

THE BIBLE ON MARRIAGE

ONE of the questions often asked by numerous Africans in this present age is, "Which form of marriage is lawful and right?" monogamy (marrying only one wife) or polygamy (marrying more than one wife)?

In many parts of this continent where paganism and Mohammedanism are still holding sway, untold numbers of souls have experienced the awful and detrimental consequences of polygamous living, while only a few have enjoyed the blessings of monogamous living. It has been accepted by many Africans that polygamy is the means by which our race is continued and fostered. Generations that have passed have regarded it a custom which makes for their material prosperity and the increase of their posterity; therefore, the few who adopted monogamy did not get many followers. After the advent of Christianity in Africa, more people became monogamists and as a result, the question often arose in cities, towns, and villages as to which form of marriage is right and proper.

Since monogamy is the marrying of only one wife, some Africans attribute it to the white race, and believe that polygamy, which is marrying more than one wife, belongs to the black race. This is not correct. Monogamy is not just a European custom, and polygamy cannot rightly be regarded as an African custom. There have always been controversies on this issue in various religious circles and it is pitiful to see how the majority give their full support to polygamous living. There are divers civil laws belonging to states or nations on this same subject, but the laws which God has made for marriage are uniform for all whom He has created in His own image. "And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Genesis 2:18). For the sake of the few honest hearts who dread the severe judgment of God for the violation of His statutes, and for those who sincerely desire to know the right course to take regarding marriage, we are writing this discourse to set forth the principles laid down in God's holy Word on the subject. We would also like to state clearly for our readers the difference between marriage and divorce and remarriage; for many have been misled to accept divorce and remarriage as lawful and right in any circumstance.

True Marriage

Marriage, as God instituted it in the beginning of creation, is the union of one man and one woman. Therefore this fact must ever remain true of every age and clime: true marriage is one woman for one man. Some Africans have the idea that monogamy is a custom belonging to a particular race or people and therefore will not suit the African. But when God created the Edenic man, He gave to him only one woman. God, being the creator of the universe and Lord over all, could have created more than one woman out of Adam, if that were according to His plan in multiplying the human race, or if that were His will for mankind. "And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. . . . And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:18, 21-23). It was God who saw Adam's need of a companion and helpmate and it was He who supplied that need. We cannot do otherwise than believe these words of God and repose our full confidence in what God thought was best for Adam. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD" (Isaiah 55:8).

Is Marriage an Ordinance Instituted by Man?

An emphatic "No" is the answer to this vital question. God's holy Word makes this fact clear in the account of the creation: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). As "one flesh" their relationship is even closer than that of children and parents, for the Lord does not forbid children to leave their parents and marry, but He commanded the husband and wife to "cleave" to each other. They are a unit. How can they be separated except by destroying one or both of them? Death alone can rightfully separate them. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:27, 28). Marriage is therefore an ordinance instituted by God Himself to make life complete for both man and woman.

In New Testament times, our Lord made no alteration of what constituted true marriage in the ordinance which was instituted by God at the beginning of creation: that a man should cleave to only one wife. Jesus, in answer to the Pharisees who came to question Him on the subject of marriage, gave the correct number permissible. "And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh" (Matthew 19:4-6). "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, . . ." (I Timothy 3:2). We need, then, to understand clearly that marriage which is in accordance with God's divine plan and purpose is the union of one man with one woman. Marriage performed according to native law and custom is as valid as one performed in a Christian church or in a court of law before a magistrate. Therefore there is no reason why people should justify having more than one wife, on such grounds.

Divorce

In these last days when people's hearts are departing from the living God, we find that divorce has become the order of the day; therefore it would be well for us to understand our Lord's injunction about it. Divorce is the legal dissolution of marriage and is looked upon with much tolerance in many religious circles because it was tolerated by Moses in Old Testament times and also because it is legal; but Jesus said, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. . . . Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matthew 19:6, 8, 9). It is therefore important for us to realize that during our Lord's time, He limited the cause for separation to the single case of fornication. "It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: but I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery" (Matthew 5:31, 32).

Lawful Separation

We must not forget, as Christians, that there are cases where a couple may have contracted a so-called marriage which cannot be regarded as valid when placed in the light of God's Word, which must therefore be dissolved. For instance, if a man finds he is married to a woman who has formerly had a lawful husband, then his marriage with her is null and void while the first companion of the woman still lives. He should separate from her, else he would be committing the sin of adultery. The same applies to a woman who finds herself married to a man whose rightful companion is still living. It is her duty to be separated from such a man in order to make her crooked ways straight. There is also another instance where separation is expedient and that is in polygamous marriages. African state laws give room for polygamous living, so many Africans live with as many women as they can have while their first companions live. But when a man finds salvation, that is, when he is genuinely converted, he will separate from the companions with whom he has been living wrongfully. Living with plural companions is the sin of adultery, when placed in the light of God's Word, even though it has been legalized by man. "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4). Also in I Corinthians 6:9, 10 we read, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God." In the time of Ezra, the priest, God demanded that the Children of Israel should make straight their crooked past, especially in this respect. He spoke to them through Ezra saying, "Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives" (Ezra 10:10, 11). Christians today, who believe and accept the words of God and stand uncompromisingly for the doctrines on true marriage, preaching and practicing it by renouncing all adulterous ways, are often charged with breaking of homes. But the most important thing is not what people think or say about us, but that we obey God's commands and do His will.

However, there is one other point which must be taken into account in cases of lawful separation, and that is parental obligations. A man who has children by women of his polygamous marriages, though he be separated from them, must fulfil his duty in providing for the maintenance of such children. In the Scriptures we read, "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than

an infidel" (I Timothy 5:8). Therefore, the man who brings children into the world is duty bound to care for them, even if he is separated from the companions by whom he had them.

In these perilous times, many so-called Christians do not regard it as the sin of adultery when a man or woman marries again after effecting divorce proceedings or mutual separation with the first and rightful companion. Our Lord made a strong statement on this point which we must take into account when considering the subject of Divorce. "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6). God's hand of approval can rest only on the union of those who are rightful companions. A man may be married to only one wife and yet commit the sin of adultery if that one wife is not his rightful companion. Who then are rightful companions? A rightful companion, whether male or female, is one who has not been joined to another in marriage before, or one whose lawful companion is dead—a widow or widower. "For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man" (Romans 7:2, 3). Surely, then, we cannot marry one who has been divorced, while the lawful companion lives, and remain true Christians who wish to make Heaven our last abode.

Change of Companion

Some people feel justified because they live with only one companion at a time, even though they change that companion to their own gratification. They are prepared to put this one companion away and have another one on the slightest pretext. This is nothing short of the sin of adultery. Others also say that there is no sin in living with one companion and gratifying their fleshly lusts with unmarried persons, so long as they have no intention of marrying them. This is nothing short of sin. Those who live such lives incur God's wrath and judgment upon themselves if they do not repent. In I Corinthians 6:9, 10 we read, "Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, .. shall inherit the kingdom of God."

Should There Be Any Occasion for Remarriage?

Our Lord makes it quite clear that there is no occasion for remarriage after divorce has been effected. "But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery" (Matthew 5:32). Saint Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians made this same point clear that there can be no remarriage while one's rightful companion still lives. "And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.... The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord" (I Corinthians 7:10, 11, 39). People may endeavour to find loopholes whereby they may be divorced and remarried, but the Word of God remains always the same from age to age and those who wish to be true followers of Jesus will walk in the light of these divine words of admonition.

Let us now dwell on some occasions for which some Africans justify remarriage after divorce, and which to all appearance seems reasonable enough, but which are not in accordance with God's divine will as revealed in His holy Word. The first is, "Child-marriage," or to be more correct, "Child-betrothal." Parents make marriage contracts for their children while they are small, but allow them the option of accepting or refusing the one chosen for them when they have grown to maturity or the age of puberty. The marriage ceremony is not performed until both the persons concerned have given their approval of the match; and, therefore, if after living together as husband and wife for a period of time, they then discover that they are not suited to each other, this is no excuse for them to break God's command. All they need to do is to go to God in prayer and seek for the grace and wisdom to live the rest of their days in peace and contentment. In Hebrews 13:4 we read, "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge."

Some teen-agers who marry when they are not yet aware of the responsibilities of marital life also justify their divorce and remarriage on the strength that the match was arranged for them by their parents. It is true that parents do arrange the match, but the couple are also given the option to agree or disagree with their parents if they so desire, before the actual marriage takes place. Therefore they have no grounds on which to marry again if

they do decide to be divorced. "And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery" (Mark 10:11, 12).

Another occasion for which people think they can be divorced and remarried is when their union is destitute of issue. This is a condition which Africans consider very pathetic and unbearable and therefore pressure is made to bear on either of the two, by relatives and friends. Those who prefer to live with only one woman at a time, rather than live in polygamy, therefore resort to divorce and remarriage. Our Lord's injunctions give no room for us to consider barrenness in the married state a just cause for divorce or remarriage, so married couples who face such a problem would do well to take it to the Lord in prayer and be willing to accept whatever God thinks best for them. Some of those who have been married discover that they have to face the problem of some protracted illness. People argue that in such a case, the only course to take is to be separated and to be remarried; but nowhere in the Scriptures did our Lord allow for this nor did He state that anyone was justified to remarry if his first companion suffers from some protracted illness. Marriages solemnized in Christian churches leave no room for separation on that account, because both the husband and wife take vows to that effect. ". . . and solemnly promise, God helping you, that you will be a true and devoted husband to her? that you will love, honor, cherish, and protect her, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, in adversity and in prosperity? and that you will keep yourself to her, and to her alone, until God, by death, shall separate you?" This same vow is taken by the woman too. ". . . and solemnly promise, God helping you, that you will be a true and devoted wife to him? that you will love, honor, cherish, and comfort him, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, in adversity and in prosperity? and that you will keep yourself to him, and to him alone, until God, by death, shall separate you?" We see from these vows that are taken by both husband and wife that separation and remarriage are out of the question; but most Africans consider it so very important to be fruitful and to multiply that this often overrides their better judgment. Instead of resigning themselves to their fate, they find it necessary to increase their families in any other way possible. In spite of all this, our Lord's injunction is, "Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery" (Luke 16: 18). This includes all mankind, for Jesus made no exceptions for persons who were remarried before they were saved. He pronounced them guilty of living in adultery.

True Marriage Is Binding for Life

In the light of God's holy Word, the true marriage contract lasts until death causes inevitable separation. "And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together; let not man put asunder" (Mark 10: 8, 9). From this saying of our Lord, we derive the fact that only death can terminate marriage contracts and therefore the need arises for making the right choice. The choice should not be left to parents or well-wishers, because it is important that conjugal love, prompted by divine love, should exist between the two, for this and this alone can never fail in marital life. The motives that should prompt true marriage are divine love and a God-given desire for companionship, a home and family. In such a union God is glorified, because its motives are unselfish. Perfect love and not lust is its keynote. When any union is prompted by lust or unholy desire, it eventually ends in disunity, selfishness, and self-glorification, and often in separation, divorce, and remarriage. But this one point is clear and vivid, that God hates separation and divorce. "Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously" (Malachi 2:14-16).

Should a Christian Marry an Unbeliever?

This is an important point for which God strongly warned His people in Old Testament times and which was confirmed in New Testament times too. "Else if ye do in any wise go back, and cleave unto the remnant of these nations, even these that remain among you, and shall make marriages with them, and go in unto them, and they to you: know for a certainty that the LORD your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land which the LORD your God hath given you" (Joshua 23:12, 13). "Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.

For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly" (Deuteronomy 7:3, 4).

The union of a believer to an unbeliever is not a Christian marriage. The Lord made it clear to His chosen people the reason why they cannot intermarry with heathen nations. He said, "For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods." This is what happened in earliest times for which God's anger was kindled against them: "that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth" (Genesis 6:2, 5-7). Abraham, when about to obtain a wife for Isaac his son, said to Eliezer, his trusted servant, "Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh: and I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: but thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac" (Genesis 24:2-4).

In the New Testament, too, Christians are forbidden to marry unbelievers. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for Ye are the temple of the living God: as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (II Corinthians 6:14-18).

After once knowing the Lord, it is a grievous sin in the sight of God for one to marry an unbeliever on any pretext. It is a violation of God's command, which brings its just recompense. Every wilful disobedience not repented of has its consequences; so also shall we not escape the consequence of disobeying God's commands with regard to marriage. However, it sometimes happens that one has been married to an unbeliever before he was genuinely converted and became a Bible Christian; the Word of God states clearly what such a one can do. "If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him" (I Corinthians 7:12, 13).

The Bible has many promises for those who obey God's Word. "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land" (Isaiah 1:19). Jesus, the Son of God, was an example of obedience while on earth. We read the following about Him in the Scriptures: "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8).

As for our God, His ways are perfect and there is no searching of His understanding. His laws are unchangeable; they stand firm forever. One of them is that only one man and one woman should enter into holy matrimony and take vows witnessing that God has joined them together until death parts them. Disregard of God's laws in this respect will plunge many into lifelong trouble and sorrow, except they repent and do that which is lawful and right.