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13

THE BIBLE, POLYAMORY, AND MONOGAMY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

A couple years after graduating from a Christian high school, Samantha became close to Hannah and Hannah's boyfriend, Austin. After several months of spending time together, Austin and Hannah asked Samantha to be a full partner—relational and sexual—with both of them. For Samantha, this relationship brought her great happiness, and she described how life-giving it was to receive affection from two people and not just one.

Tyler and Amanda were high-school sweethearts, raised in Christian homes in the Bible belt. They were living the American dream with a house, good jobs, and two kids when Amanda developed a close relationship with Jon, a friend of Tyler's. Jon and Amanda proposed exploring polyamory, and Tyler agreed, giving his blessing to Jon and Amanda and deepening his own relationship with another woman. When Tyler and Amanda came out to their parents as polyamorous, their parents were shocked. What seemed like a fringe practice of the sexual revolution had settled into the heartland of middle America.

Many people, including Christians, are not very familiar with polyamory—a multiple-partner relationship that includes three or more people. Even many who affirm same-sex marriage usually uphold and maintain monogamy. But polyamory is increasingly being seen as a valid relationship option.[1]

Polyamory is also more common than some people think. According to one estimate, "as many as 5 percent of Americans are currently in relationships involving consensual nonmonogamy," which is about the same percentage as those who identify as LGBTQ.[2] Another recent study in a peer-reviewed journal found that 20% of Americans have been in a consensual non-monogamous relationship at some point in their life.[3] Polyamory isn't just a phenomenon in secular, non-religious circles. Sociologist Mark Regnerus notes that roughly 24% of church-going people believe that consensual polyamorous relationships are morally permissible.[4]

Confronted with this reality, Christians might be tempted to offer a knee-jerk, reactionary response: "That's obviously wrong!" But we have to be able to offer something more. Many Christians simply assume that the Bible affirms monogamy. However, as Bible scholar N. T. Wright points out, most Christians cannot actually make the biblical case for monogamy, especially when someone points out examples of people in the Bible who weren't monogamous or verses that seem to assume not everyone is monogamous. We need good biblical reasons for what we believe, even if that belief seems as unshakeable and "obvious" as monogamy.
In this paper, we'll explore what the Bible says about polyamory and monogamy. We'll start by understanding what polyamory is and exploring some arguments made by Christians in defense of polyamory. Then, in the second half of the paper, we'll outline the biblical case for monogamy. Finally, we'll conclude by navigating some pastoral questions on polyamory.

What is Polyamory?

So what exactly is polyamory? To understand it, we have to look not just at the structure or pattern of relationships but at the mindset behind those relationships. Polyamorous relationships have several key features.[5] First, by definition, polyamory involves three or more people. But there's great variety in how these relationships might be structured. There are *open couples*, partnered relationships between two people, one or both of whom also has an additional partner or partners. There are *vees* (V's), which are relationships between three people, one of whom is connected relationally and sexually to both of the others. There are *triads*, relationships between three people, all of whom are sexually involved with one another. There are *quads*, groups of four which often form between two couples who join together. Finally, there are also *moresomes* and *intimate networks*. The former describes a group of five or larger who often live together, and the latter describes a larger group where members don't live together but are sexually involved with some group members.

A second feature of polyamory is its varying levels of sexual relationships and exclusivity. In monogamous relationships, spouses are assumed to have a sole and exclusive sexual relationship with each other. In polyamorous relationships, specific sexual pairings might be defined as "primary," "secondary," or "tertiary," though not all poly people like those terms. There may be an expectation of group fidelity, where everyone is expected to be sexually exclusive to those in the relationship. There may also be polyamorous relationships where some members have an emotional and relational connection with others but not a sexual relationship, as in a V relationship.

A third feature of polyamory is an ethic of honesty, openness, and negotiated relationships.[6] One big difference between polygamy and polyamory is that polygamy still carries certain predefined marital expectations. The very word "polygamy" means a *marriage* of several people (the "-gamy" part coming from the Greek word from marriage). In contrast, polyamory has no preset definition of how any relationship should look; it's not working from the paradigm of marriage. But that does *not* mean that polyamorous people have the mindset of "anything goes." Rather, polyamory is defined by a posture of openness to "letting love evolve without expectations or demands that it look a particular way."[7] Because there are no set rules or expectations, honesty is a very high value for polyamorous people. To make the relationship work, people have to be open about setting ground rules and expectations that everyone in the relationship is happy with. And if those expectations need to be revisited or redefined, this has to be done openly and honestly.

These values of openness and honesty make polyamory different from adultery/cheating on the one hand and hook-up culture on the other. Polyamory is not cheating because all partners are aware of what is going on. Within a polyamorous paradigm, the potential problem with having multiple sexual partners is that it may be accompanied by dishonesty if someone claims to have only one sexual partner; however, having multiple partners is not wrong in and of itself.

Polyamory is also not simply about hooking up sexually. For the most part, polyamory emphasizes relational connection and intimacy. It's more than just connecting with people for sex. Although polyamory may look unethical from the standpoint of monogamous values, advocates of polyamory point out that they in fact work very hard to maintain an ethic of openness and honesty in relationships.

How does this ethic of openness and honesty fit with what Scripture says about marriage, relationships, and sexuality? Are there biblical arguments in support of polyamory? In the next section, we'll consider some of the biblical and theological arguments for polyamory and show why those arguments ultimately do not hold up.

Biblical Arguments for Polyamory

Reason 1: Old Testament examples of polygamy make non-monogamy a valid option.

There are numerous examples of polygamy in the Old Testament, including some of the most well-known figures: Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, Saul, David, and Solomon. Some would argue that if these biblical examples—including King David, who is called a "man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14)—could be in non-monogamous relationships, then we should be able to affirm polyamorous relationships today.[8] They did it, so why can't we?

The main problem with this argument is that it fails to recognize that *Bible characters are not examples to be followed in every area of their life.* Jacob was a liar and deceiver, Gideon engaged in idolatry, Saul failed to obey God's commands and boundaries as king, David was a murderer and adulterer, and Solomon's idolatry and mistakes were so bad that they eventually split the kingdom of Israel.

Much of the biblical narrative is descriptive (telling us what *does* happen), not necessarily prescriptive (telling us what *should* happen), though sometimes it is both simultaneously.[9] The writers of Old Testament narrative assume that we, the readers, will evaluate every character and action in light of the Torah (the Old Testament law) and the larger narrative context of which they are a part. The writers of Scripture don't generally pause the narrative or provide a nice *Veggie Tales* wrap-up with Bob and Larry coming on scene to make sure we all get the moral of the story. Instead, biblical narratives often *show* us (on their own and paired with other Scripture) rather than *tell* us what we should conclude about a character or their actions. For example, when David commits murder and adultery, the narrative trajectory of 1 Samuel 2, as well as the moral sanctions of the Torah, help us see his actions as clearly wrong. As discerning readers, we are supposed to understand what parts of each character's life are positive and what parts are negative.

So how do we assess the lives of biblical characters and specific ethical questions about marriage and sexuality? We have to put them in context of the rest of Scripture's teaching. For example, we know that King David's murder and adultery are bad, not just typical kingly behaviors, because of the way Scripture repeatedly condemns them and shows how these sins lead to the unraveling of his family and increasing chaos in his kingdom. We know that idolatry is wrong because of the broader biblical teaching on worshipping God as God and the destruction and bondage that happen when we worship idols. Similarly, we know that monogamy—not polygamy or polyamory—is God's intent for marriage because of the way passages like Genesis 1-2, Matthew 19:1-10, and Ephesians 5:21-33 talk about marriage and how they fit into the overall story of Scripture. Because of Scripture's direct teaching on monogamy, examples of non-monogamy can't carry the weight that proponents of polyamory give them.

Reason 2: Old Testament laws allow polygamy

At a few points, Old Testament law allows for and legislates polygamy. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 gives

instructions about inheritance law in a scenario where a husband has two wives. Exodus 21:7-11 seems to describe a situation where a man takes a slave girl as a wife, but then marries another woman. The point of the law here is that the man shouldn't deprive his first wife of food, clothes, and care. Deuteronomy 17:17 says that Israel's kings should not take "many" wives, a command that might allow for some level of polygamy, though not Solomon-level excess. Because of these passages, advocates for polyamory ask: If God's law allows for non-monogamous relationships, then aren't examples of ethical polyamory valid for today?[10]

Before we can answer that question, we have to think about the logic behind it: a certain view of the connection between the Old and New Testaments. Many people think of the Old Testament as being all about law and rules and regulations. In contrast, they see the New Testament as all about grace and God loosening things up, so to speak. If non-monogamous relationships were allowed in the rule-filled Old Testament, these people reason, then obviously they'd be allowed in the looser, more gracious New Testament.

In response to this point, we need to see that some Old Testament laws are a concession to human sin. Jesus speaks precisely to this point when he talks about marriage and divorce in Matthew 19:8-9: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."[11] The Old Testament law clarifies that a man can't divorce a woman, force her to marry another man, and then take her back if it doesn't work out (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Divorce is final. We have to see that some Old Testament laws are God's concession to less-than-ideal realities of sinful human life. Just because God regulates a practice in the Old Testament doesn't mean he ultimately approves of it.

This principle includes not only divorce, but other less-than-ideal realities like slavery and polygamy. In fact, Jesus' words in Matthew 19 speak strongly in favor of monogamy (we'll dig more into Matthew 19 below). Jesus defines marriage as a one-flesh union marked by sexual difference. He highlights Genesis 1:27, which states that God created humanity as male and female. He emphatically underscores the monogamous nature of marriage by quoting Genesis 2:24: "the *two* become one flesh" (Matt. 19:5). Though God may have allowed and regulated polygamy to

some degree in the Old Testament, Jesus emphasizes that his kingdom is taking us back to God's original ideal of monogamy—lifelong faithfulness in a marriage of husband and wife. Thus, although non-monogamy may have been allowed for and regulated by Old Testament law, it should not be a practice for Christians today. Like a Christian offering animal sacrifices or observing Old Testament food laws, a Christian pursuing polygamy is confused about the overarching story of Scripture and how Jesus affects our current place in that story.

Reason 3: Polygamous marriages in the Bible are bad because they are patriarchal, not because they are polygamous

Polygamous marriages in the Bible are riddled with problems, from Jacob's literal sister wives (and their servants) to David's abuse of Bathsheba to Solomon's hundreds of wives and concubines. These practical dimensions seem to speak against the wisdom of polygamy. But *why* are polygamous marriages criticized? Advocates for polyamory suggest that the root problem here is patriarchy, not polygamy.[12] In other words, men were valued more highly than women; in these marriages, women were basically seen as property, and their main job was procreation. [13]

For example, the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah in Genesis 29-30 sounds absolutely bizarre to modern ears. Jacob is in love with Rachel, the younger but better-looking sister. But Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah by her dad, Laban, even though he really wants to marry Rachel. Leah has children. But then Jacob also marries Rachel, who can't have kids initially, so she has her servant sleep with her husband to bear children in her place. Then Leah gets jealous because she's stopped having kids, so she gives *her* servant to her husband so she'll have more kids that count toward her overall child count. Finally, Rachel has kids of her own, and then Leah starts having kids again. Clearly, this is a dysfunctional family.

So how is this baby competition relevant to the case for polyamory? Those in favor of polyamory would say that what makes this story warped isn't polygamy *per se* but a culture that says a woman's only value is in producing offspring. If we swap out that warped patriarchal value for something positive—like equality, consent, and seeing each person as a person, not merely as property—then we can affirm a filtered, purified version of polygamy: polyamory.

But is this argument correct? Is the root problem really patriarchy, not polygamy?

First, as we'll see in more detail below, the Bible categorically speaks against multiple sexual partners, regardless of whether those partners are part of a polygamous, patriarchal culture or a culture that empowers women and men to freely choose multiple partners. The biblical pattern for marriage and sexual union articulated in creation and repeated in the new creation brought by Jesus is exclusive monogamy: one man and one woman for life (Gen. 1-2; Matt. 19:1-12; Eph. 5:21-33). There is no hint or trajectory in Scripture that multiple one-flesh sexual unions would be good if only they were purged of patriarchal baggage.

Second, although the Bible is written in cultures that are patriarchal, Scripture has an overall positive value and view of women, noting that women exercise power, serve, teach, and lead in a variety of ways.[14] Indeed, key passages on

marriage lift up the value of women. Genesis 2:24 makes clear that a husband should seek to love and serve his wife (not vice versa) in a way that is profoundly countercultural to a patriarchal world. Similarly, Ephesians 5:25-32 is also countercultural, calling a husband to be the servant of his wife to the point of dying to himself (or even literally dying) because he puts her before himself.

Third, the biblical narrative makes clear that the problems with polygamy/polyamory are not just connected to patriarchy. The conflict in the case of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah didn't merely stem from patriarchy; it came from the fact that Jacob found Rachel more desirable than Leah, a reality that cuts across cultures. The text of Genesis 29-30 makes clear that the baby-making competition was a symptom of the original imbalance in Jacob's attraction to Rachel over Leah, not the cause of it. Even if patriarchy were purged from a culture or from specific relationships, having multiple sexual partners can still put people in competition with each other. Indeed, this was the outcome of the relationship of Tyler, Amanda, and Jon that I mentioned earlier. Though Amanda originally wanted a relationship with both Tyler (her husband) and Jon (her new lover), she eventually grew to prefer Jon and divorced Tyler. This is not to say that all polyamorous relationships end due to jealousy or competition; clearly, they do not. Rather, the point is that it's false both biblically and practically to say that non-monogamy only has problems when it is connected to patriarchy. Some of the problems created by non-monogamy in ancient cultures aren't exclusive to patriarchy; rather, those problems are simply part of the nature of non-monogamy.

Reason 4: The Trinity is polyamorous

Advocates of polyamory argue that God's existence as Trinity is polyamorous.[15] Each person of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—loves the other and each person is in relationship with the other two simultaneously. Even while recognizing that we have to be careful with human parallels to the Trinity, Chuck McKnight argues that the best human picture of the Trinity is a polyamorous triad and that polyamory is a "more-accurate picture of God's relationship than monogamy."[16]

There are a couple of problems with this claim. First, the language is highly speculative and not biblical. Consider how Scripture describes the persons of the Trinity as being in relationship with each other. The terms that could be seen as indicating a family-like relationship are not spousal terms, but "Father" and "Son." Of course, the relationship of the divine Father and divine Son is not identical but analogous to a human father-son relationship. Comparing two terms that Scripture never uses in describing the Trinity—monogamy and polyamory—and saying which one the Trinity is "more like" is not helpful. At best, it's purely speculative, like asking whether a parliamentary or presidential system of governance is a better picture of the Trinity or whether teams in football or baseball more accurately depict the Trinity. There might be valid points we could draw out for each option, but neither position could claim that their view is somehow taught by Scripture.

The second danger is that describing the Trinity as polyamorous privileges sexual relationships over friendships, eclipsing the deepest form of love that Jesus talks about: friendship (John 15:13). In the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we see a

relationship of perfect love. But this perfect love is definitely non-sexual, unlike polyamory.

So why would McKnight appeal to polyamory rather than to a friendship of three people (see Ecc. 4:12)? It seems that he assumes, like most in our culture, that the highest form of love and intimacy must involve sex. To be fair, McKnight argues that, while there is no sexuality in God, there is intimacy. He suggests it's better to say that this intimacy "surpasses physical sexuality" rather than say that "there is nothing sexual about it."[17] But if this is true, why does McKnight privilege polyamory over the friendship we have with brothers and sisters in Christ, where physical sexuality is also "surpassed" in the sense that we have deep bonds of love that are non-sexual in nature? Why is a polyamorous triad the best possible picture of the divine Trinity? It can only be because McKnight sees self-giving friendship in the body of Christ as inferior to sexual relationships, something that clearly goes against the teaching of Scripture. Calling the Trinity polyamorous only perpetuates the way modern Christians have privileged married, sexually active people as spiritually superior to celibate single Christians.

Reason 5: Christ's relationship with the Church is polyamorous

Ephesians 5 describes marriage as a picture or symbol of Christ and the church. Here again, McKnight argues that, although the church is a single, corporate whole, "God has an individual intimate relationship with each and every one of us. Christ's marriage to the church is ultimately a marriage to billions of individuals."[18] Thus, he states that polyamory is a more accurate picture of God than monogamy.

There are two reasons this argument doesn't work. First, while the church is made up of many members, the image of the church in Ephesians 5:25 is a singular one: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Though Jesus does have a relationship with each of us as individuals, this text focuses on the collective identity of God's people in relationship to him. When interpreting a passage with a metaphor or image, it is important that we do not go beyond the bounds of the point the metaphor is trying to make. And this metaphor focuses on the *collective* nature of God's people as a *singular* bride. We are not each individually the bride of Christ; we are all collectively the bride of Christ.

A second key factor is that the context makes it clear that Paul intends to use the metaphor of Christ and the church to underscore monogamous marriage. He quotes Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31, emphasizing that marriage is between one man and one woman, and he sums up the discussion by referring to the singular "wife" and "husband" in Ephesians 5:32. A key principle of biblical interpretation is that what is clear in Scripture should interpret what is unclear. The text of Ephesians here clearly takes the imagery of Jesus and the church as supporting monogamy, not polyamory.

Reason 6: It's all about love

For some particular sexual ethics, everything revolves around "love." In this view, love is defined as ensuring that equality, honesty, and consent are upheld. If a relationship or sexual behavior meets those criteria, then it is defined as ethical and loving.[19] Since polyamory can be lived out in a way that honors all these principles, it is seen as consistent with a "love" ethic.

The first problem with this approach is that, according to Scripture, equality, mutuality, and consent are not all you need in a sexual ethic. Many sexual behaviors explicitly condemned by Scripture could be compatible with this framework. This "love" ethic can be used to say that a one-night stand, short-term affair, or lifetime of committed love are all valid ways to embody the mutuality principle, so long as there is *mutual* agreement as to what the relationship is.[20]

The second problem is a terminology problem. It's wrong to call this a "love" ethic. This is not so much an ethic of biblical love as it is an ethic of Western individualism. The individual's consent, equality, and empowerment are the central principle and main goal. Because of this, whatever an individual freely agrees to is permissible.[21] But in Scripture, "love" has actual definable content. "Love your neighbor" doesn't simply mean to respect their individuality (though that may be part of it). Love is connected to a specific way of life, including how you treat your neighbor sexually. A biblical sexual ethic must actually *do* what Scripture says to do and *not do* what Scripture says not to do if it is to be truly loving.

The third problem with the "love ethic" approach is that it views sex as having no inherent or objective meaning. Sex means whatever each individual wants it to mean, and "love" means respecting each person's self-created definition of what sex means to them.[22] There's nothing in this ethic about a specific pattern or intention for sex. In the Bible, sex has an inherently marital meaning—it binds a man and woman in the one-flesh union of marriage. When the bodies of husband and wife unite in sexual union, that physical union has a spiritual meaning that includes exclusive monogamy. The biblical view is that sexual union has this objective meaning. In contrast, for the "love" ethic, sex itself is open to definition based on what the participating partners want it to mean—it could be mere recreation or a sign of emotional attachment or even of lifelong commitment. In other words, the meaning of sexual union is merely subjective.

Reason 7: Polyamorous people are born this way

Although some polyamorous people think of their polyamory as a lifestyle choice, a good number of polyamorous people see their polyamory as an innate sexual and relational orientation. A polyamorous orientation isn't simply being attracted to more than one person; that's a near-universal experience. Some report knowing that they were polyamorous from a young age and feeling discomfort in monogamous relationships or a complete lack of jealousy toward their partner's partner.[23] Some even speculate that there is a biological component to their polyamory.[24] Legal scholar Ann Tweedy agrees, arguing in a peer-reviewed law journal that there are clear legal grounds for classifying polyamory as a sexual orientation.[25]

The question of orientation is a complex one, but even if polyamory were a distinctly defined sexual orientation, this wouldn't necessarily answer the question of how people who experience this orientation are called to follow Jesus. After all, just because I experience something as an innate or inborn desire doesn't make it right. Because of sin and rebellion against God, we experience all kinds of desires that feel natural but are not necessarily good.[26] It's worth noting that even advocates of same-sex marriage recognize this. For example, affirming author Justin Lee

recognizes the complexity of this ethical point and argues that just because a drive is biological or inborn doesn't make it good or right.[27] As a result, the "born this way" argument can help us understand people's experiences, but it can't show us what is right or wrong.

Now that we've wrestled with several different arguments for polyamory, it's important to turn our attention to Scripture to understand the positive case for exclusive monogamy—a husband and wife united in lifelong faithfulness.

The Biblical Case for Monogamy

If we read the Bible as a series of inspirational (and confusing!) stories or as bits and pieces of ethical advice, we will miss the underlying big story. Further, we'll miss the way that monogamy is itself connected to that big story. So how does the Bible make the case for monogamy? And why is it so significant? As we answer these questions, we have to look narrowly at specific verses while also keeping our eyes on the big story of the Bible.

One important note before we dig into some key texts: the Bible was written in a world where exclusive monogamy wasn't the majority ideal. Sometimes Christians assume that everyone everywhere has always known (at least up until the 1960s) that monogamy is the social norm. But that's not true. The idea of lifelong faithfulness and sexual exclusivity between a husband and wife *was a minority view in the eras of both the Old and New Testaments.* Even though this belief came to be the predominant view in places affected by Christianity, we shouldn't act like this view is obvious or universally agreed upon. It's not. We have to actually dig into Scripture to see how it makes the case for monogamy.

Monogamy in Creation

In Genesis 1 and 2, we see God creating all things and creating all things *good*. That includes creating humanity as male and female and calling Adam and Eve into marriage, the one-flesh union of two sexually different people. For our discussion, two details stand out. First, this relationship is with *one* other person; it is monogamous, not polygamous or polyamorous.

When God creates the woman in Genesis 2:18, he is clear that he is creating a singular helper (*ezer*) for Adam. So when Genesis 2:24 defines this relationship, it is the singular "man/husband" (*ish*) and singular "woman/wife" (*ishah*).
Second, this relationship is meant to be faithful and permanent. Adam and Eve are no longer two separate entities. These two become one flesh. This phrase is a reference to sexual union (see 1 Cor. 6:16), but it's also more than that. The union of two bodies in sex is a picture of the union of two lives. Husband and wife give themselves freely, totally, and faithfully to one another in a lifelong, permanent commitment.

Why do the first two chapters of Genesis matter so much for this discussion? Genesis 1-2 shows us something about God's good intentions for his world. When non-monogamous relationships start to show up early on, as in the relationships of Lamech (Gen. 4:19-24), such relationships are clearly a departure from God's intentions. Genesis 1-2 is not just giving us a report of what happened but setting out the pattern for how things are *supposed* to be. In Genesis 1-2, we're seeing something before and beyond the broken reality of our sin-filled relationships—including those of Jacob, Gideon, Saul, David, and Solomon—and getting a glimpse of how marriage is really meant to be. Thus, it's no surprise that Genesis 1-2 is the go-to text for both Jesus and Paul when they explain marriage.

Monogamy in the New Testament

In Matthew 19, some Pharisees test Jesus' view of marriage by asking him a question about how to

interpret the Old Testament law (Deut. 24:1-4) on marriage and divorce. In his response, Jesus doesn't just engage Old Testament law but goes all the way back to Genesis 1-2 to answer their question. In other words, he goes back to God's original intentions for marriage in creation. Jesus reinforces and clarifies how Genesis 1-2 provides the template for all marriages.

According to Jesus, marriage should have three characteristics. First, like Genesis, Jesus teaches that marriage is between a man and woman. He quotes Genesis 1:27 to underscore that God made humanity "male and female" as image-bearers of God. Thus, sexual difference is one characteristic of marriage. Second, marriage is a lifelong union. This is why Jesus speaks so strongly against divorce. God's intention for marriage is not "one spouse at a time" but "one spouse for life," though Scripture allows for divorce in circumstances where sin has broken the marriage through adultery or abandonment (see 1 Cor. 7:15). Third, marriage is monogamous. Jesus shows this by quoting Genesis 1:27, highlighting that the pattern for marriage is two people, male and female. The text of Matthew 19:5 makes it abundantly clear that Jesus views marriage as involving *two* (the Greek word here is *duo*) people who become one flesh, not three or more. To really make sense of Jesus' teaching on marriage, including monogamy, we have to ask two further questions: First, what time is it? Second, why this pattern?

Jesus' teaching on marriage and monogamy is linked to the reality of new creation that is unfolding in his life and ministry. Bible scholar N. T. Wright points out that Matthew 19:8 is essential to understanding this text.[28] The Old Testament law allows for divorce "because your hearts were hard." But when Jesus comes, he brings the kingdom of God and gives people his Holy Spirit, who transforms hard hearts into hearts that are open to truly love God and neighbor (Ezek. 11:19). A new era in human history has begun, giving us the ability to go back to God's original intentions in creation. Jesus can call his followers to radical monogamy (which even his own disciples find quite startling in Matthew 19:11) because he pours out the radical power of his Spirit upon them. Seen from this angle, monogamy is not just a high ethical ideal that Jesus calls his followers to; it's evidence that the new creation brought about by Jesus is present and real.

This new creation reality helps us see more clearly why Old Testament examples of polygamy can't be used as support for polyamory. Although God patiently accommodates the less-than-ideal reality of polygamy for a season, the fullness of

the kingdom brought by Jesus makes polygamy obsolete. Thus, faithful, lifelong monogamy not only embodies God's intentions in creation, it also points to the new creation brought through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The second question we need to answer to understand the Bible's teaching on monogamy is: Why this pattern? Genesis 2:24, which Jesus quotes and emphasizes in Matthew 19:5, says that a husband is to leave his family of origin and cleave—cling to, be united to—his wife. In short, he is to build his life around her. But introducing a second wife or another partner makes this impossible; the wives are then forced to build their lives around him.[29] Genesis 2:24 depicts marriage as a total, singular giving of myself to my spouse that is unique in my relationships. While I'm called to love other people in a variety of ways, the relationship of husband and wife calls for a singular devotion and unique love that includes sexual union.

This pattern of singular, self-giving love is seen in Ephesians 5:25-32. There, Paul notes that Jesus came with a very specific and singular mission: to love the church and give himself for her. This means Jesus had to intentionally forsake other pursuits and relationships—including a literal wife and family. Paradoxically, the single Jesus is a template for our marriages, because in his kingdom-focused singleness he shows us the kind of whole-hearted, singular focus a spouse must have. Thus, Jesus' singular devotion to the church is a template for a husband's singular devotion to his wife.

Some might object to this point by noting that Christians are called to love one another. Aren't we called to show love to all our sisters and brothers in the church, not just a spouse? This is true. But to include everyone in a spouse-like relationship would not only be sexually wrong, it would be a violation of the singular focus a spouse is supposed to have. Again, this is not to negate the important role of Christian friendship and hospitality in the lives of married Christians. Nevertheless, even the apostle Paul recognizes that married Christians should invest a significant portion of their time and energy into their spouse (1 Cor. 7:32-35).

Furthermore, we have to acknowledge that, as finite beings with a limited amount of time and energy, we simply *cannot* show love to all people in the same way. For example, I'm not called to love every child in my neighborhood in the way I love my own children—by providing them with love, care, shelter, food, discipleship, and all the other responsibilities I have toward my children. Interestingly, even polyamorous people acknowledge this limited dimension of relationships, using the terms "primary," "secondary," and "tertiary" to distinguish the levels of relational investment and life entanglement in polyamorous relationships.[30] What's significant about these terms is that they again highlight that we have limits of time, energy, and devotion, and it is neither wise nor realistic to think that we can "leave and cleave" to multiple people with the same level of singular love and care. To be clear, most advocates of polyamory would not claim this; these relationships are not meant to be multiple spouse-like relationships. However, some polyamorous people reject all language of primary, secondary, and tertiary relationship in order to strive toward absolute equality among all partners. Interestingly, though, a recent study by research psychologists highlighted that the ideal of equality with multiple partners is easier said than done. These researchers concluded that "despite attempts at equality, many relationship qualities differ among partners in

non-hierarchical relationships similar to the differences that emerge for those who make formal primary-secondary partner classifications."[31] In other words, even poly relationships that tried to avoid the primary-secondary distinction still ended up operating with something like those distinctions. This research finding again highlights our human limits. We cannot justly show the spousal devotion that Scripture calls for in marriage to two, three, or more people.

To sum up, the biblical pattern in creation and new creation is exclusive monogamy. This relationship is designed to draw both husband and wife into a singular, self-giving, undivided love that is a picture of Christ and the church. Just as Jesus did not waver but stayed true to his mission to love and redeem the church, so a husband is called to give his life wholly and completely for his wife. This involves a degree of "forsaking all others," as traditional wedding vows say, in the sense that this singular, spousal covenant of love and care is made only with her. And just as the church is called to wholehearted and singular devotion to Jesus, so also a wife is called to give herself wholly and completely to her husband, likewise "forsaking all others." A husband and wife who live out this calling will make the Gospel more believable as their singular devotion becomes a sign and symbol of Christ's love for us. While this devotion does not exclude truly loving other people, it does mean that spousal love is unique and singular.

Having examined the place of monogamy in creation and the teaching of Jesus, let's briefly look at three other key New Testament passages to see how monogamy is addressed.

Monogamy, Multiple One-Flesh Unions, and Instructions for Church Leaders

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul is dealing with the question of whether a man should have sex with a prostitute (something considered normal in Greco-Roman ethics of those days). In 1 Corinthians 6:16, he says that sexual union creates a one-flesh relationship between a man and woman, even if it's in a situation with no deep emotional or relational ties. Some advocates of non-monogamy might point to this text as proof that it is possible to have multiple one-flesh unions. Although it's true that this text does indicate multiple one-flesh unions are possible, it also teaches that they are against God's will. And even though Paul is addressing one specific kind of sexual infidelity (prostitution), the problem in this text is not merely that prostitution violates a prostitute's autonomy or freedom (a sin of injustice); it's that the one-flesh marriage relationship is being violated by going beyond exclusive monogamy (a sexual sin). That is, the problem is not merely prostitution, but having multiple sexual/marital relationships. As Paul goes on to say in this passage, sexual union is meant for a husband and wife (1 Cor. 7:1-4) and is meant to be exclusive to that relationship. Thus, even while 1 Corinthians 6 acknowledges that multiple one-flesh unions are possible, it simultaneously criticizes those who act on that possibility, clarifying that God's intention is that we should be in a one-flesh union with only one other person.

The instructions for elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3:1-12 and Titus 1:6 also speak to the importance of monogamy as a pattern for the whole Christian community. In these texts, we see the requirement that these leaders be a "husband of one wife." The fact that this

requirement needs to be stated seems to indicate that there was likely still some polygamy in the cities where these early Christians lived. Non-monogamy was a live option for some of these leaders and communities. So it's significant that Christian leaders were called to live distinctively in their monogamy. To be clear, these passages aren't saying that there are two equal standards of Christian living, monogamy for leaders and polygamy/polyamory for everyone else. For one thing, the qualifications for leaders are characteristics that all Christians should be striving for. We should not read these texts and think that leaders should be gentle, peacemaking, and content, but that it's fine for the average Christian to be violent, fighting, and greedy. Rather, the standards for leaders are something that all Christians are called to, which is why leaders especially must exhibit these traits in their own lives. Even if these texts allow for some first-generation believers to remain in polygamous marriages (and thereby exclude them from leadership), they underscore that monogamy is God's best for marriage and that all married Christians, especially church leaders, should practice monogamy as the creation/new creation pattern.

The New Testament teachings on one-flesh unions and on qualifications for church leaders thus emphasize monogamy as God's intention for marriage. Written into a world where a variety of non-monogamous practices abounded, the New Testament as a whole repeatedly comes back to Genesis 1-2 to make clear that God's intention for sexual relationships is exclusive monogamous marriage.

Pastoral Reflections

What would coming to faith and discipleship mean for people in a polyamorous relationship?

When we call people to repentance and faith in Jesus, we need to be clear and precise about what areas of their lives are sinful and what areas may simply be culturally unfamiliar to us. If we do not make clear and precise distinctions, we risk calling people to repent of something that is not actually sin, projecting our own cultural practices onto Scripture rather than letting Scripture speak for itself.

We need to be clear and precise here because polyamory is complex. We need to be able to see some of the positive dimensions of polyamory that may not be necessarily sinful. For example, in a world where extended family networks are often lacking, polyamorous relationships often function like an extended family. The broader idea of "kinship" in polyamory is, in some ways, a secular echo of the way Scripture calls Christians to function as a new family.

But we do need to be clear on where polyamory goes against Scripture. A sexual relationship that is not exclusive to husband and wife goes beyond the creation and new creation pattern established by God. Granted, in a relationship of three or more people, not all of them may be sexually active with each other. This may mean that relationships between people who are not sexually active with each other in a polyamorous relationship will not need to change substantially when they choose to follow Jesus.

Take, for example, the V relationship of Alexis, Joanna, and Andrew. Alexis and Joanna each have a sexual relationship with Andrew, but not with each other, although they have developed close emotional and relational ties. Alexis has recently come to faith in Jesus and wants to know what she should do. A call to discipleship would include a call to give up the sexual relationship with Andrew outside of exclusive monogamous marriage. But a call to discipleship would also recognize that her relationship with Joanna does not necessarily need to end; it could continue as she is transformed by the Spirit. There may be other scenarios where close emotional and relational ties can be maintained without violating Scripture in any way (in the same way that two wives in a polygamous context may have a close relationship that does not involve sex). Because polyamorous relationships are often complex and fluid, there is no one-size-fits-all answer here, so great pastoral care and discernment is needed for helping those who want to follow Jesus figure out how to move forward in the best way for all involved. The more precise we can be about which dimensions of polyamory are actually sinful and which are simply culturally unfamiliar, the better our pastoral care will be.

How should Christians who hold to the historic view of marriage interact with people in polyamorous relationships?

Unfortunately, many Christians respond to polyamory with unbiblical gut reactions: "That's just wrong!" "That's gross!" "Those people must just be obsessed with sex." "How could anyone live that way?" If Christians are going to treat people with respect and dignity, we must

recognize that many people in polyamorous relationships have thought carefully about their ethics and relationships. Even while there are examples of polyamory that do not end well, we must recognize that polyamory's sexual ethic, which revolves around equality, honesty, and consent, makes perfect sense to most people in our culture.

Because of this, Christians who hold to the historic view must treat polyamorous people with grace and dignity. Remember that it is possible to show grace and dignity to people even while disagreeing with the relationships they engage in. By showing grace and dignity to others, we show that we understand how the gospel meets us in our own need and sinfulness. And we let people know that, like Jesus, we are not here to cast the first stone.

So listen. Hear where people's hearts are at. Hear what they are looking for and what they think will bring happiness and fulfillment. And don't point people to monogamy as the answer to their hearts' deepest needs. Point them instead to Jesus, who loves us with a total, singular, self-giving love, and trust that his Spirit is at work.

Notes

1. Zachary Zane, "Who Really Practices Polyamory?" *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 12, 2018. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/polyamory-bisexual-study-pansexual-754696/.

2. https://www.livescience.com/27128-polyamory-myths-debunked.html.

3. M. L. Haupert, Amanda N. Gesselman, Amy C. Moors, Helen E. Fisher & Justin R. Garcia, "Prevalence of Experiences With Consensual Nonmonogamous Relationships: Findings From Two National Samples of Single Americans," *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 43:5 (2017), 424-440.

4. Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 186.

5. Two key sources that helpfully explain polyamory are Elizabeth Sheff, *The Polyamorists Next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), and Deborah Anapol, *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

6. On the ethics of polyamory, see Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Adventures*, 2nd edition (Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 2009). See also the chapters "The Ethics of Polyamory" and "The Challenge of Jealousy" in Anapol, *Polyamory in the 21st Century*.

7. Anapol, *Polyamory in the 21st Century*, 5.

8. Brian G. Murphy, "The Bible, Monogamy, and Polyamory," https://www.queertheology.com/bible-polyamory/.

9. In making the case for polyamory, Chuck McKnight seems to miss this distinction when he asserts that "there is no single biblical view of marriage." https://www.patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/11/polygamy-and-the-problem-of-patriarchy.html. This statement makes sense only if every *descriptive* text is also taken as a *prescriptive* text.

10. Murphy, "The Bible, Monogamy, and Polyamory," https://www.queertheology.com/bible-polyamory/.

11. All biblical quotations are taken from the NIV.

12. Chuck McKnight, "Polygamy and the Problem of Patriarchy," https://www.patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/11/polygamy-and-the-problem-of-patriarchy.html.

13. Many people assume it is a settled fact that ancient Israel was patriarchal. But Carol L. Meyers convincingly argues that "ancient Israel should not be called a patriarchal society, for the term 'patriarchy' is an inadequate and misleading designation of the social reality of Israel." She contends that "heterarchy" is a better term, for it highlights the multiple power structures in play in society that "cross-cut" each other, rather than assuming that power structures have a nice, neat, linear power flow. See "Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 1 (2014): 8-27. Thanks to John Nugent for pointing out this article to me.

14. For a great example of hearing Scripture in its own cultural context, which dispels many of our modern misconceptions of Scripture, see Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Image Books, 2010).

15. Jeff Hood is very emphatic about this point. https://www.patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/09/southern-baptist-preacher-affirms-polyamory-interview-with-rev-dr-jeff-hood.html

16. Chuck McKnight, "Is God Polyamorous?" https://www.patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/10/is-god-polyamorous.html.

17. McKnight, "Is God Polyamorous?" https://www.patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/10/is-god-polyamorous.html.

18. McKnight, "Is God Polyamorous?" https://www.patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/10/is-god-polyamorous.html. Brian Murphy makes a similar point at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gG9-bgnVc1c&feature=youtu.be.

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20. Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 222.

21. Brian G. Murphy, "The Nuts and Bolts of Creating a Sexual Ethic," https://www.queertheology.com/create-sexual-ethic/.

22. See Alistair Roberts, "Five Principles of the New Sexual Morality," https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-principles-of-the-new-sexual-morality/.

23. Sheff, *The Polyamorists Next Door*, 25.

24. Sheff, *The Polyamorists Next Door*, 26.

25. Ann E. Tweedy, "Polyamory as a Sexual Orientation," *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 79 (2011): 1461-1515.

26. Ed Shaw, *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 51-59. Preston Sprinkle, "15 Reasons for Affirming Same-Sex Relations – and 15 Responses," Pastoral Paper 5, https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources.

27. Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays vs. Christians Debate* (Jericho Books, 2013), 62.

28. N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 188.

29. Thanks to John Nugent for pointing this out.

30. Sheff, *The Polyamorists Next Door,* 17-18.

31. Rhonda N. Balzarini, Christoffer Dharma, Taylor Kohut, Lorne Campbell, Justin J. Lehmiller, Jennifer J. Harman, and Bjarne M. Holmes, "Comparing Relationship Quality across Different Types of Romantic Partners in Polyamorous and Monogamous Relationships," https://osf.io/g3ykf/.

About the Author

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