Christian Marriage and Polygamous Family: A New Testament Perspective for Conflict Resolution

Bamigbele, Kolawole Ilesanmi & Afolabi, Adenike Victoria

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Abstract

Marriage occupies a foundational position within Christian theology and social organization. Regarded as a divinely instituted covenant, its integrity is considered central to the health of both the family unit and the broader Christian community. While polygamy is evident in Old Testament narratives, the New Testament presents a clearer ethical framework that upholds monogamy as the normative ideal for Christian living. In many African societies, including Nigeria, polygamy remains culturally embedded and socially legitimized, creating significant theological and pastoral tensions within Christian communities. These tensions manifest in areas such as church membership, leadership eligibility, sacramental participation, inheritance conflicts, and the emotional wellbeing of family members. Despite extensive theological engagement with the institution of marriage, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the practical application of New Testament principles to conflict resolution within polygamous family systems. This gap is particularly acute in African Christian scholarship, where lived realities often diverge sharply from normative theological prescriptions. This study addresses the tension between biblical ideals and the lived realities of polygamous households among African Christians, using a qualitative theological and hermeneutical methodology. The findings indicate that while the New Testament does not explicitly legislate against polygamy by name, it consistently promotes monogamy as the ethical standard for Christian marriage through teachings on covenant fidelity, mutual responsibility, and sacrificial love. Furthermore, the New Testament provides actionable principles including love, justice, mutual responsibility, pastoral sensitivity, and gradual transformation for managing conflicts within polygamous family structures. The study concludes that effective conflict resolution requires a careful balance between biblical fidelity and cultural awareness, enabling Christian communities to respond to the complexity of polygamous families with both truth and compassion.

Keywords: Christian marriage, polygamy, New Testament, conflict resolution, family ethics, African Christianity, pastoral care

Introduction

Marriage is a universal institution that underpins family life and social organization across cultures and civilizations. Within Christian theology, it is regarded as a divinely instituted covenant, rooted in the creation narrative of Genesis 2:24 and characterized by covenantal commitment, unity, and exclusivity.[1] The foundational model of one man and one woman entering into lifelong covenant provides the normative lens through which Christian communities evaluate all marital arrangements.

However, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, polygamy, the practice of a man having more than one wife simultaneously remains culturally embedded and socially prestigious. It is intertwined with concepts of wealth, virility, and social standing, and often serves economic functions related to land management, labour distribution, and lineage perpetuation.[2] As a result, significant numbers of African Christians enter or remain within polygamous arrangements even after conversion, creating

complex pastoral and theological challenges for church leaders who must navigate between doctrinal commitments and social realities.

Scholarly discussions indicate that polygamy is not only a doctrinal issue but also a pressing pastoral concern requiring practical strategies for conflict resolution.[3] Polygamous households frequently experience internal conflicts such as jealousy among co-wives, disputes over inheritance and parental authority, emotional instability among children, and accusations of favouritism. These tensions are not merely interpersonal; they carry theological dimensions rooted in questions of dignity, justice, and the nature of Christian love.

This study therefore examines New Testament teachings on marriage and evaluates their implications for resolving conflicts in polygamous contexts. It argues that while monogamy is upheld as the normative model, the New Testament provides robust principles for addressing complex marital realities with both truth and grace. By engaging primary biblical texts alongside secondary theological and pastoral literature, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of African Christian ethics and conflict resolution scholarship.

The study is structured as follows. It begins with an examination of the biblical foundations of Christian marriage in both testaments, before turning to New Testament teachings specifically. It then considers the contemporary African context, identifies specific conflict resolution principles drawn from the New Testament, and reflects on their theological implications. The conclusion synthesizes the findings and offers directions for further pastoral and scholarly engagement.

Biblical Foundation of Christian Marriage

The biblical understanding of marriage originates from the creation account in Genesis 1–2. God's declaration that 'it is not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18) establishes the relational basis of marriage, while the union of one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24) defines its fundamental structure. This model reflects unity, exclusivity, and covenantal commitment.[4] The creation narrative presents this design not as a cultural convention but as a divine ordinance embedded in the nature of human identity.

In the New Testament, Jesus reaffirms this design by returning to the creation account. In Matthew 19:4–6, he grounds marriage in creation theology, affirming the dyadic union: 'the two shall become one flesh, and what God has joined together, let not man separate.' This teaching highlights both the permanence and the dyadic exclusivity of marriage as divinely intended.[5] By grounding his teaching in creation rather than Mosaic law, Jesus elevates the normative significance of monogamy beyond cultural or legal contingency.

Pauline writings further develop the theological dimensions of marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7:2–4, Paul articulates a principle of mutual conjugal rights and reciprocal authority, encouraging fidelity and stability within the marital bond. His instruction that

'each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband' reinforces the dyadic structure of marriage and addresses concerns about sexual immorality by advocating exclusive commitment.[6] These teachings collectively provide a framework for understanding marital relationships as grounded in commitment, faithfulness, and mutual respect all of which are foundational to conflict resolution.

The analogy of marriage to the relationship between Christ and the Church, as developed in Ephesians 5:22–33, adds a further theological dimension. Marriage here is not merely a human institution but a sacramental sign, a living symbol of the self-giving love of Christ. This theological weight reinforces the ethical demands placed on Christian spouses and frames conflict resolution as a spiritual, not merely social, undertaking.[7]

Polygamy in the Old Testament: Descriptive Reality

Polygamy features prominently in several Old Testament narratives involving patriarchs, judges, and kings. Abraham had multiple partners; Jacob married both Leah and Rachel as well as their maidservants; David and Solomon maintained large households of wives and concubines. However, it is critical to note that these accounts are descriptive rather than prescriptive.[8] The biblical text records polygamy as a social reality without offering explicit divine endorsement of the practice.

Indeed, a careful reading of these narratives reveals a consistent pattern of dysfunction and conflict associated with polygamous arrangements. The tension between Sarah and Hagar resulted in expulsion and family breakdown (Genesis 16; 21:8–21). The rivalry between Leah and Rachel generated jealousy, manipulation, and deep emotional suffering (Genesis 29–30). David's polygamous household was marked by rape, murder, and rebellion (2 Samuel 13–18). These consequences appear to illustrate the structural tensions inherent in plural marriage.[9]

Furthermore, Mosaic laws concerning polygamy appear to regulate rather than endorse the practice. Deuteronomy 21:15–17 addresses the rights of children from less-favoured wives, and Deut. 17:17 explicitly prohibits kings from multiplying wives, suggesting an awareness of the corrupting potential of polygamy.[10] These regulations reflect a pastoral accommodation to cultural realities while simultaneously pointing toward a higher standard-consistent with what scholars describe as progressive revelation, the gradual unfolding of God's ethical standards in ways appropriate to each stage of redemptive history.[11]

This interpretive framework is essential when evaluating the significance of New Testament teachings on marriage. The New Testament does not repudiate the Old Testament but fulfils it, clarifying and elevating the ethical standard in light of the Christ event. Against this background, the New Testament's consistent emphasis on monogamy represents not a cultural preference but a theological progression toward the creation ideal.

New Testament Teaching on Marriage

The Teaching of Jesus

Jesus' teaching on marriage, particularly in Matthew 19:4–6 and Mark 10:6–9, constitutes a decisive statement on the normative structure of Christian marriage. By ap-

pealing to the creation narrative rather than Mosaic precedent, Jesus establishes monogamy as the theological baseline against which all marital arrangements are to be evaluated. His endorsement of indissolubility implies an exclusivity inconsistent with polygamous arrangements.[12] While Jesus does not explicitly name polygamy as a sin, his affirmation of the 'two shall become one flesh' formula carries implicit normative weight that cannot be reconciled with plural marriage.

Furthermore, Jesus' teachings on love, forgiveness, and servant leadership (Matthew 5–7; 20:25–28) provide crucial ethical resources for conflict resolution within families. The call to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39) applied to family life demands impartiality and genuine concern for all family members, including co-wives and children in polygamous households. These ethical demands do not dissolve the complexity of polygamous situations but provide a moral compass for navigating them with integrity and compassion.

Pauline Instruction

The Apostle Paul provides the most sustained New Testament reflection on Christian marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses marital sexuality, fidelity, and the conditions under which separation may be considered. His instruction that 'each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband' (1 Corinthians 7:2) reflects the dyadic structure of Christian marriage. The mutual authority described in verses 3–4 implies a relationship of mutual exclusivity structurally incompatible with polygamy.[13]

In Ephesians 5:22–33, Paul develops the analogy between marriage and the Christ-Church relationship, describing the husband's role in terms of sacrificial, self-giving love modelled on Christ's love for the Church. This Christological framing elevates the ethical demands of marriage beyond cultural norms and frames marital conflict resolution as a spiritually serious matter. The call for husbands to 'love their wives as their own bodies' (Ephesians 5:28) provides a practical principle of empathy and equity that directly addresses the kinds of neglect and partiality that characterise polygamous conflict.

Leadership Standards

The pastoral epistles provide explicit normative guidance on marriage through the qualification that church leaders be 'the husband of one wife' (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6). The precise meaning of this phrase has been debated: some interpreters limit it to a prohibition of bigamy in the narrow sense, while others read it as a broader statement about marital fidelity and exclusivity.[14] However, the consensus among interpreters is that this qualification reflects the early Church's expectation that its leaders model the monogamous marital ideal. By extension, it functions as a normative statement about Christian marriage for the wider community, since leaders are to be 'examples to the flock' (1 Peter 5:3).

Marriage as Theological Symbol

The portrayal of marriage as a symbol of the Christ-Church relationship in Ephesians 5:22–33 provides the hermeneutical key for understanding why the New Testament upholds monogamy so consistently. The Christ-Church relationship is characterized by exclusive covenant, sacrificial love, and faithful headship, none of which admit

of plurality on either side. The theological logic of this analogy reinforces the dyadic structure of Christian marriage at the level of its deepest symbolic meaning.[15]

Polygamy in Contemporary African Christian Contexts

In contemporary African Christianity, polygamy represents one of the most persistent points of tension between indigenous cultural practice and Christian doctrinal teaching. Estimates suggest that significant proportions of self-identified Christians in sub-Saharan Africa live in polygamous households, either as primary spouses, co-wives, or children of polygamous fathers.[16] This reality cannot be dismissed as marginal; it is a mainstream pastoral challenge in many Nigerian and other African church contexts.

The cultural foundations of polygamy in African societies are multifaceted. In many communities, plural marriage is associated with social status, agricultural productivity, and the perpetuation of family lineage. Among certain ethnic groups, a man's prestige is partly measured by the number of wives and children he maintains.[17] Widowhood traditions, such as the levirate custom, further complicate the situation by creating quasi-polygamous arrangements in the name of social protection and family continuity.

The pastoral challenges created by this reality are extensive. First, there is the question of church membership and sacramental participation for polygamists. Different denominations have adopted varying positions from full exclusion to conditional inclusion reflecting the lack of a unified Christian response. Second, the question of whether polygamists who convert to Christianity should be required to dissolve their additional marriages creates significant ethical dilemmas involving the welfare of existing wives and children.[18] Forcing dissolution could result in women and children being deprived of material provision and social standing, creating greater harm than the existing arrangement.

Third, polygamous households in African contexts frequently experience internal conflicts requiring pastoral intervention. Jealousy among co-wives over the husband's attention, affection, and resources is a common source of tension. Competition among children of different wives over inheritance, paternal recognition, and educational opportunities generates long-term familial instability. Accusations of favouritism whether real or perceived create deep emotional wounds that can persist across generations.[19] These conflicts call for practical, theologically grounded approaches to resolution that take seriously both biblical principles and the social realities in which affected individuals live.

The Nigerian church context presents a distinctive microcosm of these challenges. With over 200 ethnic groups and diverse customary marriage traditions, Nigerian Christian communities must navigate polygamy as a present pastoral reality rather than an abstract theological problem.[20] Denominations have responded differently-some imposing strict exclusions, others developing nuanced reception policies but few have developed systematic frameworks for conflict resolution within existing polygamous households. This study addresses this gap by offering New Testament principles as actionable pastoral resources.

The New Testament Principles for Conflict Resolution in Polygamous Families

Love and Compassion

The New Testament's central ethical command is love-agape love characterized by selfless concern for the wellbeing of others (1 Corinthians 13:4–7; John 13:34–35). Within polygamous family contexts, the application of this principle demands that husbands treat all wives and children with equal dignity and genuine care, resisting the culturally condoned dynamics of favouritism and hierarchy. It also calls for co-wives to extend forgiveness and forbearance toward one another, refusing to allow competition to degenerate into hostility. Pastoral workers engaging with polygamous families are called to model this love by approaching affected individuals without condemnation, creating a space in which honest and healing dialogue can occur.

The New Testament's repeated emphasis on forgiveness both divine forgiveness as the model and human forgiveness as the ethical response (Matthew 18:21–35; Colossians 3:13) is particularly relevant in contexts of long-standing relational injury. Where co-wives have harboured grievances, or where children bear resentment toward stepparents or half-siblings, the Christian ethic of forgiveness offers a pathway to relational restoration that is unavailable within purely cultural frameworks.

Justice and Fairness

Biblical ethics consistently demand justice, particularly for the vulnerable (Micah 6:8; James 1:27). In polygamous family systems, children and less-favoured wives are frequently among the most vulnerable members of the household. New Testament principles of impartiality (James 2:1–9; Romans 2:11) and care for the marginalized directly address the structural injustices that can occur when one wife or set of children is consistently disadvantaged.[21]

Practically, this principle calls on Christian husbands in polygamous households to establish equitable distributions of material provision, parental time, and emotional investment. Church leaders engaging in pastoral mediation within these families should advocate for just treatment of all members, including those who have been marginalised. The prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, which frequently condemned the exploitation of the powerless, is carried forward in the New Testament's emphasis on the dignity of every person made in the image of God.

Pastoral Sensitivity

Effective conflict resolution in polygamous contexts requires pastoral sensitivity-a recognition that those involved are navigating situations of genuine moral complexity, often without adequate support or guidance. The New Testament model of pastoral care is one of patient accompaniment rather than hasty condemnation (Galatians 6:1–2; 2 Timothy 2:24–26). Pastors and community leaders must resist the temptation to impose simplistic solutions that ignore the social and emotional consequences for all parties involved.[22]

This sensitivity includes recognising the particular vulnerability of women in polygamous households who may lack independent economic resources, social networks, or legal protections. Pastoral intervention must ensure that conflict resolution processes do not inadvertently reinforce the powerlessness of co-wives or children. Where pos-

sible, it should connect affected individuals with community resources including legal aid, economic support, and counselling that can contribute to lasting resolution rather than temporary pacification.

Gradual Transformation

The New Testament ethic of transformation is characterized by the metaphor of growth from immaturity to maturity, from the old life to the new (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 12:1–2). This gradualist vision has important implications for how Christian communities engage with polygamous households. Rather than demanding immediate structural change that may cause irreparable harm, the New Testament model encourages a process of discipleship and moral formation in which individuals are guided toward the creation ideal over time.[23]

In practice, this means that Christian communities and their leaders should resist pressure to either fully endorse polygamy as theologically normative or to require its immediate dissolution at the cost of significant human harm. Instead, they should create pathways of accountability and growth that allow individuals in polygamous situations to move toward greater alignment with New Testament teaching at a pace that is pastorally responsible. New converts from polygamous backgrounds should be welcomed into full Christian community while being accompanied in a journey of gradual ethical formation.

Leadership Integrity and Institutional Clarity

At the institutional level, the New Testament's leadership standards provide a clear basis for churches to articulate and uphold expectations regarding marriage. The requirement that leaders be monogamous serves not only as a moral standard but as a community-forming practice, it signals the church's commitment to the New Testament vision of marriage and provides a visible model for the broader congregation. Churches that maintain this standard while simultaneously offering compassionate pastoral care to those in polygamous situations demonstrate the integration of truth and grace central to New Testament ethics.[24]

Institutional clarity also helps to prevent the conflicts that arise from ambiguity and inconsistency. When church policies on polygamy are unclear or inconsistently applied, they generate grievances, erode trust, and undermine the church's credibility as a community of justice. Clear, consistently applied policies communicated with compassion and accompanied by robust pastoral support are themselves a form of conflict resolution at the institutional level.

Theological Implications and Contextual Reflection

The foregoing analysis reveals several significant theological implications for African Christian communities engaging with the challenge of polygamy. First, the New Testament presents an ethic of marriage that is rooted in creation theology, fulfilled in Christ, and oriented toward eschatological wholeness. This framework transcends cultural particularity without dismissing cultural reality. African churches are therefore invited to hold together a commitment to biblical truth and an attentiveness to the concrete conditions of their communities.[25]

Second, the tension between the New Testament ideal and the African polygamous context is not resolved by choosing one over the other but by developing contextually

sensitive hermeneutics that allow the former to illumine and gradually transform the latter. This approach, sometimes described as critical contextualization,[26] involves taking both the biblical text and the cultural context seriously, allowing each to interrogate the other in a process of theological discernment.

Third, the New Testament's integration of truth and grace evident in Jesus' dealings with those whose marital histories were complex (John 4:1–26) and in Paul's nuanced guidance on marital situations (1 Corinthians 7) provides a model for pastoral practice that refuses the false dichotomy between doctrinal integrity and human compassion. Effective conflict resolution within polygamous families cannot be achieved by sacrificing either pole of this tension; it requires the creative engagement of both.

Fourth, African Christian theology has a distinctive contribution to make to this discussion. Its Ubuntu philosophy of mutual interdependence and its traditions of community mediation offer contextually appropriate resources that, when integrated with New Testament principles, can generate conflict resolution approaches that are both biblically grounded and culturally intelligible.[27]

Sequel to the aforementioned, Opadere and Akande, opined that marriage in respective of diverse standards and beliefs, is a fundamentally important institution worth celebrating and sustaining for the stability of family and the society at large.[28]

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the New Testament consistently upholds monogamy as the normative model for Christian marriage while providing robust principles for resolving conflicts within polygamous family systems. Through the teachings of Jesus, the instruction of Paul, and the structural logic of the Christ-Church analogy, the New Testament establishes a vision of marriage characterized by dyadic exclusivity, mutual self-giving, and covenantal permanence.

Although polygamy remains a pervasive social reality in many African Christian contexts, New Testament teachings offer a framework for addressing the attendant challenges with both theological integrity and pastoral sensitivity. The principles of love and compassion, justice and fairness, pastoral sensitivity, gradual transformation, and leadership integrity provide concrete resources for conflict resolution that are neither culturally detached nor theologically compromised.

Effective engagement with polygamous family conflicts requires Christian communities to hold together biblical fidelity and cultural awareness in a dynamic and creative tension. Pastoral workers must be equipped not only with theological knowledge but with skills in mediation, family counselling, and community engagement. Church institutions must develop clear, consistent, and compassionate policies that affirm the New Testament ideal while providing genuine support for those navigating the complexities of polygamous households.

Ultimately, the goal of Christian engagement with polygamous families is not condemnation but transformation-a gradual movement toward the wholeness and flourishing that the New Testament envisions for all human relationships. By applying its principles with wisdom and compassion, the church can serve as a genuine agent of reconciliation, justice, and hope within these complex family systems.

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