

# **TOO MANY WIVES**

# 11

## Too Many Wives Paul G. Hiebert

Tom and Sarah Ward looked at the old chief seated on his stool in front of his hut, and at his wives squatting expectantly behind him. They had prayed two years for Amadu's conversion. Now he had summoned them and told them that he and his wives were ready to become Christians and wanted to be baptized into the church. The young missionaries expressed their joy at his decision and told him they would ask for a meeting of the church council the next day to act on his request.

Now, as Tom and Sarah sat under the night sky brilliantly lit with stars, they wrestled with the question of what they should recommend to the church council the next morning. Their decision seemed to depend on a number of entangled issues. Should the church baptize polygamists and their wives? And what about Amadu? He was the chief of the village and a natural leader. Should they recognize this and make him a leader in the church? They knew that even if they did not ordain him as the leading elder in the church, the people would recognize him as such. Did Paul's instructions that a leader have one wife apply only to the apostle's own cultural setting, or did they apply to the church at all times? And what about themselves? Should they as young missionaries take a stand against their mission's policy if they disagreed with it or if it hampered the growth of the church, even though this might lead to their dismissal?

Two years earlier, shortly after they arrived in Africa as American missionaries, the Wards were sent by their mission board and the West Africa Evangelical Church to begin a church in a new tribe in the Ivory Coast. At the outset they went to see Amadu, the local chief of the

village where they felt called to work. They asked him for permission to live near the village and talk to his people about Jesus Christ. He welcomed them and gave them a place to build their house. Amadu had listened without comment when they shared with him the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ. But he showed no opposition when five families and two single men in the village decided to become Christians. The married men were young and had only one wife each, so the Wards had not faced the question of polygamy. Gladly they baptized the converts and organized a new church. Mugbe, one of the married men, was recognized by the other Christians as their leader, so Tom and Sarah spent considerable time teaching him the Scripture and the responsibilities of a church leader. But the church was young, and the converts could not read, so they mainly looked to the missionaries for guidance in their newfound faith.

Now the chief wanted to become a Christian. What should they do? If they accepted him into the church, the door would be wide open for them to reach other families in the village. But what about his wives? At first the question seemed only to be one of polygamy, but the more they discussed the case, the more they realized that there were many other social factors involved.

First, both the West Africa Evangelical Church and the African Evangelical Mission, under which the young missionaries served, had already taken a strong stand against polygamy. In this they agreed with the stand taken by other mission agencies that had begun work in West Africa in the late nineteenth century. At the Lambeth Conference organized by the Anglican Church in 1888, a resolution had been passed that stated:

It is the opinion of this Conference that persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ.

The wives of polygamists may, in the opinion of this Conference, be admitted in some cases to baptism, but it must be left to the local authorities of the church to decide under what circumstances they may be baptized.

The African Evangelical Mission had resolved that the wives of a polygamist could be baptized if they were true converts, because they were usually the involuntary victims of the custom. But the mission would baptize no man who retained more than one wife. A polygamist was encouraged to "free himself" for baptism by putting aside all wives except one; otherwise he must wait until God freed him by the death of all but one of his wives.

The Wards were aware of the fact that some of the African churches, after they became independent from mission control, were beginning to reexamine the question of polygamy. In Tanzania one church had decided:

An unbeliever who has more than one wife, if converted to Christianity and requiring baptism, may be baptized with his believing wives and children with the permission of the Bishop. (He is not to take any more wives as long as any of his wives are still alive.) And they can be received for communion.

As they discussed the problem, Sarah and Tom talked about the biblical teachings regarding polygamy. Did Paul in 1 Timothy 3 require "one wife" of all Christians, or only of the leaders? And what about the traditional marriages? Were the traditional tribal weddings true marriages that had to be honored? If so, were they not asking the old chief to divorce some of his wives if he had to send them away? Which was worse—polygamy or divorce?

The young missionaries considered the impact of various policies on the growth of the church. On the one hand, if they permitted polygamy among the laity, one of the great barriers to the spread of the gospel in the tribe would be removed. Would this not, however, open the door for sin to enter the church? On the other hand, the church might accept only those who were polygamists *before* their conversion and take a strong stand against Christians' taking more than one wife. But once they accepted polygamists into the church, it would be hard to eliminate polygamy from the church in the long run. In other parts of Africa where polygamists had been admitted into the church, young Christian men under strong pressures from their kinsmen often took second wives, particularly when their first wives were barren. They knew that they would be disciplined; but after a time, if they showed proper repentance, they could be reinstated with their wives because there already were polygamists in the church. Finally, the church might follow the policy practiced by many other churches in Africa and deny church membership to polygamists altogether. But did this not hinder the growth of the church, and was this not condemning new believers for sins they committed before they became Christians? Was monogamy essential for conversion, or could it be handled as a matter of spiritual growth within the church?

Tom and Sarah had also considered the specific case of Amadu. If they asked the old chief to give up all but one of his wives, which one should he keep? The first marriage had been arranged for him by his parents. That wife had borne him no children, so he had married a

second who gave him three sons and a daughter. Later his brother had died, leaving him to care for two widows and several children. By tribal custom, he was automatically "married" to the widows. In time these wives had also borne him children. Finally, as a tribal chief, he had taken another wife to add to his prestige and cement relationships between the clans. It was this young wife who now cared for him daily in his old age.

What about the wives and children who were put away so that the chief could be baptized—what would become of them? How would they respond to the gospel? And what about widows? According to the customs of the tribe, widows were automatically married to the nearest kinsman of their deceased husband. If polygamy was prohibited, who would care for them? The church would have to find other ways to provide for widows and their children.

There was also the question of leadership. If the church admitted the old chief into membership, he would automatically become the church leader. Mugbe might remain the official pastor, but everyone, in fact, would look to the old chief for leadership. How did this fit with Paul's teachings about a leader being the husband of one wife?

Finally, Tom and Sarah wondered about their own relationships to the various groups with whom they worked. What about their relationship to the mission? If they believed the mission policy to be wrong, were they obligated as missionaries to enforce it? What about their relationship to the West Africa Evangelical Church? Some of its young leaders were beginning to question the mission policy and were calling for a reexamination of the whole issue. What about their obligations to the church in their village, and to the non-Christian villagers? Were they not responsible under God for opening the door of salvation to these people?

It was late when Tom and Sarah finished their discussion and agreed that tomorrow they would recommend to the church that. . . .

## **REASONS FOR POLYGAMY:**

- **prestige**
- **helps eradicate prostitution**
- **cement relationships between groups and individuals**
- **have children when wife is barren, so you don't have to divorce her and send her away**
- **labor in the fields**
- **care for widows**
- **sexual gratification**
- **have more children**
- **need young wife to do the chores – often requested by the older wife**