

SHOULD POLYGAMOUS CONVERTS PARTAKE HOLY COMMUNION? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SDA DOGMA

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Abstract

The study sought to investigate if polygamous converts in the SDA churches are allowed to partake Holy Communion and compare this with biblical teachings. This study employed the Social Exchange Theory to underpin the study. The study utilised a descriptive survey research design and employed the qualitative research paradigm in exploring the issue in the Biblical context. The target population was one Executive Director, 2,462 church members, 5 pastors and 143 Polygamous converts. The sample size of 464 respondents comprised 344 church members, 105 Polygamous converts, 9 elders, 5 pastors and one Executive Director. Data from the field was collected through interviews and self-administered questionnaires. The study also used simple random and purposive sampling techniques when selecting the sample respondents of one Executive Director, 9 elders and 5 pastors. The data were manually coded, entered into the computer, and analysed through the (SPSS) program. Data were presented descriptively through percentages, tables and figures. The study findings revealed that: 50 per cent of Polygamous converts and church members agreed that the SDA Church should choose whether to partake the Holy Communion or not without exclusion. The study also found that the Bible is silent on polygamy, so polygamous converts should not be discriminated against. Therefore, the SDA Church should not discriminate against the Polygamous converts but should instead accommodate them and show them the love of Christ.

Key terms: Polygamous, converts, Holy Communion, SDA DOGMA.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The practice of polygamy was acknowledged and accepted within the various law codes in the ancient Near East, where polytheism abounded. For example, according to the earliest known laws of Sumerians, the law reforms of King Uru-inimgna of Lagash (the early Dynastic period of the Sumerians, 2378-2371 B.C.). Women in the earliest times could marry more than one husband, but King Uru-inimgna made this practice a capital crime and forbade its continuation (Kramer, 1963). In the Sumerian Lipit Ishtar Law code (ca. 1850 B.C.), at least four different inheritance laws tacitly assumed the social institution of polygamy (Roth, 2000). The Babylon Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1700 B.C.) also acknowledged the practice of polygamy, allowing for a husband to take a concubine if his wife was infertile (in Abram's case) or to take another wife if his first became deceased or if his first wife tried to obtain a divorce through a public scandal (Hugenberger 1983).

At the time of the early church, Jewish Polygamy clashed with Roman monogamy. Polygamy was still practised by the Jews when the Christian Church came into being. In the New Testament, we find no references to it, and some have suggested that it might have fallen into disuse and that at the time of our Lord, the Jewish people had become monogamous (Hayward, 1983). Tertullian, who lived during the 2nd and 3rd centuries turn, wrote that getting married is lawful, but polygamy is unlawful:

We do not indeed forbid the union of man and woman, blest by God as the seminary of the human race, and devised for the replenishment of the earth and the furnishing of the world and therefore permitted, yet singly. For Adam was the one husband of Eve, and Eve his one wife, one woman, one rib (Donalson, 1985).

In the middle ages, the church held a synod in Hertford, England, in 673, overseen by Archbishop Theodore. Chapter 10, issued by the synod, stated that marriage is allowed between one woman and one man, and separation (but not divorce) is only granted in the case of adultery, but even then, remarriage is not allowed (Bede, 1990). During the reformation, monogamy was the norm among Christians. In the 16th century, there was a Christian re-examination of plural marriages. Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant Reformation, wrote:

I confess that I cannot forbid a person to marry several wives, for it does not contradict the Scripture. However, suppose a man wishes to marry more than one wife. In that case, he should be asked whether he is satisfied in his conscience and devised for the replenishment of the earth and the furnishing of the world and therefore permitted, yet singly. For Adam was the one husband of Eve and that he may do so in accordance with the word of God. In such a case, the civil authority has nothing to do with the matter (Strong, 2009).

Polygamy is still widespread in the world today, whether in the form of plural marriage, concubinage or both. According to the ethnographic data, 1041 out of 1231 societies are polygamous (Gray, 1998). Beginning with the Indian tribes, America has a long history of polygamy, all of whom were polygamous when America was colonised (Wolfson, 1999). In 1830, polygamy was embraced as a religious tenet by Joseph Smith and eventually accepted by his Mormon followers. At the time of the early church, Jewish polygamy clashed with Roman monogamy. Polygamy was still practised by the Jews when the Christian Church came into being. In the New Testament, we indeed find no references to it.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints formally banned polygamy in 1890 as a condition for the union. Since then, it has actively excommunicated members found to be living in polygamous households. However,

polygamy has continued among fundamentalist Mormons who believe that polygamy is essential for achieving the highest degree of heaven (Jay, 1992). In Africa, polygamy was and is practised in African cultures (Kunhiyop, 2008). The practice was seen as an honourable practice before the coming of modern Christianity (Hilman, 1975). The practice was found in almost all African societies when they first met Christianity, and it has been a matter of much missiological and theological discussion (Parrinder, 1950).

The polygamous converts in the SDA Church have not been fully accepted as church members. The SDA Church Manual, which guides the church on various issues affecting the Church, is silent on polygamy (SDA church Manual, 2010). In rare cases, polygamous converts are allowed to be baptised, have church membership and partake in the Holy Communion without abandoning their other wives (SDA church working policy, 2012). However, the SDA Minister's Handbook clearly states that:

Adventists practice open communion, inviting any who have committed their lives to Christ to participate. 'Christ's example forbids exclusiveness at the Holy Communion. Open sin indeed excludes the guilty. This the Holy Spirit plainly teaches. Nevertheless, beyond this, none is to pass judgement. God has not left it with men to say who shall present themselves on these occasions. For who can read the heart? Acts 8.' Individual conscience is the guide for participation. There is no authority to impose other restrictions (SDA Minister's handbook, 2012)

This quote implies that any individual who has faith in Jesus Christ (including the polygamous converts) should choose whether to partake in the Holy Communion or not. However, this is not the case in real practice with the polygamous converts in the SDA Churches in Kenya. The church leadership seems to side-line the polygamous converts and does not give them the freedom to choose whether or not to partake of the Holy Communion. At the time of the early church, Jewish polygamy clashed with Roman monogamy. Polygamy was still practised by the Jews when the Christian Church came into being. This prompted the researcher to seek answers as to why the polygamous converts are not given the freedom to choose whether to or not partake the Holy Communion. Such a study was found to be lacking in SDA Churches Kenya. This makes polygamous converts feel left out of the Christian fellowship. Whatever action the church takes must relate to the people and how they live in the light of clear biblical requirements and God's love for humankind (Hoschele, 1998). Studies on the position of the SDA Church on polygamous converts and the views of these polygamous converts on the position of the Church are lacking. The researcher found a dearth of knowledge on the same in Kenya SDA Churches.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Exchange Theory guided this study. This theory is based on the fundamental assumption that human behaviour is socially learned. Sociological perspectives merely assert that individuals' specific thoughts and behaviours are a product of social rather than biological forces. The social exchange framework was developed in the 60s by George Homans and later further developed by Laura Stafford; social exchanges have some differences (Stanford, 2008) Social exchanges involve a connection with another person; social exchanges involve trust, not legal obligations; social exchanges are more flexible; and social exchanges rarely involve explicit bargaining (Emerson, 1976).

This approach focuses on the exchange of resources between people and has thus been used extensively in studying relationships. Society is seen as an ongoing series of exchanges which occur during interactions. All social exchange theories share several basic principles centred on the concepts of rewards, costs and reciprocity. Specifically, social exchanges models share the following three basic assumptions: "(a) Social behaviour is a series of

exchanges; (b) Individuals attempt to maximise their rewards and minimise their costs, and (c) when individuals receive rewards from others, they feel obligated to reciprocate" (Sprecher, 1998).

In studying polygamy, these principles are applied when one considers becoming polygamous. ("What I get out of it"- "What I lose by doing it") = "My decision" to the exchange of services. In Traditional African communities', polygamy is a sign of prestige; polygamy increases the chances of each woman getting married (Wilbur, 1996). Polygamy ensures that if one wife is barren, the others can bear children (Mbiti, 1999). Many wives give birth to too many children, which in turn ensures a large labour force (Remi, 1970). Polygamy reduces cases of sexual immorality (Kunyahop, 2008). People are portrayed as entering and staying in a polygamous marriage based on the reward-cost balance experienced in them. Within this theoretical framework, the study seeks to determine the factors affecting polygamous converts in the SDA Churches in Kenya UGC, Kenya. Some polygamous converts were reluctant to give some personal information concerning their married life.

3.0 FINDINGS

According to the SDA Believe, The Holy Communion as an ordinance serves the Christian faith by benefiting the members. This is because Jesus administered Communion only to His professed followers. The Communion service, therefore, is for the believing Christians (Ministerial Association, 2005). This hints that once one professes to have a relationship with God, they should partake the Holy Communion. This, however, is not the case when it comes to the real practice for the polygamous converts among the SDA Church in Kenya.

The Seventh-Day Adventists observe open Communion. Adults wishing to participate should not be stopped from doing so. It is not the work of Church officers to decide who is worthy or unworthy to take part. "Christ's example forbids exclusiveness at the Holy Communion. It is true that open sin excludes the guilty. However, beyond this, none are to pass judgment. Baptism is a sacrament known as a means of grace. It is a means of grace because it is a primary vehicle through which God gives His spiritual blessings to His people.

God has not left it to men to say who shall present themselves on these occasions." (White, 2001). Some in the congregation may feel that their sin and guilt prevent them from participating in the communion service. On the other hand, their sin is why they should participate (Ministerial Association, 1994). This argument leaves the choice of whether to partake Holy Communion or not in the hands of the individual, a polygamous convert among them. The SDA Church Manual clearly states that:

One should exclude themselves from the Communion because some who are unworthy may be present. Every disciple is called upon to participate publicly and thus bear witness that he accepts Christ as a personal Saviour. It is at these, His appointments, that Christ meets His people and energises them by His presence. Hearts and hands that are unworthy may administer the ordinance, yet Christ is there to minister to His children. All who come with their faith fixed upon Him will be greatly blessed. All who neglect these seasons of divine privileges will suffer loss. Of them, it may appropriately be said, 'Ye are not all clean' (SDA Church Manual, 2008).

This quote from the SDA Church Manual implies that any individual who has faith in Jesus Christ (including the Polygamous converts) should choose whether to partake Holy Communion or not. Nevertheless, in real practice, this is not the case with the polygamous converts in the SDA Church in Kenya. Instead, the church leadership seems to side-line the polygamous converts and does not give them the freedom to choose whether to partake the Lord's Supper.

This prompted the researcher to seek answers as to why the polygamous converts are not given the freedom to choose whether to or not partake the Holy Communion. Such a study was found to be lacking in SDA Church Kenya. The Manual of the Church of Nazarene has some similarities with that of the SDA Church regarding partaking the Lord's Supper. The manual argues that since the Holy Communion is a sacrament, its nature as a sacrament implies that it belongs to all who have trusted in Christ for their salvation. The manual says:

We believe that the Memorial and Communion Supper instituted by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is essentially a New Testament declarative of His sacrificial death, through the merits of which believers have life, salvation, and promise of all spiritual blessings in Christ. It is distinctively for those who are prepared for reverent appreciation of its significance, and by it, they show forth the Lord's death until He comes again. Therefore, being the Communion feast, only those who have faith in Christ and love for the saints should be called to participate therein" (Reed & Lilema, 2007). This quote from the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene clearly explains that the Holy Communion is for those who have faith in Jesus Christ. In it, we see no prohibition against persons with "pre-existing conditions like polygamy (Reed & Lilema, 2013).

Table 1: Views of Church Members and Polygamous Converts on the Partaking of Holy Communion

Item	Category	Frequency	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Total
Polygamous converts should partake the Lord's table as Sabbath school members.	Church members	F %	173 54	31 10	116 36	320 100%
	Polygamous converts	F %	74 80	9 10	9 10	91 100%
Only baptised members of the church should partake the Lord's table.	Church members	F %	259 81	10 3	51 16	320 100%
	Polygamous converts	F %	39 43	42 46	10 11	91 100%
The church manual is not clear whether the Polygamous converts should partake the Lord's table or not.	Church members	F %	95 27	93 29	142 44	320 100%
	Polygamous converts	F %	18 20	40 44	33 36	91 100%

The Church Members were asked to give their opinion on whether polygamous converts should be allowed to partake the Holy Communion as Sabbath School members; a majority, 173 or (54%), agreed that they should indeed partake the Holy Communion as Sabbath school members, 116 or 36 per cent disagreed while 31 or 10 per cent were undecided as shown in table 1. However, whether only baptised members should partake the Holy Communion, 259 or (81%) of a good majority agreed with this statement. Only 51 or (16%) disagreed, while 10 or 3% were undecided, as shown in the table.

When the Church Members were asked whether the SDA Church manual was clear on whether polygamous converts should partake the Holy Communion or not, a majority, 235 or (74%), either disagreed or were undecided whether the Church Manual is not clear whether the polygamous converts should partake the Holy Communion or not. However, only 95 or (26%) agreed that the church manual was unclear on this issue, as shown in Table 1. This means that to them, the church manual was clear on who should partake the Holy Communion.

When the polygamous converts were asked the same questions about partaking the Holy Communion, a majority, 73 or (80%), agreed that they should be allowed to partake the Holy Communion as Sabbath School members. A few 9 or (10%), disagreed, and the same number, 9 or (10%), were undecided, as shown in Table 1. When asked whether only baptised church members should partake the Holy Communion, a majority disagreed or were undecided, 52 or 57%. Those who agreed with this statement were 39 or (43%), as shown in the table. This shows that they are greatly divided on this issue. When they were asked whether the Church manual was clear on the issue of Polygamous converts partaking the Holy Communion, a good number, 40 or (44%), were undecided, 33 or (36%) disagreed, and only 18 or (20%) agreed, as shown in Table 1.

Communion

When the church members were asked whether polygamous converts should be allowed to partake the Holy Communion as Sabbath school members, a majority, 173 or (54%), agreed that they should partake of the Holy Communion (refer to Table 1). This agrees with the SDA Minister's handbook, which states:

Adventists practice open Communion, inviting any who have committed their lives to Christ to participate. 'Christ's example forbids exclusiveness at the Holy Communion. It is true that open sin excludes the guilty. This the Holy Spirit plainly teaches. However, beyond this, none is to pass judgement. God has not left it with men to say who shall present themselves on these occasions. For who can read the heart? Acts 8.' Individual conscience is the guide for participation. There is no authority to impose other restrictions (SDA Ministers, Handbook, 2012).

When the church members were asked whether the SDA Church Manual was clear on whether Polygamous converts should partake the Holy Communion, a majority of 235 or 74 either disagreed or were undecided on the issue. This means that a majority are of the view that the Church Manual is evident on the issue of the Holy Communion since it states that:

None should exclude themselves from the Communion because some who are unworthy may be present. Every disciple is called upon to participate publicly and thus bear witness that he accepts Christ as a personal Saviour. It is at these, His appointments, that Christ meets His people and energises them by His presence. Hearts and hands that are unworthy may administer the ordinance, yet Christ is there to minister to His children. All who come with their faith fixed upon Him will be greatly blessed. All who neglect these seasons of divine privileges will suffer loss. Of them, it may appropriately be said, 'Ye are not all clean (SDA Church Manual, 2015).

When the polygamous converts were asked the same question pertaining the partaking of the Lord's Table, a majority, 73 or 80 per cent, agreed that they should indeed be allowed to partake the Lord's Table (refer to Table 1); this is in agreement with the SDA Church Manual, the Minister's Handbook, the Elders Handbook and the SDA Fundamental Beliefs that advocate open communion, inviting any who have 'committed their lives to Christ' to participate. Jesus Christ instituted the Holy Communion during the last supper. Judas Iscariot, one who was later to betray Him, was right there partaking the Holy Communion with Jesus. Jesus said that the one who will betray Him was dipping on the same plate. Suppose Jesus could allow a sinner to partake the Holy Communion with him. How much more should we, fallen sinners, allow our brothers and sisters in polygamous relationships to partake of the Holy Communion?

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: There also seems to be an agreement that none should exclude themselves from partaking the Holy Communion. The very reason that one is a sinner is why he should partake the Holy Communion, and polygamous converts are not exceptional.

Recommendation: Polygamous converts should partake the Holy Communion since the SDA Church Manual does not exclude anybody. Adventists practice open Communion, inviting any who have committed their lives to Christ to participate. The Bible does not outrightly forbid polygamy; it actually endorses it for the levirate institution. Polygamous converts should choose whether to partake the Holy Communion or not without exclusion. Let one be exempted by their conscience, but one should not be compelled by anyone, whether a pastor or church elder, to do otherwise.

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