cf. Gen 24:60). The imperative, along with the jussive, commonly occurs in statements of blessing<sup>171</sup> to show the strength of the blessing. The obvious conclusion is that the introductory statement “God blessed them” rather than “God commanded them” signifies that the imperatives “Be fruitful,” “multiply,” and

<sup>165</sup> M. O. Vincent, “A Christian View of Contraception,” *Christianity Today*, Volume 13 (1968), 14-15.

<sup>166</sup> Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “‘Be Fruitful and Multiply’ Is this a command, or a blessing?” in *Christianity Today* Vol. 45, No. 14, (Nov. 12, 2001): 58. Retrieved <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/november12/4.58.html?start=2> (Accessed on 6/5/17)

<sup>167</sup> Van Leeuwen, “‘Be Fruitful and Multiply’ Is this a command, or a blessing?”, 58.

<sup>168</sup> Van Leeuwen, “‘Be Fruitful and Multiply’”, 58.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Frank E. Gaebelein (ed), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 38.

“fill” are divine blessing to be enjoyed and pursued not commands to be kept.<sup>172</sup>

Another issue has to do with who the command/imperative applies to. One group considers the command as applying to every couple. But another group regards the command as general imperatives given to whole human species (through Adam and Noah) rather than to individual couples.<sup>173</sup> The immediate context supports this position. According to the passage, being fruitful and multiplying is to lead to filling the earth. But it is not possible Adam and Eve alone could fill the earth. Neither could Noah and his sons alone do it. Adam and Eve received this command because they were the first and only couple at that time and without them multiplying there could be no continuity of the human race. A similar argument holds for Noah and his sons. After the flood, they were the only people left to repopulate the earth. Adam, Eve and Noah and his sons have fulfilled this command and have populated the world through their descendants rather than through their direct offspring.

We run into problems if we take the command as applying to individuals rather than a blessing upon humanity in general.<sup>174</sup> How are we going to account for the life of Jesus Christ who at 33 years had no wife to bear children and yet claims to have come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, that is the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17)? That Jesus did not “multiply” should tell us that Genesis 1:28 is *not* a command for every person to obey. In addition, Jesus said that celibacy is a personal choice based on each person’s gifts, neither condemning it nor praising it above marriage and childbearing (Matt. 19:12). Here, Christ’s clear commendation of eunuchs clarifies that this Old Testament prohibition of the entrance of eunuchs into the congregation of Israel (Deut. 23:1) is not universally binding and should not be taken to imply that procreation is always mandated.

Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, also encourages Christians that it is better to stay single than be married (1 Cor. 7:38) so that individuals can place their entire focus on serving God (verses 32–35). He affirms that being married is a good thing, but he insists that being single is better in certain circumstances. If the command to propagate is specific for everyone then Paul encourages us to sin when he insists that being single is better in certain circumstances than marrying. Also, couples who decide not to have children at all or to abstain voluntarily from sex would be guilty of sin. But the Bible permits voluntary sexual abstinence by couples who have agreed to do so for a period of time in order to pray (1 Cor.

<sup>172</sup> Gaebeline (ed), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 38.

<sup>173</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options 2nd edition* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010), 399.

<sup>174</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2008), 218.

7:5).<sup>175</sup> More so, many men and women are physically unable to bear children. This failure should not be assessed as sinful because, often it is not their fault. Children, we are told are God's gift and an inheritance (Psalm 127:3).

Finally, we must deal with the reason for which God wanted humans to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. We discover from the passage two aspects of humanity. Humans are both sexual beings and spiritually bear the image of God. Both the spiritual and physical dimensions must inform our understanding of the permissibility or otherwise of birth control. The command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth is based on human sexuality while the command to dominate the earth relates to the image of God humans carry. Humankind was blessed with the ability to reproduce and the opportunity so that there will always be God's image-bearers on the earth to rule over it.

### **Is Birth Control an Incipient Murder?**

Some contraceptives may lead to abortion; others prevent ovulation or fertilisation. It is argued that the use of contraceptives is a sin against the law that prohibits murder. God has commanded us not to kill (the Sixth Commandment, Ex. 20:13), but to intentionally prevent the conception of a child is to intentionally take away the future life of a real human being. Nipping life in the bud without allowing the bud to sprout is a sin, it is argued. God condemns murder in no uncertain terms because humans are his image bearers (Genesis 9:6). It is God who gives life and he alone must be allowed to take life (cf. Job 1:21).

We agree with anti-contraceptive advocates on contraceptives that cause fertilised eggs to be aborted. Murder happens when life is taken away after it has been conceived. However, preventing the fertilisation of the egg does not amount to taking human life. Biologically, the unfertilised female egg is not "life." Whether one believes that human life begins at conception or at birth, there is no basis to consider the prevention of the conception of some form of life as taking away life. As Norman Geisler observes, "Voluntary selectivity with regard to the number of offspring is no more sinful than choosing to limit the number of trees one plants in the yard or the number of grains of corn one plants in a row."<sup>176</sup> He reasons further that hindering life from multiplying is sinful but limiting some life to make life more liveable for the already existing lives is not.<sup>177</sup> Therefore, generalising all contraceptives as life threatening is unfair, since not all contraceptives are potentially harmful.

<sup>175</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 399.

<sup>176</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 400.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid..

### Purpose(s) of Conjugal Union

Is procreation the only purpose for conjugal union? Before investigating the issue we wish to state at the onset that God designed sex to be practiced only within the context of marriage. Sex outside of marriage is wrong no matter its purpose (1 Cor. 6:18). The question as to what the intended purpose of sex is has been answered in two opposing ways. Anti-contraceptive proponents believe that procreation or reproduction should be given priority over the other purposes of sex. The pleasure of sex should not be considered as an end but a means to an end, conception. Great theologians like Augustine<sup>178</sup>, Luther, and Calvin agreed that sex should not be enjoyed if the intended purpose is not procreation. Therefore, to enjoy the pleasure of sex while avoiding the responsibility of childbearing is a sin against the natural law established by God.<sup>179</sup> The argument continues that the reproductive organs were given for reproduction and therefore using them for any purpose other than procreation is to go against the natural law.

The Roman Catholic Church promotes the practice of abstinence during the wife's fertile period as the natural way of family planning. This church rejects contraceptives as intrinsically evil against nature by making sexual intercourse unproductive. It reasons that since "the sexual organs are by nature generative, to close off the possibility of transmission of life in their use is to go against the will of God."<sup>180</sup> According to Paul King Jewett, sharing this view states that the Bible "is indeed the word of God today as when it was first given. It is therefore a sin to seek the treats of married love and to shun the responsibility of parenthood."<sup>181</sup> Against the backdrop of the above position, it is argued that since the primary purpose of sex is procreation, it is wrong to use any artificial method of birth control to prevent conception. Birth control methods which seek to make the pleasure of sex an end in itself is unethical and must be avoided,<sup>182</sup> it is argued.

Contrary to the above view, one can note that it is biblically indefensible to restrict the purpose of sex to procreation. Sex is a God-given gift for several specific purposes. It has other purposes such as pleasure (Genesis 3:16; Eccl. 9:9, Prov. 5:18; Song of Solomon 4:9-11), mutual self-giving, expressing the marital union and love (Genesis 2:24), communication, spiritual bonding (becoming one flesh), and companionship (Genesis 2:18; Ps. 68:6).<sup>183</sup> That sex is not only meant for

<sup>178</sup> D. C. Jones, "Birth Control" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (2nd Edition) edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2001), 169.

<sup>179</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 398.

<sup>180</sup> Jones, "Birth Control", 170.

<sup>181</sup> Paul King Jewett, "A Case for Birth Control," *Christian Century*, May 24, 1961. Volume: 78: 651, 652.

<sup>182</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 398.

<sup>183</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 400. See also Jones, "Birth Control", 170 and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Old*

creation is seen also in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, where Paul advises people struggling with sexual temptations to marry in order to satisfy their sexual urge. Paul further sees sexual intercourse as a marital duty in I Corinthians 7:3-5. In view of the foregoing discussions it is wrong for anyone to choose one purpose of conjugal union and leave the others. While we affirm that the will to have children must be present in every marriage, we deny that procreation is the sole aim for sexual intimacy.

If sex is intended only for childbearing then sexual activities must stop after menopause since sexual drive does not cease to exist. To note an additional opinion, John Frame believes that “procreation in Scripture is not the only function of sexual activity, nor is it clearly a necessary function (else we would expect prohibitions against sexual activity for women following menopause, etc.).”<sup>184</sup> Further, if sex is for procreation alone, then it is unethical to use even the rhythm method (which is approved by anti-contraceptive proponents) because no pregnancy can occur during that period.<sup>185</sup> Finally, if sex is meant only for procreation then a man who knows his wife to be sterile would have no moral grounds to have sex with her.<sup>186</sup>

### Onan's Sin and Birth Control

Onan's behaviour (in Genesis 38) is usually cited to argue that God is opposed to contraception. In this passage, we are told that Onan's brother, Er, married Tamar (v. 6), but due to some wickedness committed by Er, God slew him (v. 7). After Er's death, Er's and Onan's father, Judah, told Onan to marry Tamar and to raise up “seed” (or a child) to be the legal heir of Er's property: “Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.’” (Gen. 38:8, NRSV). This command came in accordance with the practice of levirate marriage in Israel and the neighbouring nations. Levirate marriage means the marriage relationship between a widow and her deceased husband's brother to raise up children who would be considered to be his brother's, thus keeping alive that family line (see Deut. 25:5-6). The source of the levirate marriage prior to the law is difficult to trace. However, there is no doubt that Onan understood clearly the purpose for such a marriage. Onan was not willing to split his inheritance with any child that he might produce on his brother's behalf, so he practised the oldest form of birth control, *coitus interruptus*. Onan's

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Testament and Birth Control,” Christianity Today. Volume 13:3-6, (November 8, 1968), 5.

<sup>184</sup> As cited by Bart Garrett, “Christians and Contraception: Convenience or Kingdom Thinking?” in *IIM Magazine Online*, Volume 3, Number 25, (June 18 to June 24, 2001), 5-6.

<sup>185</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 401.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

motivation for the withdrawal was selfish: he used Tamar for his own pleasure but refused to perform his legal duty of creating an heir for his deceased brother. His disregard for this parental injunction was considered rebellion against God. Therefore, “What he did was wicked in the LORD’s sight; so, he put him to death also” (v. 10).

The passage clears any suggestion that Onan practised birth control and that he incurred God’s wrath for it. The real issue has to do with whether Onan’s sin should be equated with birth control in general and whether the practice of contraception should therefore generally be regarded as something detestable to God. Opponents of birth control methods argue that it is “what he did” (that is the withdrawal and spoiling the semen), not his motive, that was seen as wicked in God’s eyes. Others see the judgment not to have been prompted by Onan’s act but his motivation for the act: Onan knew the offspring would not be his but Er’s and this motivated him to spill the semen on the ground (v. 9). Onan’s actions were motivated by his understanding that the offspring that would result from his union with Tamar would not be his but his brother’s. Such motive made his act sinful. God punished Onan’s intent (*mens rea*) not his action (*actus reus*).

It is argued that if the act of contraception were punishable by death in and of itself, the writer would have no need to explain Onan’s train of thought, i.e. that he envied his brother, and did not want to grant him the honour. The writer needed to explain Onan’s intention in order to justify God’s action of putting him to death. We cannot deduce from the passage that the act itself, not the motive behind it was wrong. The Hebrew construction of v. 9 shows that Onan’s action was continuous rather than just once.<sup>187</sup> This is evident in the NIV translation: “so whenever he lay with his brother’s wife...” Onan did not openly disobey his father’s command, but repeatedly pretended to obey.

Besides, the same phrase that links Onan’s action itself and his motive (or circumstance of his action) is also used to denote what Ham did in seeing and announcing his father’s nakedness (Genesis 9:24), what David did in marrying Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:27), and what Eliashib did in providing lodging for Tobiah (Neh. 13:7). In each of the above cases, it is not the actions themselves, that is, seeing and talking about a naked parent, taking a wife, or showing hospitality to someone, that are morally wrong but the motives and attendant circumstances. The same thing applies to Onan’s case. One thing is clear then: God is not only interested in our action but also the motives behind them (Prov. 16:2, 21:2; 1 Cor. 4:4-5).

We cannot use Onan’s case to establish a general rule that use of

<sup>187</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 2002), 367. The Hebrew conjunction ‘*im* carries the idea of “whenever” here.

contraceptives is wrong, at least for the following reasons. First, Onan's disobedience was not to the general command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) but to a specific duty to ensure the continuity of his dead brother's family line.<sup>188</sup> Second, as we have established earlier, God's punishment to Onan was occasioned by the motive behind his activity and not the activity itself. The text does not give explicit teaching on birth control. However, we can deduce that birth control for sinful intention is wrong. Our conclusion from the analysis of Genesis 38 is that birth control is not in itself sinful, but that it becomes sinful when used for sinful purposes.<sup>189</sup>

### **Children are God's Gift**

The Bible regards children as a gift, heritage and blessing from God (Genesis 4:1; 33:5; Psalm 127:3-5; Luke 1:42). God's desire is that his people should not be barren (Deut. 7:4) and so he blesses barren women with children (Psalm 113:9; Gen. 21:1-3; 25:21-22; 30:1-2; 1 Sam. 1:6-8; Luke 1:7, 24-25). God rejected the common Mediterranean practice of sterilising males (Deut. 23:1) as well as sexual abstinence in Israel (Exod. 21:10). However, sexual relations were to be set aside during the time of menstruation, the time of childbirth and for religious reasons for men (Lev. 15:19-28; 12:1-8; Exod. 19:15). Anti-contraceptive proponents argue that to hinder God's plan about passing life on through contraceptives is a clear disobedience of God. Birth control is tantamount to rejecting God's gracious gift of children.

The argument against birth control based on the fact that children are a gift from God is not compelling. The Bible also says that a wife is a gift from the Lord (Prov. 18:22). This, however, does not mean that it is wrong to stay single (1 Cor. 7:8). Just because something is a gift from God does not mean that we should attain the largest number available for us. There is a responsibility attached to childbearing. To have too many and become irresponsible, as a result, is wrong. D. C. Jones observes that "Though the Bible places a high value on having children as one of the prime blessings of marriage, the procreation decision is rightly weighed in relation to the intrinsic goods of the couple's companionship and partnership."<sup>190</sup> Jones' point is that there is no justification stressing the need to have children if childbearing is a threat to the companionship and partnership of the couple.

### **An Evangelical View on Birth Control and Contraceptives**

<sup>188</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 401.

<sup>189</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 401.

<sup>190</sup> Jones, "Birth Control", 170.

Can Christians use contraceptives and birth control methods?<sup>191</sup> The answer is “yes” and “no”. “Yes”, if the motive is right and then it is not harmful or potentially harmful to the “conceptus” and the mother. “No”, if it is done with a wrong motive or it is harmful or potentially harmful to the “conceptus” and the mother. This section outlines the wrong and right uses of contraceptives among Christians.

### **Unchristian ways of using Birth Control**

From the discussion done so far this study contends that birth control is wrong in the following instances. First, birth control is wrong if it is used in an extra marital affair to avoid the consequences of the sinful act. Couples must bear in mind that they are expected to satisfy their sexual urge only with their spouses. Second, it is wrong to use birth control as a means of refusing to aid the continual existence of a particular race whose existence is threatened. An example of such a situation will be Adam and Eve refusing to have children at the time that there were no other people to ensure the continual existence of the human race. A similar situation may arise after war whereby the existence of a particular race depends on very few surviving people. In that case any deliberate attempt not to give birth to ensure the survival of the endangered race would be morally wrong.

Third birth control would be wrong if it is used as a means of avoiding the responsibility of parenting. Such couples would not have been born if their parents took the same decision. There would be no race if all couples took the same decision. We all have the duty to pass life on.

Fourth, any birth control method which causes abortion is wrong. This refers, especially, to pills that are meant to prevent the fertilised egg from successfully implanting itself in the lining of the womb. Such a method is tantamount to murder and must be condemned. Christian couples must therefore, exercise due care in choosing a form of birth control that is unquestionably contraceptive, rather than abortion-intended.

### **Christian ways of using Birth Control**

The following are ethical ways of using birth control. First, it is ethical to use birth control in order to temporarily delay children until the couple is mature and financially and spiritually resourced to cater for children. New couples may be schooling or may not have the capacity to take care of their children and so may decide to wait until they are ready or prepared for children.

Second, it is ethical to use birth control to enable couples give birth to the number of children their resources can cater for. The need to provide for our children and plan for their future is Christian. Scripture is clear that we have a great

<sup>191</sup> We have gleaned most of the idea in this section from Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 402-404.

responsibility to take care of our family members (1 Tim. 5:8, Luke 14:28). It is, therefore, better not to give birth than to produce children one cannot provide for. Third, it is not wrong to use birth control as means of spacing out one's children. This enables parents to avoid the unnecessary strain that comes to the family when children are too closely spaced.

Fourth, it is also not wrong to use birth control to end childbirth. No part of Scripture commands us to have all the children it is possible to have. Therefore, at a point in time when couples believe that they have had enough children they desire, there is nothing wrong if they decide to stop further childbearing through birth control. Even though children must be highly valued, it is also important to realise that truly caring for them requires making wise decisions so that one has the means, including emotional investment, financial resources, and time, to give good care. To ensure this, a couple may have to limit the number of children they have in order to best provide for each child's emotional, physical, and spiritual needs.

Fifth, there is nothing wrong with using birth control for health, physical, economic, social or psychological reasons.<sup>192</sup> It is rather wrong to force a couple to bring forth children if doing so has the tendency to negatively affect their health and welfare. Finally, birth control is legitimate for a higher moral purpose, for instance to enable a person to be childless or celibate for the sake of God's Kingdom (see Mat. 19:12). However, such decisions would be inappropriate if the species is threatened by their abstention. As a matter of fact, some vocations and calling in life may be handicapped by the adherents having family or children.

### **Which kinds of Contraceptives are permissible?**

As a general rule, contraceptives that absolutely honour and uphold the sanctity of human life are acceptable, while those that do not are not acceptable. Methods that are not potentially harmful to the life of the "conceptus" or the mother are permissible within the confines of a marital relationship, assuming proper motives exist. These methods may include abstinence, rhythm or calendar, barrier methods, and sterilisation. Methods that are intended to terminate life, such as surgical and chemical abortions and some "morning after" pills are intentionally abortifacient (purposefully abortive) and should then be universally rejected.

### **Conclusion**

From the preceding discussion we find no biblical prohibition of contraception in general. We find in the Bible various passages that present childbirth as a good thing and the inability to have children as a bad thing. At the same time, it

<sup>192</sup> Jones, "Birth Control", 170.

cannot be argued from the Bible that it is explicitly wrong to use birth control for a limited time. There is no Bible text that orders Christian couples to maximise the number of pregnancies they can have. Therefore, not all sexual activities may aim at procreation. While the Bible exalts childbearing, it also recognises that certain circumstances in one's life may necessitate putting a limit on the number of children born or delaying childbearing as husband and wife seek to fulfil the mandate of being stewards over creation. Responsible parenthood may require limiting or spacing the children for health, social, physical or economic reasons. We found the argument from Onan's death to reject birth control not persuasive. It was the attitude of Onan's heart rather than his act itself that prompted God's judgment against him.

Evangelical Christian couples may, at times, choose to use contraceptives in order to plan their families and enjoy the pleasures of the marital bed. The couple must consider all these issues with care and must be truly open to the gift of children. The moral justification for using contraceptives must be clear in the couple's mind, and fully consistent with the couple's Christian commitments. That said, all married couples, should seek God's will with regards to when they would want to have children and how many children they seek to have. The use of contraceptives in planning one's family should be left up to Christian couples, not any external agency or agencies, to decide, as they seek the Lord's guidance in making the decision.

### Review Questions

1. Explain the terms "contraceptive" and "birth control."
2. What role does Genesis 1:26-28 play in the debate surrounding the use of contraceptive?
3. How would you advise a Christian couple about the available options for birth control?
4. Is it sinful to use contraception? Explain your answer.
5. Critically examine three unethical uses of contraceptives.
6. In your opinion, what are the factors that contribute to the use of contraceptives in Africa?
7. What are the arguments surrounding the purpose of sex? What is your position? Explain.
8. Under what three conditions can a Christian subscribe to contraceptives?
9. Critically examine the contributions of Genesis 38:1-10 to the birth control debate.

## CHAPTER 6

# Use of Alcohol

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10. Are Christians required to maximise the number of children they could have? Explain your answer.

The subject of alcohol consumption is one of considerable concern in today's church. People usually ask: Is it a sin for a Christian to drink alcoholic beverages? Is total abstinence from alcohol a requirement for all believers? These questions frequently stir the emotions of people on all sides of the issue. This chapter is an attempt to clarify the issue of alcohol use for contemporary African Christians.

### **What is Alcohol?**

The term alcohol derives from the Arabic “al kohl” which means a fine powder, probably antimony sulfide, used then in making cosmetics. Paracelsus, a 16th century chemist, defined it as the subtlest part of anything. By the 19th century the term “alcohol” came to be used generally for “wine-spirits”. In the field of chemistry, alcohol refers to a group of liquids containing the elements carbon, hydrogen and oxygen. Alcoholic beverages contain ethyl alcohol whose chemical formula is  $C_2H_5OH$ . Pure alcohol is colourless, boils at 173 F and freezes solid at 200 F below zero. Absolute alcohol is 99% ethyl alcohol and it is used in scientific and laboratory procedures. Alcohol is a major source of energy and a drug that affects the nervous system and depresses sensory function. It is used as a purifying agent, usually for purifying water (see 1 Tim. 5:23).

There are three main categories of alcoholic beverages depending on the manner of their manufacture and the percentage of alcohol in them. The first category includes brewed beverages produced from grain such as barley, oats, and maize. Examples include ale, beer, porter and stout. The second type, wine, is obtained from fruits, usually grapes, by the direct fermentation of the sugar in the fruit juice. The third type, distilled spirits, are produced by fractional distillation of wines or brewed beverages to concentrate the alcohol in the distillate. Examples include whisky, gin, rum, brandy, vodka. Yeast is the active agent in the fermentation process. It produces an enzyme which breaks down sugars and finally converts the sugars into alcohol and carbon dioxide. Before the discovery of yeast, wine could be made by simply exposing the fruit juice to the air in a warm place. Alcoholic beverages for human consumption usually contain between 2% and 40% alcohol.

### **The Meaning of the term “Wine” Examined**

The term “wine” commonly appears in the Bible. Does the term “wine” in the Bible denote exclusively fermented wine or inclusively either fermented or unfermented wine?<sup>193</sup> Some people assume that “wine” in biblical terms always refers to “fermented grape juice.” This assumption, known as the “one wine theory,” means that the “wine” mentioned in the Bible must in all instances be alcoholic. If all wine in the Bible are alcoholic and the Bible regards wine as a gracious divine blessing (though it condemns drunkenness), then it stands to reason that the Bible approves the moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages. Others contend that “wine”, in the context of the Bible, may be alcoholic or non-alcoholic. Upon close examination, it is evident that the Bible knows both fermented wine, which it cautions against, and unfermented grape juice, which it approves of.

### **The Meaning of Wine in English**

#### **Contemporary Usage of the Term “wine”**

One of the issues that make many people think of wine only in alcoholic terms is the way this term is defined in most contemporary English dictionaries.

*The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, for example, defines it as “an alcoholic drink made from grapes.” The seventh edition of the *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines “wine” as follows: “1: fermented grape juice containing varying percentages of alcohol together with ethers and esters that give it bouquet and flavor. 2: the usu. fermented juice of a plant product (as a fruit) used as a beverage. 3: something that invigorates or intoxicates.” *Nelson’s New*

<sup>193</sup> Most of the facts presented in answering this question come from Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages*.

*Illustrated Bible Dictionary* defines wine as “the fermented juice of grape.”<sup>194</sup> In none of these definitions is there any room made for referring to unfermented grape juice as wine. The contemporary definitions, therefore, give support to the “one wine theory.” No wonder people read these definitions and get the impression that the term “wine” is synonymous with “alcohol” or fermented juice.

### Older Usage of the Term “wine”

It can be seen from older dictionaries that the restrictive meaning of “wine” as fermented juice is a recent development. The term “wine”, according to older dictionaries, is defined as either fermented or unfermented grape juice. According to the 1896 *Webster’s International Dictionary of the English Language*, wine is “the expressed juice of grapes, especially when fermented ...a beverage... prepared from grapes by squeezing out their juice, and (usually) allowing it to ferment.” The 1955 *Funk & Wagnalls New “Standard” Dictionary of the English Language*, for example, defines “wine” as follows: “1. The fermented juice of the grape: in loose language the juice of the grape whether fermented or not.” These definitions make it clear that wine may be fermented or unfermented.

The *New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* (1971) equates “wine” with unfermented grape juice: “Wine or juice pressed from the grapes but not fermented.” The 1828 *Webster’s Dictionary* refers to unfermented grape juice as “new wine”, saying, “*new wine*—wine pressed from the grape, but not fermented.” The 1759 Nathan Bailey’s *New Universal English Dictionary of Words and of Arts and Sciences*, defines “wine” as follows: “Natural wine is such as it comes from the grape, without any mixture or sophistication. Adulterated wine is that wherein some drug is added to give it strength, fineness, flavor, briskness, or some other qualification.” Bailey refers to unfermented wine as natural wine and goes on to say this wine may be fermented (adulterated) by chemical means.

William Whiston’s translation of Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*, first published in 1737, gives us further grounds to believe that “wine” refers also to unfermented grape juice. Referring to Joseph’s interpretation of the cupbearer’s dream, Josephus writes:

He therefore said that in his sleep he saw three clusters of grapes hanging upon three branches of a vine, large already, and ripe for gathering; and that he squeezed them into a cup which the king held in his hand and when *he had strained the wine*, he gave it to the king to drink . . . Thou sayest that *thou didst squeeze this*

<sup>194</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 1313.

wine from three clusters of grapes with thine hands and that the king received it.<sup>195</sup>

The above quote reveals to us that as early as the time of Joseph, it was customary to squeeze the juice from grapes and drink it immediately in its fresh, unfermented form. Josephus calls such juice *gleukos* which Whiston renders it wine. Clearly, “wine” in this context is not a restrictive term for fermented juice. The same term is rendered “new wine” in Acts 2:13.

From the above study it must be said that translators of older versions of the Bible such the King James Version of the Bible (1611) understood “wine” as referring to both fermented and unfermented grape juice. With this understanding the King James Version uniformly translates the Hebrew *yayin* and Greek *onios* as “wine”. In the 17th century, this rendition was acceptable because (as stated earlier) readers understood “wine” as either fermented or unfermented grape juice. However, in today’s context where “wine” is understood only as fermented juice, it is very appropriate that Bible translators indicate which kind of wine they are referring to, whether fermented or unfermented. Failure to give such clarification will lead uninformed Bible students into taking all references to “wine” in the Bible as referring to fermented grape juice.

## The Meaning of the Latin Vinum

### Latin Usage of Vinum

Since the English term wine derives from the Latin *Vinum*, it is very appropriate to consider the meaning of this Latin term in the present study. Samuele Bacchiocchi contends that *vinum* refers to fermented or unfermented grape juice.<sup>196</sup> The Latin lexicon, *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, published in 1740, according to Bacchiocchi gives various definitions of *vinum* including “*Aigleuces vinum*—(“sweet wine”), “*Defrutum vinum*—(“boiled wine”), both of which are unfermented grape juice.”<sup>197</sup> Furthermore, the lexicon further explains that grapes can be referred to as wine, an idea supported by Marcus Cato’s designation of grape juice as “*vinum pendens*,” that is, “wine still hanging on the grapes.”<sup>198</sup> In his 1640 *Theatrum Botanicum*, Parkinson explains that juice from ripped grape is called *vinum*, that is wine. This *vinum* becomes *sapa* or *defrutum*, when boiled.<sup>199</sup> W. Robertson’s 1693 publication *Phraseologia Generalis*, defines the Latin *mustum* as “new wine” and the phrase *vinum pendens* as “wine yet on the tree.” Therefore, in Latin usage, wine may be fermented or unfermented.

<sup>195</sup> William Whiston, trans., *Josephus Complete Works* (Grand Rapids, 1998), 66.

<sup>196</sup> Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible*.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

### The Biblical Usage of the Greek *Oinos*

The Latin *vinum* derives from the Greek *oinos*. Unfortunately, some scholars have given the impression that *oinos* refers exclusively to fermented grape juice. Bacchiocchi quotes Liddell and Scott as defining *oinos* as “the fermented juice

of the grape.”<sup>200</sup>

The validity or otherwise of this claim has a heavy bearing on one’s attitude towards alcoholic beverages. If proven to be true it would mean that the Latin *vinum* and English wine are expected to have this restrictive connotation. Bacchiocchi goes on to show that even in the Septuagint *oinos* is used to refer to both fermented and unfermented drink (see for example Job 32:19). The New Testament understanding of *oinos* is discussed later in this chapter.

### Hebrew Words Denoting the Vine and its Produce Old Testament Words for Alcoholic Beverages

*Yayin* is used at least 140 times in the Old Testament. It is regarded as a generic term for the juice of the grape expressed in various ways. The words *yayin* and *shekar* translated wine and strong drink respectively, occur together a number of times always indicating intoxicating beverages. That *yayin* as something consumed by humans can be seen in the intoxication of Noah (Genesis 9:21), Lot (Genesis 19:32-35), and Nabal (1 Sam. 25:36-37). Abraham also gave it as a gift to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18; Heb. 7:3). Nazarites were forbidden from taking *yayin* during the period of their vow (Num. 6:3ff; Judg. 13:4 ff). It is to be offered to God in worship (Ex. 29:38, 40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5, 7, 10). *Yayin* is a gracious blessing from God to be enjoyed by his people (Deut. 14:26; Ps. 104:14-15; Eccl. 9:7; Is. 55:1; Amos 9:13-15). Abundance of *yayin* is a sign of God’s blessing, while the lack of it is a sign of God’s cursing (Deut. 28:39). Divine Wisdom prepares *yayin* as one of the delicacies for all who seek her (Prov. 9:1-5). Figuratively, *yayin* symbolises God’s wrath “poured from a cup” (cf. Ps. 75:8; Jer. 25:15; 51:7).

Another word is *tirosh*, which means “new wine” (freshly pressed wine) in all its occurrences in the OT.<sup>201</sup> In Hosea 4:11, we are told *tirosh* could enslave the heart when abused. *Tirosh* is a blessing from God (Genesis 27:28, 37; Deut. 7:13; Prov. 3:10). The removal of *tirosh* is a sign of God’s curse (Deut. 28:51).

Another Hebrew word, *shekar* (from the root *shakar*; to be drunk or intoxicated) means intoxicating drink, strong drink, or beer. The biblical attitude

<sup>200</sup> Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible*.

<sup>201</sup> Stephen D. Renn (ed.), *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 1048.

towards strong drink is much more negative than its attitude towards wine. Human consumption of *shekar* is depicted in the negative sense (for example see Prov. 20:1; Is. 5:11). *Shekar* was commanded to be offered as a drink offering to the Lord in worship (Num. 28:7), and is to be joyfully consumed as a part of the “rejoicing tithe” unto the Lord (Deut. 14:26). *Shekar* has medicinal value (Prov. 31:6-7).

Other Old Testament terms for wine are *mesek* (wine mixed with spices, cf. Is. 5:22; Prov. 9:2, 5), *hamer* (wine in the Chaldean language, from *hamar* which means to ferment; see Dan. 5:1-4; Deut. 32:14); *sobe* (translated as wine, liquor, and drunken, see Hos. 4:18; Nah. 1:10); *mishrah* (the juice of grapes Num. 6:3), *’asis* (new wine) (Is. 49:26; Joel 1:5). It is also used as a sign of the Messianic blessings to come for God’s people (Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13).

### New Testament Words for Alcoholic Beverages

*Oinos* is used in the Septuagint to translate each of the Hebrew words that refer to an intoxicating drink (*yayin*, *tiros*, *’asis*, *shekar*, *hamer*, *sobe*). In the New Testament, *oinos* refers to an intoxicating beverage for the word for a “winebibber” (i.e. one who drinks wine to an excess) is *oinopotes* (Mt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). In the literal sense *oinos* appears to run the full gamut of meanings, from new grape juice to the fully fermented alcoholic beverage. In contrast to John the Baptist, the Lord was accused of being both a glutton and a winebibber (he was neither) because he ate bread and drank wine with sinners (Mt. 9:10; Mt. 11:18-19; Mk. 2:15-16; Luke 5:29-30; Luke 7:33-34; Luke 15:1-2). The same *oinos* that makes one drunk (Eph. 5:18) was created by Jesus to be served at a wedding feast with full knowledge that it had the capacity to make one drunk (John 2:1-11). *Oinos* has medicinal value (1 Tim. 5:23).

*Sikera* (strong drink) refers to a grain-based alcohol or intoxicating beverage. John the Baptist was prohibited from drinking *sikera* (Luke 1:15). *Gleukos* (sweet new wine) as certainly capable of intoxication for the disciples are accused of being filled with *gleukos* (new wine) in Acts 2:13. Whereas Peter attributes the behaviour of the disciples not to drunkenness (*metheuo*), but to the Spirit of God (Acts 2:15). This kind of wine had high sugar content and was not fully fermented.

### Jesus and Wine

We cannot make any meaningful conclusion on this subject without touching on Jesus’ teaching on alcoholic beverages, both in word and in action. We shall consider Jesus’ miracle of changing water into wine at a wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11). The question as to whether Jesus was a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew

11:19; Luke 7:34) and the wine Jesus used for instituting the Communion (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23) will be discussed.

### **Jesus' Wine at the Wedding at Cana**

Jesus' miraculous transformation of water into wine at a wedding at Cana is considered by some people as evidence of the Lord's sanction of the use of alcoholic beverages. Since Jesus produced about 160 gallons of high-quality alcoholic wine to be drunk at a wedding party, he endorses at least wine use in moderation, the argument goes. This argument is based partly on the assumption that the Greek word, *oinos*, translated wine refers only to alcoholic drink. But as we discovered earlier *oinos* is used about 33 times in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *tiros* which means grape juice. *Oinos*, like, Hebrew *yayin* and Latin *vinum* is a generic term referring either to fermented or unfermented wine. That being the case, there is no solid grounds to equate *oinos* to alcoholic drink if other considerations do not support it.

Did Jesus create that large amount of wine to get every guest drunk and launch this new marriage with slurring lips and staggering feet? The description given by the master of the banquet to the wine provided by Christ as "the good wine" (*ton kalon*) is also used as evidence that the Lord's wine was alcoholic. If it is good wine, then it must be alcoholic, it is said. Was the wine described as good because of its potency to get people drunk? In the Greco-Roman world, the wine considered good was one whose potency has been removed by the strainer. The quality of the wine Jesus made was not a measure of its alcohol content but of the absence of decay, as it would have to be if it were intoxicating. The miraculous wine had no time to ferment and so it was a fitting representation of his glory and was appropriate to serve as the very first of his great miracles (John 2:11). The subject of the whole miracle is to show the glory of Christ as the divine Creator who can create anything at any time. For Christ to have produced good wine of high alcoholic content for guests to drink is morally inconsistent with the sinless nature of Christ and his teachings. If he did so, he would create an avenue for drunkenness. To argue that Christ, the Creator of good things (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25; Col. 1:16), used his supernatural power to make intoxicating wine which Scripture condemns as "a mocker" and "a brawler" (Prov. 20:1) is against the principle of Scripture.

The expression *methusthosin*, "well drunk", (John 2:10) used by the Master of Ceremonies, has been used to support the idea that Christ produced intoxicating wine. First, it must be noted that the word *methusthosin* can also mean "to drink freely." Second, the full statement concerns not the wedding at Cana, but

the general practice among those who hold feasts: “Everyone serves the good wine first; and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine . . .” (John 2:10). The expression probably refers simply to the large quantity of wine generally consumed at a feast, without any reference to intoxicating effects. Insisting that the wine used at the feast was alcoholic and that Jesus also provided alcoholic wine of a better quality is to say that Jesus provided a large additional quantity of intoxicating wine, so that the wedding party could continue its reckless indulgence. Such a conclusion destroys the moral integrity of Christ’s character. The whole discussion sums up in this quote:

There is not a hint that the wine he made was intoxicating. It was fresh-made wine. New-made wine is never intoxicating. It is not intoxicating until sometime after the process of fermentation has set in. Fermentation is a process of decay. There is not a hint that our Lord produced alcohol, which is a product of decay and death. He produced a living wine uncontaminated by fermentation.<sup>202</sup>

### Was Jesus a Drunkard?

Pharisees frequently accused Jesus of being a winebibber, drunkard and glutton. They also said Jesus had a devil and blasphemed, among other things. We know Jesus was not a glutton or demon-possessed blasphemer! So, if these things are not true, why should we assume that our Lord was a drunkard as indicated by the Pharisees, a group of Jesus’ most-outward adversaries well known for their questionable theology? They were merely contrasting Jesus’ lifestyle with the austerity of John the Baptist, a practicing Nazarite, who abstained from anything of the vine and ate locusts and wild honey (Num. 6:3; Luke 7:33–34, 1:15; John 8:48–52; Mark 2:7; Matt. 3:4). When Jesus hung parched on the cross, Roman soldiers offered him fermented wine mingled with myrrh. But as soon as Jesus tasted it and recognised it was fermented, he refused it. If Jesus refused this beverage even as his body was tormented with extraordinary thirst, why would he have drunk intoxicating wine normally (Matthew 27:34)? And more to the point, why then should we? “Considering the Bible’s very negative attitude towards drunkenness and Jesus’ dedication to God, it is inconceivable to us that Jesus ever drank alcohol recreationally or that he was ever drunk.”<sup>203</sup> Three principal reasons for this are witness to the lost, service to the saved, and the appropriate treatment of the body.

Jesus’ enemies used the term drunkard to discredit him. He does not admit that he was a drunkard. The accusing witnesses to Jesus’ life described him as

<sup>202</sup> R. A. Torrey, footnote not complete

<sup>203</sup> Richard Land and Barrett Duke, “The Christian and Alcohol” in *Criswell Theological Review* n.s. 5/2 (Spring 2008) 19-38: 32.

“...a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Matt.11:19; cf. Luke 7:34). This description is used to argue that Jesus himself used alcoholic drinks, became drunk and hence, by his practice, he sanctions the use of alcohol. The full text of this passage goes like this: Jesus said: “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, ‘Behold, a glutton man, and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children” (Luke 7:33-35). On the first look, it seems clear that Jesus took alcohol and got drunk. However, such an understanding is not likely to be correct. If Jesus took alcohol and got drunk, then it cannot be true that he was sinless because the Bible is clear that drunkenness is a sin.

That being the case, there should be a better understanding of the text so as not to contradict this passage with other scriptures. The motive behind the passage is to contrast the lifestyle of Jesus and his forerunner, John the Baptist. John lived an ascetic life, but Jesus lived a social life attending parties, eating and drinking (Matthew 9:10-11; Luke 15:1-2 cf. John 2:1-11).

The phrase “eating and drinking” is used idiomatically to describe not so much the difference in their eating and drinking habits, as the difference in their social lifestyles. Christ’s lifestyle was eminently social; therefore, in the common parlance of that time, he came “eating and drinking”. The two expressions are used by the writer to contrast John’s lifestyle of full social isolation with Christ’s lifestyle of free social association. Therefore, the emphasis is not on alcohol but on social lifestyle. John’s ascetic life enhanced his work of preparing the way for the Lord while Jesus social life enhanced his ministry of seeking and saving the lost.

The expression “eating no bread and drinking no wine” means that John’s prevailing habits were ascetic. His lifestyle made people charge him with the possession of demon.

It must be noted that the fact that the people described Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard does not mean that he must be. He was said to possess Beelzebub, but that does not mean it is true. In a similar way, we cannot say that since he was described as such it must be true by all means. There is no proof that Jesus was either a drunkard or demon-possessed. None of the charges against John and Jesus were true. They were all groundless.

John was a Nazarite and so could not take wine made from grape (or from any other source). Jesus, on the other hand, was not a Nazarite and so was free to drink wine from grape. Even at the Last Supper, he drank wine. The fact that he “came drinking” does not however mean that we should assume that he drank all sorts of wine, both fermented and unfermented. As stated earlier, if Jesus drank

fermented wine and got drunk, he could not have been described as sinless.

After a lengthy discussion, Bacchiocchi concludes that:

Of whatever food or drink the Lord consumed, it was healthful designed to provide for His physical needs and not to gratify self-indulgence. “My food,” Jesus said, “is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). It is hard to believe that Jesus would have fulfilled His Father’s will by partaking of intoxicating wine which the Scripture clearly condemns. Thus, it is unwarranted to assume that the kind of food and drink Jesus consumed was calculated to gratify an intemperate appetite robbing Him of clear mental perception and spiritual affection.<sup>204</sup>

The question as to whether Jesus could have been accused of being a drunkard if he never drank alcoholic wine must be considered at this point. The incident on the day of Pentecost helps us to answer this question well. On that day, the people did not see the disciples drinking anything, and yet accused them of being drunk with new wine (Acts 2:13). This scenario shows that Jesus can be accused of being a drunkard even if they saw him drinking nothing, or grape juice, or water, for that matter. This goes to show that no matter what Jesus drank or did not drink his unscrupulous critics could have tagged him as a drunkard.

On two occasions, Jesus was accused of possessing a demon (John 7:20; 8:48). If we believe that he drank some alcoholic wine because his critics accused him of being a drunkard, then we must also believe that he had an evil spirit because his critics accused him of having a demon. At the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the expression Jesus used was in reference to the drink for the institution was *gennēmatos tēs ampelou* (fruit of the vine). He said to his disciples, “I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matt. 26:29, NRSV; cf Mark 14:25 and Luke 22:18). There is no mention of intoxicating wine at the institution of the Lord’s Supper either. One last thing needs to be mentioned before we conclude the chapter; it is the position of the Bible on alcohol use.

## **Biblical Position on Use of Alcohol**

### **The Bible does not Explicitly Condemn Alcoholic Drinks**

Though there is a cultural gap between biblical times and ours, it can be said with safety that the Bible does not give any explicit condemnation of drinking of alcohol. On the contrary, the Bible makes some positive references to alcohol use.

- Wine was drunk at Jewish feasts (Deut. 14:23, 26; 16:13), given as sacrifices to the Lord (Exod. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5ff; 18:12) and sometimes used

<sup>204</sup> Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible*, 94.

as a symbol of celebration (Psalm 104:15; Prov. 3; 10; Song 5:1; Joel 2:19ff; 3:18).

- Wine was considered as one of the good things (blessings) that come from the Lord. Psalm 104:15 says that wine “gladdens the heart of mortals.”
- Strong drink was used as medicine. It could be given to those about to perish or those in physical pain to serve as anesthetics (Prov. 31:6). This text may explain why Jesus was given wine to drink on the cross (see John 19:29-30). He might have been given wine to reduce the pain he was going through. Paul, knowing this fact, instructed Timothy to take little wine to help solve his stomach problem (1 Tim. 5:23).
- Wine was regarded as something which could temporarily relieve a person of emotional pain (Prov. 31:7).
- Wine was used as disinfectant to clean wounds (Luke 10:31).
- Wine was used at social gatherings such as weddings (John 2:1-11).

### **The Bible Strongly Condemns Drunkenness**

No matter how one looks at intake of alcohol, one thing is very clear: Drunkenness is a violation of God’s express command (“Do not be drunk with wine” Eph. 5:18). Drunkenness refers to a drugged or deranged condition resulting from drinking intoxicated beverages (1 Cor. 5:11; 6:10; Eph. 5:18). This situation is characterised by staggering, reeling, vomiting, loss of mental and physical control, poverty and addiction (see Job 12:25 Ps. 107:27; Prov. 20:1; 21:17; 23:20-21, 29-35; 31:4-7; Is. 5:11:12, 22; 19:14; 24:20; 28:7-8; 29:9; Jer. 25:27; 48:26; 51:39, 57; Hos. 4:11, Joel 1:5). The Bible strongly disapproves of drunkenness for (at least) the following reasons.

Drunkenness leads to disgrace and immorality. Noah got drunk; the result was immorality and family trouble (Genesis 9:20-26). Lot was so drunk and did not know what he was doing; this led to incest (Genesis 19:30-38). Alcohol causes the drinker to have strange and adulterous/perverse thoughts, reduces willfulness, and prevents reformation (Prov. 23:31-35). This may explain why a drunkard son is regarded as stubborn and rebellious (Deut. 21:20). Drunkenness leads to shame (Hab. 2:16).

God commanded priests not to drink so that they could tell the difference between the holy and the unholy (Lev. 10:9-11, see also Ezek. 44:21). Also, God asked the Nazarites not to eat or drink anything from the grape vine (Num. 6:3). For example, Samson was to be a Nazarite for life. His mother was told not to drink wine or strong drink (Judg. 13:4, 7, 14). Prophecies of a drunkard are considered false (Mic. 2:11). Drunkenness robs God’s people of their senses and makes them

consult pieces of wood for revelation (Hos. 4:11-12).

Intoxication affects judgment. Kings, princes, and others who rule and judge must not drink alcohol, or else their judgment will not be perverted (Prov. 31:1-4, cf. Hos. 7:5). Similarly, Paul exhorts older men and older women of the church to be temperate and not be addicted to wine (Tit. 2:2-3).

Those who have responsibilities (kings and princes) are exhorted not to drink any intoxicating beverage or else they drink and forget what has been decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted (Prov. 31:1-7). It could be deduced that the text applies to those who have responsibilities for others, such as parents, elders, and teachers as well.

Strong drink (alcohol) is meant for those who are about to perish, those who are about to die, usually this means those who are in intense suffering because of a deadly sickness or injury (Prov. 31:1-7). This is meant to kill their pain. However, we have better ways of dealing with this situation in our day.

The drunkard is considered as a fool. A wise person will not be among winebibbers (Prov. 23:19-20). Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, whoever is led astray by it is not wise (Prov. 20:1).

The drunkard will come to poverty (Prov. 23:21).

- Drinking causes woe, sorrow, fighting, babbling, wounds without cause and red eyes (Prov. 23:29-30). These effects are not readily apparent when one looks at the liquid in the cup, however. This may explain why alcoholic drink is called the wine of violence (Prov. 4:17). Also, alcohol makes the drinker insensitive to pain, so he or she does not perceive it as a warning (Prov. 23:29-35).
- Drunkenness is not part of the Christian life. The past life of drunkenness has no place in the Christian's life (1 Pet. 4:3-4). For this reason, the believer is not to keep company of the drunkard (1 Cor. 5:11). For Paul, what should stimulate the Christian's life is not wine but the Holy Spirit: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18, NIV).
- Priests and prophets stagger and reel from beer and wine, err in vision, and stumble in judgment (Is. 28:7, see also 28:1, 3).
- Drunkards seek their own gain and expect tomorrow to be just like today (Is. 56:9-12).
- Drunkenness is a deterrent to inheriting the Kingdom of God. A drunken servant is unprepared for his Lord's return (Matthew 24:48-51). Drunkenness will cause a person not to be ready for the Lord's return (Luke 21:34). Acts of the sinful nature, such as drunkenness, will prohibit a person from inheriting the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21). Paul also says drunkards will not inherit the

kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10).

The following quote from Anderson Spickard Jnr. summarises the discussions so far.

“Alcohol abuse, [even that which] may not lead to serious consequences, is addressed very pointedly in Scriptures. Both Jesus and Paul warn us repeatedly that drunkards will not inherit the Kingdom of God (Luke 21:34, 1 Cor. 6:10, Gal. 5:21). It’s not hard to figure out why they speak so strongly: alcohol abuse is involved in most murders, most assaults, most child abuse cases, most traffic fatalities—the list is endless. We do ourselves and our entire society a great disservice when we laugh at drunkards or treat it lightly.”<sup>205</sup>

The Bible Favours Abstinence but does not Explicitly Prescribe it. The Bible does not explicitly “prescribe complete abstinence as a universal moral rule.”<sup>206</sup> Yet, it is deducible from biblical teaching that God takes a favourable position on abstinence. In other words, alcohol is not evil and drinking (per se) is not sinful, but all Christians should, nonetheless, refrain from alcohol out of love for God, themselves and their neighbour. We shall next consider the arguments for moderation and for abstinence.

The moderation (temperance) argument commends the use of alcoholic beverages to all Christians if used moderately. The individual must be guided by his/her conscience and circumstance, the argument goes. From the premise that the Bible condemns drunkenness rather than intake of alcohol, advocates of this position argue that Christians may drink alcohol in moderation, and once they avoid drunkenness, they do not sin. Further, it is contended that not everyone gets drunk when he/she takes alcohol. Also, it is argued that the Bible requires self-control which can be attained not only through abstinence but also through moderate intake of alcohol.

From Deut. 14:26, it is contended that God recommends strong drinks as beverage. They further argue, based on Psalm 104:14-15, that God has given us both plants and wine. We must therefore, accept wine as God’s blessing and not see it as evil. Proponents of moderate alcohol use strengthen their case further by referring to Jesus’ miracle of turning water into wine (John 2:1-11). Since Jesus’ wine is described as the best (John 2:10), it is argued, he takes drinking for granted. Another passage used to support moderation is 1 Timothy 5:23, where Paul admonished Timothy to take a little wine to solve his stomach problem.

According to this view the cases of abstinence in the Bible are special

<sup>205</sup> Anderson Spickard Jnr. as cited by Josh McDowell, *Counselling Youth*, 39

<sup>206</sup> Kudejie, *Christian Social Ethics*, 157.

cases not normative for all. These include the command that priests should not drink wine before they enter the tabernacle to minister (Lev. 10:9), the vow made by Nazarites not to take wine (see Num. 6:3-5), and the adoption of abstinence by the Rechabites as part of their programme in rejecting a settled agricultural existence so as to follow a nomadic lifestyle like the Jews in the wilderness (Jer. 35). The argument further goes that Daniel and his friends abstained not only from wine but also from food to improve their spirituality (Dan. 1:8-16), while John the Baptist's abstinence was part of his prenatal selection as a prophet (Luke 1:15). Based on the above contentions, it is said that it is legalism that will lead one to make a law that prohibits drinking of alcohol.

As a way of evaluation, it can be said that alcohol is not evil in itself. God made it for various purposes including being a sedative (Prov. 31:6), a stimulant (2 Sam. 16:2), antiseptic (Luke 10:34), and a laxative (1 Tim. 5:23). Therefore, alcohol has some good uses. These positive references to alcohol consumption for medicinal purposes tell us that the mere consumption of alcohol in itself is not a sin. This has to be admitted in support of the moderation view. However, in today's world, the purpose for which alcohol was commended in the Bible can be achieved through more effective and less harmful means. For example, people have much less reason to drink alcohol medicinally because there are many more effective means for dealing with various physical and mental afflictions that do not have the potential to cause the kinds of significant damage and grief that alcohol use can cause. This point does not deny that modern medications themselves have side effects of their own.

Paul's advice (in 1 Tim. 5:23) was specifically for Timothy due to his ailment, not a command for all to obey. Even in this case, Paul was not exhorting Timothy to take alcohol daily for the rest of his life, but to take it for the purpose of solving his stomach problem. Further, in that situation, Paul is also not saying that Timothy should take undiluted wine. Rather, Paul urges Timothy to add alcohol to water and drink rather than taking water only. Therefore, what Paul commended, even for medicinal use, was a diluted wine. The more important point however, is that to use this text as support for daily intake of alcohol is wrong.

The argument from Deuteronomy 14:26, does not seem convincing, either. First, the text will contradict many other texts if taken to mean God endorses alcohol drinking. Second, it is very likely that the drink was bought in undiluted form for easy transportation to Jerusalem where the feast was to take place, not to promote the intention of keeping it undiluted. This reasoning is supported by the fact that the reference to wine in this passage is to a Jewish festival celebrated by the whole household (which included children). To say that God was commending

strong drink use for the festival is to say that children were also permitted to take strong drinks. That will be very strange to the overall teaching of the Bible.

The fact that the Bible condemns drunkenness without giving any explicit condemnation of taking alcohol cannot be used as a basis to encourage people to take alcohol. Why? Complete drunkenness is not the only reason why it is wrong to take alcohol. There are other reasons for this position; for example, alcohol slows down the thinking process (Prov. 31:4-5).

The questions that advocates for moderation have to consider include: Beyond what volume of alcohol will one get drunk? In other words, what is the allowable alcohol intake of an individual? If it varies from person to person, how can one determine his/her limit so that he/she can take in alcohol without committing the sin of drunkenness? Does one have to experiment alcohol intake for some time to determine his/her limit? Is it possible for one to get drunk as part of the process of determining his/her limit? If yes, who is responsible if the person, as part of the experiment, gets drunk? To be sure, the limit, even if determined accurately will work only for the drink used in the experiment. It will not work for any other drink with different alcohol content. For example, one's limit for a drink which contains 15 percent alcohol will be different from another drink which contains 24 percent alcohol. Therefore, if one should decide to take in twenty different alcoholic drinks, he/she needs to conduct at least twenty experiments, each with a very high probability of getting drunk before knowing the limit accurately. Again, who is responsible for the sin of drunkenness which could result from the individual experiment to determine one's limit?

This is obviously a grey area and the difficulty in determining one's limit without getting drunk should encourage us to choose abstinence. Drunkenness is sinful and alcohol is addictive; this much is clear. All understandings of alcohol drinking must be filtered through this lens. The one who drinks in moderation does so with the knowledge that he/she is responsible for his/her actions in case accidental overindulgence results.

## Conclusion

While the Bible is quite clear that drunkenness is sinful, it is unclear on alcohol drinking. Drunkenness is a serious sin against the express command of God ("Do not be drunk with wine" Eph. 5:18). To become drunk with alcohol is to put oneself under the controlling influence of something other than the Spirit of God. In the Bible, we see all classes of people using alcoholic drinks. Both new and fermented wine was widely used among the Jews. No matter how one looks at intake of alcohol, one thing is very clear: the Bible strongly disapproves of

drunkenness. Drunkenness refers to a drugged or deranged condition resulting from drinking intoxicating beverages (1 Cor. 5:11; 6:10; Eph. 5:18). Both the Old Testament (especially the prophets) and the New Testament speak negatively about drunkenness.

We, therefore, offer some general principles that the Christian could consider when making a decision about alcohol use or any other activity. First, Christians are under the lordship of Christ. As such, they are not free to do just anything, except that which pleases and glorifies God (1 Cor. 6:20). Second, Christians must avoid selfishness, that is seeking their own interests, even to the detriment of others (1 Cor. 10:24). Third, God's glory should be the most important concern for Christians. With every activity Christians embark upon, they ought to ask whether or not God will be glorified. Paul wrote, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). We ask any Christian who chooses to drink alcohol whether God is glorified by the process or not? Considering the principles mentioned, it seems obvious, that, the Christian who abstains from alcohol will be able to glory God more than the one who drinks alcohol in moderation and risks getting drunk. There is no glory for God in the willful pursuit of pleasure that has no regard for one's influence or effect on others. Finally, the Christian must remember that he/she will be judged for his/her every deed, both those that affect his/her own life and those that affect the lives of others. Paul counsels, "But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31). Whether in this life or in the life to come, God will hold Christians accountable for their behaviours. It does not even matter whether or not we believe we are justified to engage in certain activities.

### **Review Questions**

1. What is alcohol? Give some major sources of alcohol.
2. Can a Christian take a little wine to boost his/her appetite? Explain your answer.
3. "The Bible speaks against drunkenness not drinking." What is your view on this assertion?
4. How would you counsel a drunkard based on Jesus' teaching on alcohol?

CHAPTER 7

# Funeral Expenses

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The modernity and technological advancement that characterise the 21st century have affected many aspects of Ghanaian, and for that matter African traditional life. Prominent among the changes brought about by modernity and technological advancement is the remarkable change in Ghanaian funeral practices, which in turn have led to an unprecedented rise in the cost of funerals. In recent times, much debate has been generated among various ethicists and theologians regarding the justification for expensive funerals. Two major schools of thought have emerged in response to the issue.

On the one hand is the argument that funerals serve as the final farewell message to the dead and as such, must be celebrated affluently not only as a form of honour given to the deceased, but also as a means of ensuring that the living do not incur the wrath of the dead. On the other hand, it is argued that huge sums of money spent on funerals could be channeled into enterprises that will give better benefits to the living and enhance the national economy. This chapter, through a critical analysis of contemporary funeral practices, promotes support for inexpensive funerals.

We collected primary data using the participant observation method and

oral interviews. We processed the primary data by description, narration, historical analysis and interpretation. In addition to the primary data, we have examined the perspectives of scholars from different schools of thought and persuasions on the subject of funerals in Africa. The approach enabled us to draw attention to the grim facts of expensive, extravagant funeral celebrations in Ghana, and to propose ways of reducing excess expenditure in funeral practices.

### **Expensive Funerals: The Case of Ghana**

Funeral rites have been with humanity since the onset of sin and the resultant death that accompanied it. Like other parts of the world, every Ghanaian society celebrates funerals as a means of paying the last tribute and saying good-bye to the dead. Though common to almost all races, funeral practices differ from one culture to another. For instance, unlike Europe where funeral celebration is a family affair, Ghanaian funerals engulf the whole community. CNN's Paula Newton rightly observes that, "Ghanaian funerals are an opportunity to celebrate the life of the dearly departed. A large number of mourners attend funerals - the more, the better."<sup>207</sup>

A celebration which involves a whole community, as Newton alludes to, definitely demands huge financial commitment from the bereaved family (as well as the entire community) to cater for food and drinks for guests. Newton concurs and says that, "Bereaved families have to provide food, drinks, music and dance for their guests."<sup>208</sup> While the provision of food and drinks for visitors and other funeral practices may not be new altogether, what goes into these practices has changed over the years due to cultural dynamism, modernity and technological advancement.

Today, the "success" of a funeral is measured by the degree of display of affluence and the crowd it attracts. Ghanaians pride themselves with how much they spend on a funeral. Pauline Bax says "[Ghanaians] say with pride: 'I spent 10,000 cedis [on my father's funeral].'"<sup>209</sup> For this reason, all efforts are geared towards making funerals well attended, lavish and flamboyant. "Ghanaians spare no [funeral] expense because [they] care more about the dead than the living."<sup>210</sup> To ensure the success of a funeral, there is an intense planning and spending for space,

<sup>207</sup> Paula Newton, "The Long Goodbye: Why Funerals are Big Deals in Ghana" in CNN's "On The Road Series" Tue March 11, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/11/world/africa/on-the-road-ghana-funerals/> (Assessed on 18th October 2016)

<sup>208</sup> Newton, "The Long Goodbye"

<sup>209</sup> Pauline Bax, "In Ghana, Funerals Have Become Big Business" <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-08-22/in-ghana-funerals-have-become-big-business> (Accessed on 7/12/16)

<sup>210</sup> Bax, "In Ghana, Funerals Have Become Big Business"

service conductors, seating arrangements, clothing, musicians, transportation, caskets and elaborate banquets.<sup>211</sup> There are funeral committees responsible for

the planning of every funeral. Dancing casket bearers and special mourners are available for hire to add to the fascination of a funeral.

As a matter of fact, funerals have become a big drain on bereaved families.<sup>212</sup> Many bereaved families are not able to meet funeral costs with the contributions from family members and sympathisers.<sup>213</sup> They resort to borrowing money from individuals and financial institutions. Many business experts recognise that funeral costs in Ghana have become unbearable. Roberta Bonetti has noted that a typical contemporary Akan funeral can cost almost as much as one Ghanaian's yearly income.<sup>214</sup> Newton, who believes that "Ghanaians may spend as much money on funerals as on weddings, sometimes even more," has estimated the average cost of a Ghanaian funeral at between \$15,000 and \$20,000.<sup>215</sup> Bax states, concerning funerals, "... since costs for the elaborate affairs can easily exceed the annual earnings of an average resident, [Ghana's] biggest insurers, including Enterprise Life Assurance and SIC [State Insurance Company], have seen funeral coverage become a major source of business."<sup>216</sup> Alfred Ankrah, SIC's funeral policy manager has stated that, "We have a [funeral] policy targeting the so-called upper class that pays out 10,000 cedis, but still people say it's not enough,"<sup>217</sup> C. C. Bruce, executive director of Enterprise Life, rightly notes that the burden of financing funerals has become so high that people have to take bank loans to organise the event.<sup>218</sup> Anastacia Arko, an analyst at Accra-based Databank Financial Services, observes that "Funeral costs are high... People are becoming sensitized to take up ... policies"<sup>219</sup>

Reflection on the quantum of financial resources spent on funerals compared with the prevailing economic situation in the country brings several questions to mind. What benefits does the living derive from expensive funerals? What would an expensive funeral achieve for the dead? Do the dead take note of what happens during their funerals? Are the dead really that enthused about the display of wealth to dispose of their bodies? Should a "befitting burial" necessarily

<sup>211</sup> Samuel K. Bonsu & Russell W. Belk. "Do not go Cheaply into that Good Night: Death-Ritual Consumption in Asante, Ghana", *The Journal of Consumer Research* 30.1 (2003):41-55, 44.

<sup>212</sup> Bax, "In Ghana, Funerals Have Become Big Business"

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Roberta Bonetti, "Alternate Histories of the Abebuu Adekai," *African Arts* 43.3 (2010): 14-33,25.

<sup>215</sup> Newton, "The Long Goodbye"

<sup>216</sup> Bax, "In Ghana, Funerals Have Become Big Business"

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

affect the lives of surviving relatives negatively?

Two schools of thought have emerged in response to the issue. On the one hand are those who contend that funerals must be celebrated affluently not only as the final farewell rite in honour of the deceased but also as a way of avoiding being punished by the ancestors for not sending off the dead befittingly. On the other hand, there are those who argue that such monies should be used for a more profitable venture, such as supporting brilliant but needy pupils, or to undertake developmental projects that will benefit the entire community. Certainly, this situation calls for a careful analysis of associated costs and benefits. After a theological and ethical reflection on the issue this book recommends funerals celebrated at minimised cost.

### **Factors that Contribute to Funeral Expenses in Ghana**

In this section, we look at various changes that have taken place in Ghanaian funeral practices in recent times due to modernity and technological advancement. The rise in funeral expenses, according to the data collected, is attributable to the fact that old funeral practices which were relatively cheaper have been replaced by contemporary ones which are very expensive.

### **Preservation of Corpses**

Embalming, the art of preserving corpses generally by the use of chemical substances, could be traced to ancient Egypt. Like ancient Egypt and other countries, Ghanaians embalm their dead to prevent them from decomposing before burial. We learn important lessons from the embalming of Jacob as recounted in the Bible. After the natural outburst of sorrow for his deceased father, Joseph ordered that the body be embalmed, according to the custom of Egypt. Two reasons may be assigned for the embalmmnt. First, it was the standard custom of the land. People generally follow the customs of the land around them in such instances. The second reason is that, the body would have to be taken all the way back to Canaan according to the promise Joseph made. The trip would be rather displeasing as the body degraded in the heat of the territory and so the embalming was very much necessary.

The embalming process took place over a period of forty days while seventy days (including the forty days) were devoted to mourning the dead man. H. A. Ironside has stated that, it is probable that the actual process was continued for forty days, and that the body lay in natron for the remaining thirty days of mourning. Walter Kaiser asserts that the Egyptians embalmed the bodies of the dead not because they believed that these natural bodies rise again. The old books and

pictures of Egypt plainly show that they believed the earthly body was left behind forever at death and that the spirit entered a new life. Some scholars suggest that the embalment was done in the hope of eternal life when the spirit would reunite with the body. In any case, embalming the body represented the preservation of heavenly qualities of life, and was in general an image of immortality. With this background, Kaiser concludes that there is in the embalming of Jacob and Joseph, this thought of the preservation of the heavenly qualities which they represent - Jacob (who is here called Israel), a spiritual goodness, and Joseph, a more interior state of nearness to the Lord. According to the practice, the embalmers washed the corpse and swathed it in bandages of linen, cut in strips and smeared with gum after the seventy days had elapsed. They then gave it up to the relatives of the deceased, who provided for it a wooden case, made in the human shape, in which the dead was placed, and deposited in an erect position against the wall of the sepulchral chamber. This custom probably originated in the belief in the future reunion of the spirit with the body. The process became more and more complicated, and to such perfection was it carried that bodies embalmed thousands of years previously were preserved to contemporary times in the numberless mummies that have been discovered in Egypt.

No matter one's position on the issue, one thing is clear: The funeral associated with this embalment process was elaborate and costly. There was great respect shown to Jacob's body. Joseph and his brothers did not say that their father's body was merely the shell and so there was no need to spend money on it. It was still Jacob as respects his body and it was precious in the eyes of the God who loved him, and so there was an embalming of his body, and the Egyptians were experts in this.

Different Ghanaian ethnic groups have similar funeral practices. In the past when a person died, the head of the lineage saw to it that the body was prepared and kept until it was buried. Various traditional modes of corpse preservation were used. One method was to position the corpse upside down to drain out completely the fluid in the system through the nose or mouth. Another method was to sit the corpse down with a bowl beneath him/her so that body fluid will drain through the anus and sex organs. A third method was to cover the corpse completely with Siam weed (*acheampong*).<sup>220</sup> Finally, liquids such as the mixture of the ashes of a roasted plantain and water, cement solution, lime solution, and schnapps could be forced down the throat of the dead person to serve as preservatives.<sup>221</sup> Traditional means of corpse preservation were simple and inexpensive.

<sup>220</sup> Noah Gyamfi Kumi, Interview by co-author (Isaac Boaheng) on 22nd December, 2016 at Asikasu No. 1, Dormaa-Ahenkro.

<sup>221</sup> Barima, Interview

Today, the traditional means of corpse preservation have given way to the modern trend of keeping corpses at the morgue. With the arrival of refrigerated morgues corpses can be preserved for a very long time. Various hospitals and clinics have morgues in which dead bodies are preserved. Dissatisfaction with the services provided by public morgues has led to the establishment of private ones which render (quality) services at a high cost.<sup>222</sup> Morgue expenses include a daily embalming injection and mortuary fees. Despite the high cost of keeping corpses at the private morgue, Mary Ampomah notes that many people prefer them to public ones. She reports of the transfer of the body of one of her deceased relatives from a public morgue to a private one with the aim of looking for a better service.<sup>223</sup> When Ghanaians die abroad, bereaved families, in most cases convert huge sums of cedis into dollars to pay for the cost of preserving these bodies abroad. Later, after relatives abroad have organised a first funeral, the bereaved family flies the body home, to Ghana for burial in the deceased's hometown followed by a befitting funeral.

Morgue fees for the preservation of the dead usually depend on the duration of the preservation. At first, bodies were mostly preserved for a week or less. However, these days, the body's length of stay has become an indicator of a family's wealth and as such corpses are kept longer. Bodies that are buried on the spot without keeping them at the morgue are considered to be of a lower status. Some societies refer to such bodies as *atomprada* (a plantain that is harvested and cooked the same day).<sup>224</sup> For this reason, many families deliberately allow their dead relatives to stay longer at the morgue (sometimes for months or even years) in order to accord the dead a high status and to prove the bereaved family's affluence. Families, thus, pay huge sums of money to cater just for the preservation of the corpse.

In some cases, the fee becomes so huge that some families abandon their dead relatives at the morgue. This practice of keeping corpses for long periods at the morgue, according to Noah Gyamfi Kumi and Twum Barima, may be justified for three main reasons.<sup>225</sup> First, this practice is intended to give the deceased family the opportunity to plan and raise adequate funds for the funeral rites. Second, it gives the deceased family the opportunity to settle any dispute and foster unity before the final funeral rites. Finally, it gives the deceased family enough time to publicise the demise of their loved one so that other people (both family members

<sup>222</sup> Barima Interview

<sup>223</sup> Mary Ampomah, Interview by co- author (Isaac Boaheng) on 22nd November, 2016 at Asikasu No. 1, Dormaa-Ahenkro.

<sup>224</sup> Evangelist Abraham Adoma, Interview by co- author (Isaac Boaheng) on 15th December, 2016 at Asikasu No. 1, Dormaa-Ahenkro.

<sup>225</sup> Kumi and Barima, Interview

and non-family members) could pay their last tribute at the funeral. Deliberations on the date and location of a ceremony and the subsequent preparations can take about two months.

While the above reasons may sound convincing, one may question the legitimacy of paying exorbitant amounts at a public, private or foreign morgue just to preserve a dead person temporarily.

### **One-Week Celebration, Fortieth Day Celebration and Anniversaries**

Some Ghanaian societies organise “One-Week Celebration” for their departed relatives at which they make plans for the final funeral rites and officially announce them. Few decades ago, relatively few family members very solemnly observed one-week celebrations on the quiet. In recent times, the one-week celebration has become more or less a formal funeral rites drawing large crowds and requiring elaborate publicity, hiring of canopies, video coverage, distribution of food and drinks, manual or electronic display of pictures just as the final funeral celebration.<sup>226</sup> Gradually, this event, primarily meant for the official declaration of plans for the final funeral rites, has turned into a preliminary funeral. Invariably, there are two funerals—one without the body present (the one-week celebration) and the other with the body present (the final funeral celebration). In addition, there is a fortieth day celebration as well as the first, second, tenth (and other) anniversaries all of which are celebrated with food and drinks alongside music and dance. The cost of organising these events increases the total cost of the funeral remarkably.

### **Tomb**

Most Ghanaian societies practice burial of the dead in the earth. In times past, families dug a simple six-foot grave, placed the coffin in it and covered the grave with soil and then planted flowering plants on it. This practice was economically cheaper for, at least, two reasons. First, there was virtually no cost incurred in digging the grave and covering it with soil because family members and their friends to care of it. Second, the same piece of land could be used to make another grave after the first body had completely decomposed. Today, there have been major changes in the making of tombs. In urban communities, family members do not dig the grave anymore; they hire “professionals” to dig the grave for a fee. Also, there are professionals who decorate tombs with terrazzo, ceramic tiles and marbles<sup>227</sup> for very high fees. Some tombs have a whole house built on them with metal gates and decorated corridors while others even constitute a mausoleum. The inexpensive practice of planting flowering plants at the extreme ends of the

<sup>226</sup> Adoma, Interview

<sup>227</sup> Barima, Interview

grave has, in recent times, been replaced by the placing of expensive wreaths on the grave. The doll, *akuaba*, which was placed on graves have been replaced by the fixing of a tombstone at the front side of the tomb. Family members do all these things to satisfy themselves that they have given a befitting farewell to the dead. In the Asikasu No. 1 community within the Dormaa-Ahenkro municipality, the cost of some tombs is equivalent to the cost of two building plots.<sup>228</sup> Yet, while many people find it difficult acquiring their own building plots, families continue to erect large and expensive tombs at the cemetery.

### Funeral Publicity

Not too long ago, family messengers went on errands to spread news about people's demise. Today, elaborate funeral announcements are covered across both the electronic and print media. Funeral arrangements are broadcast on radio and on television (both state owned and private television stations) at rates depending on duration and the time of the announcements. Besides, pictures of deceased persons are replicated in the classified pages of local newspapers to inform the public about their funeral arrangements. The more decorated these pictures are, the more attractive and expensive they become. Furthermore, some families erect large, colourful and expensive billboards at vantage points to publicise funeral arrangements. "Billboards, which may cost from nearly \$600 to \$3,000, are placed at strategic spots for everybody to see, often dotting the cities' skylines."<sup>229</sup>

The publicity of funerals also involves the use of banners, posters, handbills, T-shirts and social media facilities like Twitter, Imo, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook.<sup>230</sup> Many bereaved families print invitation cards for distribution to friends, co-workers and business partners of the deceased's children and other relations. In most cases, phone calls reminding people about the big event follow these numerous publicity activities. After the funeral, the bereaved family makes use of the media (for example Television and newspaper announcements) to show appreciation to sympathisers. This practice replaces the old practice whereby a bereaved family went around from house to house to thank sympathisers. Clearly, every aspect of publicising funerals involves some form of financial commitment.

### Funeral Brochure

Many years ago, all that was done was a simple handwritten order of service for the burial service. It was so simple that a single sheet folded into two or three could be used for the purpose. However, with the invention of the print media, a

<sup>228</sup> Barima, Interview

<sup>229</sup> Newton, "The Long Goodbye"

<sup>230</sup> Barima, Interview

whole booklet is dedicated for the order of service, the biography of the deceased and tributes from various parties. Funeral booklet ranges from a single page colour print to a full book print of multiple expensive colours. They have been turned into photo galleries with various pictures of the deceased (and others) colourfully displayed page by page with each picture telling his/her life story through different life stages. These booklets are so elaborate that mourners clamour for them. Printed at very high costs, funeral brochures are useful for just an hour or two.

### The Casket/Coffin

From time immemorial, Ghanaians have mostly buried their dead in coffins. However, the time Ghanaians buried their dead in unpolished coffins made of *wawa*, *odum* or *mahogany* tree is gone. Coffins have progressed from simple to complex forms. Today, coffins are made not only from wood but also from materials such as plastics, metal, fibreboard and fiberglass. Contemporary coffins are decorated with broken mirrors, white linen, polyester, white beddings, flowers, shiny silver, bronze or gold plates and bars, among other things. Modern technology has made it possible to have some coffins that can be dismantled into beds with stands on which bodies can be laid in state.

Through the innovation of a carpenter named Seth Kane Kwei, customised coffins (those made to resemble an important element of a person's life, usually his/her profession), have also emerged.<sup>231</sup> Coffins for cocoa farmers are usually in the form of cocoa pod, drivers in a form of a car, musicians in the form of a microphone, fishermen in the form of a fish, pastors in the form of a Bible and so on.<sup>232</sup> Coffins hype on legacy and reputation and the more customised they are, the more expensive they become. Coffins constructed of mahogany, bronze or copper may cost as much as \$10,000.<sup>233</sup> Another development in recent times is the importation of coffins from abroad, usually from the United Kingdom or the United States of America. Imported coffins are highly patronised because they are regarded to be of a higher quality and standards of workmanship than locally manufactured ones. Interestingly, no casket, regardless of its quality or cost, will preserve a body forever. One sad thing about expensive coffins is that they usually end up being destroyed at the cemetery to prevent grave looters from stealing them for resale.

### Funeral Cloth and Souvenirs

<sup>231</sup> Roberta Bonetti, "Alternate Histories of the Abebuu Adekai," *African Arts* 43.3 (2010): 14-33, 14.

<sup>232</sup> Barima, Interview

<sup>233</sup> Ghana Caskets – Ghana Coffins Guide,  
<http://www.funeral-arrangements-guide.com/ghana-caskets-ghana-coffins-guide/>

The old practice of mourning in an ordinary black (*brisie*) or black and red cloth (*kobene*) has given way to the practice whereby families prescribe special mourning clothes for each funeral. Relatives and friends wear special cloths, some of which are custom-made with pictures of the deceased, for funerals. Currently, it is not uncommon to come across the prescription of four mourning clothes for just a single funeral—one for the extended family of the deceased, one for the children of the deceased, one for the grandchildren of the deceased and another one (usually a white cloth) for the Thanksgiving Service in church.<sup>234</sup> In addition, customised polo shirts with images of the deceased imprinted in them may be made and worn by funeral ushers and other people. Funerals also involve the use of handkerchiefs, face towels, wristbands, cups and bowls, writing pads, pencils, pens, key holders made in the name of the deceased. Mourners have to find money to buy all these items.

### **Laying-in-State and Undertakers**

Previously, it was the family members of the dead who took up the responsibility of preparing the body for laying-in-state and burial. Strangers had no role in the preparation of the corpse. This helped the grieving family to come to terms with the departure of their loved one. In the attempt to make the funeral grand by engaging the services of funeral homes, the role of the family is totally cut out in the preparing of the dead. Professionals (undertakers) charge high fees to prepare the corpse for laying-in-state. They usually decorate the body with expensive jewels such as trinkets, necklaces, expensive beads and rings. Sometime bereaved families transport these morticians from very far places to come and serve the family.

### **Tents, Canopies and Chairs**

The period of using fork-sticks and palm branches to prepare sheds and using wooden benches at funeral has passed. Today, funeral grounds have canopies of different styles arranged to provide shade, comfort and beauty. Depending on the size of the funeral, hundreds of chairs may be rented too. The canopies are well decorated with balloons, bunting and flowers. The benches used some fifty years ago have given way to the use of plastic and aluminum chairs of different styles. All these practices are capital intensive.

### **Entertainment**

Musicians, drummers, brass bands and poets feature prominently at Ghanaian funerals. In the past, music at funerals was basically traditional. It included

<sup>234</sup> Kumi and Barima, Interview

*Nnwomkorô*, a cultural song exclusively performed by a group of adult women, *Adenkum*, traditional calabash music at festivals, and *Adowa*, a cultural group which was originally an all-female dance, songs performed orally with special body movements were seen at funerals. These traditional music groups were not expensive to engage. Today, various dance bands, brass bands and traditional drumming groups are engaged for most funerals. The band members are provided with food and drink only for them to perform for about two hours. Spinners also have their special place at the funeral grounds. There is even the promotion of live-band music performed by top musicians at huge fees.

Another “new thing” that has emerged in funerals in recent times is video coverage. On the day of the death some families engage video operators and camera-bearers to record the funeral activities. The video reportage continues during the one-week celebration through the final funeral rites to the Thanksgiving Service. It is not clear what families do with these videos when the funerals are over.

### **Accommodation, Food and Drinks**

In the past, palm wine and locally brewed alcohol, *akpeteshie*, were the main drinks served at funerals.<sup>235</sup> In recent times, the one-week celebration has become more or less a party. Bereaved families are expected to host and feed all guests and other members of the extended family. After the event on Saturday, individuals are invited to a dinner at a given location or hotel on Sunday. This is very expensive to offer. At such gatherings, bereaved families serve all kinds of drinks, including expensive imported and locally manufactured alcoholic beverages.

Funeral preparations include provision of accommodation. To achieve this, there is usually the need for renovations and rebuilding. The body is kept in the morgue until the family house is rehabilitated, fixed with a new roof and repainted and decorated to make it attractive. In some cases, old houses are completely pulled down and new ones built to replace them. Also, family members may pay for hotels and hostels for their visitors.

## **Economic, Cultural and Theological/Ethical Perspectives on Expensive Funerals**

### **The Economic Viewpoint on Expensive Funerals**

Funerals have some positive effects on the host economy. For Kumi, a funeral celebration is the only event in the economy that compels people to spend more money every weekend.<sup>236</sup> Payments for the preservation of corpses, conveying

<sup>235</sup> Kumi, Interview

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

corpses to destinations, drink purchase and sowing of funeral cloths, radio and television announcements, and dressing of corpses all contribute to the economic life of the people involved. Mourners converging at the affected community come with their basic needs and attempts to finding solutions to these needs, tend to create employment for others (especially those in the affected community). For example, a shoemaker will serve those who need to mend their shoes for the funeral. Market women, butchers, fishmongers, poultry sellers, cooking oil sellers, rice sellers and so on are all involved in meeting the needs of people who converge for a funeral. In addition, the music industry also benefits from funeral celebrations as bands are hired to perform.

The renovation and reconstruction of an old house does not only beautify the community and improves upon the living standards of the occupants, but also enhances the economy for hardware shop owners, masons, carpenters, labourers and other artisans. The church also receives donations, purchases and monuments from bereaved families (during thanksgiving services) to improve upon its standards. In some cases, churches deliberately fix fund raising events to coincide with the funeral Thanksgiving Service is to be held. Also, the government receives some revenue for the making of the grave. Financial institutions benefit from funerals in the sense that, in most cases, they give out “funeral” loans to bereaved families which attract interest.

Nonetheless, it has been argued that the overall effect of funerals on the economy is negative. According to Kumi, funerals are events at which many individuals contribute hard-earned monies to benefit very few people.<sup>237</sup> That is, during funerals those who get employed such as hearse drivers, petty traders, and artisans, derive their benefits at the expense of many poor individuals who contribute towards the funeral. Funerals may incapacitate people to meet basic needs let alone having personal savings. Virtually all funerals end in debt. After taking stock of the event, it is the norm to share funeral debt equally across board for the family members irrespective of one’s ability or inability to pay. To prevent being looked down upon due to one’s inability to pay his/her share, people often resort to borrowing monies from money lenders, friends and financial institutions to pay. The poor are deprived of their personal savings because almost every weekend there is a funeral expense to be met. At the end, majority of the people get poorer and poorer while the few people who constantly benefit at funerals get richer and richer. In effect, expensive funerals lead to the exploitation of the poor by the rich.

Since huge sums of money are borrowed for funerals and the debt settled later with interest, the deceased family is usually left with huge debts to settle.

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<sup>237</sup> Kumi Interview

Primarily, the surviving spouse and children are supposed to give the deceased a befitting burial, while the immediate family may be thinking of life beyond the funeral ceremony. Thus, to consider a rather modest funeral rite, the extended family may not be in agreement. In attempt to finance an expensive funeral, a huge amount of money is demanded from the surviving spouse who may, together with the family, use the deceased person's property as collateral to secure loans for the funeral. This situation makes them vulnerable to future hardship. For example, a child may have to drop out of school due to financial challenges resulting from a recent funeral of a deceased relative. Children may eventually drop out of school for a period or permanently. The difficulties that confront the surviving spouse and children tend to compound the emotional pain they suffer.

Another issue is the amount of time spent on funerals which causes waste in most cases. Daniel Asomah Gyabaa argues that the time spent at funerals does not make any corresponding positive impact on the economy.<sup>238</sup> The time spent at funeral grounds indirectly tends to affect the national economy since people leave their businesses to spend a lot of time at funeral grounds. People attend funerals at the opportunity cost of working to generate revenue, which could have contributed ultimately to the national economy. People run from work to be part of funerals on working days and never return to make up for the lost time at the workplace. This practice amounts to a loss of revenue to the national economy. Yet, such workers would expect full payment of their salaries at the end of the month.

### **The Cultural/Traditional View on Expensive Funerals**

People's worldview surrounding death tends to shape their attitude towards funerals. Traditionally, Ghanaians hold the belief that (expensive) funeral rites are necessary to ensuring unbroken relationship between the living and the dead. Therefore, social pressure to hold an impressive funeral proves very irresistible.<sup>239</sup> Edgar Tekyi Akorno explains that death, in traditional African thought, is a transition from one world into another and this transition comes with a certain level of flamboyance.<sup>240</sup> Effah Korsah shares a similar opinion when he states that "in Akan one must move from the world of the living to the world of the dead with the same glory he/she had while living. For this reason, the corpse is expected to be dressed nicely and seen

<sup>238</sup> Daniel Asomah Gyabaa is a senior minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. He is well versed in the Akan culture. He was interviewed by co-author, Isaac Boaheng in Sunyani on 22nd February, 2018.

<sup>239</sup> Pauline Bax, "In Ghana, Funerals Have Become Big Business" <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-08-22/in-ghana-funerals-have-become-big-business> (accessed on 7/12/16)

<sup>240</sup> Dorcas Efe Mensah, "When death takes away everything: Funerals leave families broke" by on July 4, 2013, <http://training.dw.de/ausbildung/blogs/mm13accra/?p=1141>

of well so that he/she can be welcome in that world.”<sup>241</sup> Akorno further opines that, “People believe that without a befitting burial, the dead cannot rest in peace and may even come back to punish the family for failing to bid it farewell in a proper

manner.”<sup>242</sup> It is believed that a proper funeral rite is a guarantee to serene and calm life and smooth entrance into the spirit world or abode of the dead.

Akorno Kumi explains that Ghanaians believe that the crowd at a person’s funeral translates into the crowd that will meet him/her at the entrance to the world of the spirit.<sup>243</sup> In other words, the nature of one’s funeral has everything to do with the person’s transition from the world of the living to that of the dead. It is against this backdrop that people contend that they must do all they can to have befitting funerals for their dead relative so as to maintain the cordiality between the spirit of the dead and the living family after the dead has entered the other world.

Besides, expensive funerals serve as means of conferring honour and reputation on the dead—the more elaborate, the better.<sup>244</sup> Attempts to confer greater honour on the dead has led to the inclusion of many practices that, hitherto, were not done. This situation has also led to the seeming competition among families as to who can organise a more expensive funeral for their dead than the other. The idea of conferring honour on a dead person and remembering him/her through an elaborate funeral ceremony is questionable. Is someone’s reputation associated with his/her living standard or the manner in which his/her funeral is conducted?

The display of affluence at funerals often deprives funerals of their purpose. The affluent nature of contemporary funerals usually ends up distracting people from the immeasurable sadness that widows, orphans and surviving loved ones are supposed to experience within the Ghanaian culture. It affects the grieving process negatively. Traditionally, during funerals, most people would not eat in the normal way but *di abuada* (“live without food”) as a sign of their grief and respect for the dead. But as it is, most funerals have been turned into jubilation grounds where people go to dance and make merry through feasting and drinking. The solemnity and sorrow at funeral has been taken away.

### Theological/Biblical Perspective on Expensive Funerals

We begin this section with few observations from the funeral of Jacob (Genesis 49). The body of Jacob was buried as soon as the days of mourning were over. The

<sup>241</sup> Effah Korsa is well versed in the Akan culture. He was interviewed by Isaac Boaheng in Sunyani on 22nd February, 2018.

<sup>242</sup> Mensah, “When death takes away everything”

<sup>243</sup> Kumi, Interview

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

accounts of Jacob's burial betray that in ancient Israel, corpses were buried rather than cremated. In the Bible, we find people buying plots of land for their burial and that of others. Abraham bought a plot of land from Machpelah to be used as the cemetery for his lineage. At the time Jacob was about to die, Abraham, Sarah, Leah, Isaac and Rebekah had been buried there. We read, "Then he gave them these instructions: 'I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites.' When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people" (Gen. 49:28-33, NRSV). Jacob also instructed his sons to bury him in that field. Clearly, in ancient Israel, burial sites were bought (at least by those who had no land of their own).

Joseph with Pharaoh's permission carried his father's body from Egypt to Canaan for burial. In this account, we also find that many people, both relatives and non-relatives, accompanied Joseph to the burial site. These people included his brothers (Jacob's children), Joseph's household, Jacob's household, courts and dignitaries from Pharaoh's government (Genesis 50:7-9). Clearly, the burial ceremony was a public event, not a private one. Certainly, the cost of transporting Jacob's body to Canaan was high. Joseph publicised his father's funeral and so had a great crowd following him to the place of burial.

From biblical perspective, there is nothing wrong with performing funeral rites. There are many examples of funeral rites held in the Bible. Theologically, one's eternal state has nothing to do with the nature of his/her funeral. One's acceptance or rejection of the Christian gospel determines one's eternal destiny. Those who believe in Christ have eternal life and those who do not are lost. We have found examples of expensive funerals in the Old Testament especially the case of Jacob's funeral. The embalment, transportation of the corpse and burial all cost the family a lot. However, the Bible admonishes all to spend moderately and to help others with the excess. Christians are required to uphold good morality even in the face of sorrow and mourning.

Unfortunately, many people use funerals as an opportunity to do all sorts of immoral things. The level of morality demonstrated by mourners, especially young ones, is always low. It is only at the pre-burial service that people comport themselves a bit. Afterwards, most (young) people get drunk and then misbehave, dancing almost naked. More so, funeral scenes are full of quarrels and abusive

utterances. According to Gyabaa, there is the saying that *ayie ase ne bi hyia ne dɔfo* meaning “people meet their lovers on funeral grounds”. This saying, according to Gyabaa, has both positive and negative implications.<sup>245</sup> People can meet their right partners at funerals. However, in many cases people meet the wrong partners because they make decisions hastily out of lust usually because of drunkenness.

Gyabaah further states that it is unchristian to have an expensive funeral. Rather than spend so much on funerals we should be moderate and use the extra funds to help the poor. In his view, a befitting burial is one that is done peacefully, does not entertain any form of vices and does not leave the family bankrupt. He argued that Christians can adopt with modification, the Islamic practice of immediate burial after death, and the use of one coffin to carry every corpse to the burial site.

## Conclusion

We have noted, first, that in Ghana, bereaved families go every length to provide elaborate funeral ceremonies for deceased loved ones due to the Ghanaian religious belief that the spirit of the dead cannot rest peacefully unless it receives a befitting burial. Secondly, the bulk of the financial burden at funerals falls upon the deceased’s household and family, usually leaving them broke after the celebration. Third, changes in funeral practices in Ghana have created employment opportunities for some people. Nevertheless, the display of affluence affects negatively the pockets of many people, particularly those in the middle and low-income groups.

Based on these discussions, we recommend the following: First, there is the need to educate Ghanaians on the implications of excessive spending on funerals. In this regard, we call on traditional and religious leaders to sensitise their followers on the need for more cost-effective and simple ways of organising funerals. Second, people should not copy blindly the show of affluence of those who are economically sound. Families should not borrow money to organise expensive funerals in order to compete with another family. As much as possible, funerals should be organised within the means of the bereaved family. No family, whether economically sound or not, should use all the available resources (or substantial portions of their resources) to organise a funeral. To this end, expensive caskets with their attendant decorations, duplicated announcements (on FM stations, television stations and newspapers), bill boards of the deceased, prescription of different mourning cloths for a funeral, giving out of souvenirs with the picture of the deceased and the use of many musical groups at one funeral should be discouraged.

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<sup>245</sup> Gyabaa, interview.

The cost of food, drink and entertainment must be minimised since a funeral is not for enjoyment but mourning. After all, no amount of display of wealth at a funeral can bring the dead back to life or change his/her eternal destiny. Thirdly, preserving corpses scientifically for a long time, for whatever reason, tends to increase the cost of funerals. It should be avoided. Burying the dead promptly, usually within 24 hours is highly recommended. However, as a general rule, we suggest that a dead person should not be kept at the morgue for more than two weeks. Fourth, the use of alcohol at funerals must cease since most people get drunk and cause confusion at the end. We agree with Most Rev. Charles Gabriel Palmer-Buckle's assertion that "the surest way to remember the dead is not the type of coffins used to bury them nor is it the type of cloth or T-shirt worn during their funerals, but doing something positive for the dead which would benefit the living."<sup>246</sup> Once we reduce the cost of funerals, there will be resources available which can be channeled into assisting the society in such areas as health and education.

### Review Questions

1. How is funeral celebrated in your community? Do you have issues with the practice? Explain your answer.
2. How does the celebration of a funeral improve the economy of the host community?
3. Analyse the factors that make funerals expensive these days.
4. Discuss the importance of funerals to a Ghanaian community.
5. Does the Bible support expensive funerals? Explain your answer.

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# Subject Index

- African worldview** VII, 24
- alcohol** VII, 88, 89, 90, 94, 95, 96,  
97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102,  
103, 104, 105, 117, 123
- burial** 70, 109, 111, 114, 116, 119,  
120, 121, 122, 123
- Christian** VII, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9,  
11, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 23, 24,  
26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, 34, 36,  
37, 38, 41, 43, 44, 49, 50, 51,  
52, 53, 54, 57, 61, 64, 66, 69,  
70, 71, 72, 73, 76, 77, 78, 79,  
80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 86, 87, 88,  
96, 100, 101, 104, 105
- church** 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15,  
16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25,  
26, 27, 28, 29, 33, 34, 35, 36,  
37, 38, 45, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54,  
55, 56, 57, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72,  
80, 88, 100, 118
- coffin** 122
- contract** 5, 13, 48
- corpse** 110, 111, 112, 116, 120, 122
- covenant** 2, 4, 5, 8, 18, 22, 35, 46, 48
- divorce** VII, 1, 11, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34,  
35, 36, 38, 47, 49, 50, 52, 53,  
54, 55, 65
- drunkard** 94, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100,  
105
- Drunkenness** 99, 100, 101, 104
- engagement** 12, 13, 24, 28, 29
- funeral** VII, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110,  
112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117,  
118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123,  
124
- glutton** 94, 96, 97
- Gomorrah** 58, 59
- homosexuality** VII, 56, 57, 58, 61,  
62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 68, 69, 70,  
71, 72
- laying-in-state** 116
- levirate marriage** 44, 45, 81
- marital unfaithfulness** 31, 34, 35
- Marriage** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10,  
11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19,  
20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28,  
29, 33, 35, 37, 39, 43, 44, 48
- murder** 78, 84
- Onan** 44, 81, 82, 86
- Ordinance** 2, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15,  
18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 29, 36
- perversion** 59, 66, 70
- polygamy** VII, 3, 14, 18, 19, 29, 31,  
37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45,  
46, 47, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54,  
55
- polygynandry** 38
- preservation** 110, 111, 112, 118
- pro-contractive** 76
- remarriage** VII, 1, 30, 33, 34, 36, 38,  
47, 64
- same-sex** 1, 18, 56, 57, 67, 69, 70, 71
- sin** VII, 8, 16, 33, 34, 36, 47, 52, 54,  
55, 58, 59, 61, 62, 64, 65, 66,  
70, 71, 72, 78, 79, 81, 88, 97,  
99, 101, 102, 103, 104
- Sodom** 58, 59, 61, 62
- vow** 5, 32, 35, 93, 102
- wedding** 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15,  
16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28,  
94, 95
- wine** 7, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95,  
96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 102, 103,  
104, 105, 117

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