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PAYMENT OF DOWRY AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Theological Advisory Group

Following is an excerpt from the TAG publication, "A Biblical Approach to Marriage and Family in Africa." This is not the work of one person but the fruit of group discussion. The Manuscript Drafter only facilitates discussion and elicits further thought. He seeks to be a faithful scribe, writing down the phrases, sentences and thoughts expressed orally. He then organizes, edits and produces a manuscript which must be further approved by the TAG Research Team.

As we have seen in our study of African customary marriages [customary dowry is discussed elsewhere in the book], dowry (more properly speaking, "bride price") had a very important place in the sealing of a marriage relationship. Dowry was a form of economic compensation to the bride's parents for their loss of their daughter. More important, dowry was the legal exchange which validated a marriage and confirmed the consent of both parents of the bride and bridegroom. Without the payment of dowry no marriage was recognized as valid.

CHANGES IN DOWRY TAKING PLACE TODAY

Money Has Replaced Cattle For Dowry: Dowry is no longer paid with goats and cattle but with money. The question arises, therefore, how much dowry should be paid today? There used to be a standard price of dowry set differently in different areas. Not today. Payment in money has changed the issue. In one case recently the dowry was set at five grade cows, a tractor and tens of thousands of shillings.

Education Raises the Cost of the Dowry: If a girl is highly educated, she costs more. Traditionally, the woman was an asset. She could help with her work. Today, the more education she has, the greater will be her worth.

Dowry is Paid to the Girl's Father: Today the dowry is given only to the father. In the past, the dowry was shared with other family members.

The Suitor, Not His Family, Pays the Dowry: In the past the father or uncle or other members of the family paid the dowry, but today the man himself pays the dowry. In the past it was a communal affair, helping the young man to

marry, though they only helped with the first wife. All other wives were the man's responsibility. Now the responsibility of paying the dowry rests entirely upon the man getting married.

In the past the family chose the girl, but today the young man chooses his bride. So this creates a difference in how the dowry is obtained, for the responsibility of paying dowry rests with the young man.

The Roles of the Father and Son Have Changed: In the past, the father owned the animals to help his son marry a wife. But now young men are financially independent and, therefore, have more authority over whom they will marry. The son actually supports the father. The father does not have money to pay for the dowry (contrasted with the past when the father had the necessary animals). So the burden is on the son.

Yet we should note that the father gives his contribution at pre-wedding parties. Many times the father uses part of the dowry he receives in order to contribute generously toward the wedding expenses. Even the bride sometimes helps her groom pay for the dowry if she is working and loves the man very much.

Greed Makes Dowry Very Expensive: Greed leads to exorbitant dowry today. One dare not say in the presence of the bride's parents that they are greedy. But in fact, they are greedy many times.

People today talk about what they would like: cows, goats, large sums of money, a car or a house. But they often do not follow through on requiring these things. It is the money that is the greatest concern.

Traditionally, dowry was a token of love and appreciation to the parents of the bride. Dowry was meant to show how serious the young man was with his request to marry her. But today dowry is often called "fees". "You must give back my fees which I invested in the girl." People have so many children. Parents must pay their fees in school. In the end the parents are exhausted and therefore, demand "fees". Dowry has also become a form of business, helping the parents build a house or buy a car. Thus there is a change of emphasis today in what dowry means.

But this is wrong. If a son-in-law becomes part of the family and a need arises, the son-in-law will give. But to demand much money is not good. In some cases the parent insists on "fees" but the young man replies that he cannot be forced, that he will not give under pressure.

We need to educate the parents to show that the dowry problem is one reason for few weddings in the church today. Parents should allow a life long payment, even as it was traditionally. Scripture doesn't allow parents to require and demand. This amounts to selling their daughter.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES APPLIED TO DOWRY

Dowry is Sanctioned by Scripture: The fact that Scripture nowhere condemns payment of dowry but instead contains examples of God's people exchanging dowry for marriage, demonstrates that God's Word does not condemn dowry but implicitly supports its legitimacy.

Compare the examples of Isaac (Genesis 24:50-54), Jacob (Genesis 29:16-20) and David (I Samuel 18:17-27). Dowry seemed to be paid according to the man's ability. Abraham, a wealthy man, gave out of his wealth while Jacob, in his material poverty, gave his labour.

The Bible Values Different Cultures: Cultures reflect different ways of handling different situations. No one culture as a whole is superior to any other culture as a whole. Though dowry is not practiced in western culture today, dowry was practiced in biblical times. Dowry had the same meaning in the Bible times as in African traditional cultures, though the meaning of dowry is changing today. If dowry was acceptable by God in the Hebrew culture (in the Old Testament), we need not nor should not despise dowry today.

When the Gospel was first preached in Kenya and Christians were baptized, the Alliance of Missionary Societies in 1919 recommended that the church councils advise their converts not to demand dowry before marriage. Demanding of dowry before marriage was not favoured. However, they felt it was not practical to limit the amount of dowry required in marriages. They also felt that "the ultimate disappearance of the dowry be looked for as a result of Christian teaching rather than Government prohibition or regulations."

Today, more than seventy years since that decision, the payment of dowry before marriage remains entrenched in most African Christian Marriages. However, times are changing and many families no longer demand dowry from their prospective son-in-law.

Dowry is Optional For Christian Weddings, Not a Requirement: In the Bible there are only stories of dowry, but no teaching that dowry should be paid. Dowry is not really essential for a Christian marriage in Africa today. In fact, African cultures are changing and many families do not demand dowry for

their daughters to be married. Many times the bridegroom may give gifts to his bride's parents to show his appreciation but this is not dowry, technically speaking. The payment of dowry was traditionally an essential part of every legitimate marriage but with the passing of time and changing of customs, dowry should not be considered essential for every Christian marriage today. Dowry is optional with each family.

Greed Must Be Avoided: Care must be taken to avoid the love of money, to avoid the danger of greed. It is easy for a legitimate exchange of gifts to degenerate into greed for more money (Luke 12:15-21; Colossians 3:2, 5, 6; 1 John 2:15-17).

The Bible is not against dowry as such. However, when dowry becomes too expensive, then it is wrong. Greed often sets in. Dowry today sometimes involves the payment of tens of thousands of shillings, the building of a stone house or the purchase of a new car. This modern development is different from traditional African culture. Traditionally, the father of the bridegroom paid the parents of the bride. The father provided the dowry for the son. But today money and education have entered the culture and the son must pay.

Though the payment of dowry was traditional, everyone married, even the poorest. The men did not stay long without marrying, for they continued paying after marriage. If dowry is paid in the right way, it is good, for dowry brings the two families together. This preserved marriages for both families desired the marriage to succeed. However, we live in a changing society. Dowry has changed its meaning. It is now more commercial. Parents demand money before a daughter is given in marriage. Thus the meaning of dowry is changing.

Parents Should Value Christian Character More Than Material Things: Though dowry has been universally practiced throughout Africa, Christian parents need to evaluate the reasons why they demand dowry. Greater value should be placed on the quality of the young man, both his Christian character, life and vocation more than on the payment of dowry. Christian parents may decide not to request dowry of a young man whom they love, respect and trust, rather than create a great hardship for him. Dowry should be paid according to one's ability.

The Christian church should counsel and advise parents on the importance of their daughters marrying fine, Christian young men. Dowry should only be required according to the ability of the person to pay. Otherwise, dowry degenerates into a commercial transaction, something very different from the traditional concept of dowry.

Christian Parents Should Control the Negotiations for Dowry:

Christian parents have a great part to play when negotiating for the dowry. For them to leave the negotiations of dowry with some unsaved relative is foolish. Parents can choose the person to negotiate dowry. The person chosen can be counseled as to what the parents wish. The man chosen by the parents cannot go beyond the wishes of the parents.

When non-christian relatives join in the discussion, they often create problems. Christian parents and Christian relatives should not bring in a non-Christian relative for negotiating dowry.

The father has a major role to play. He calls the family together. He invites the family to the wedding. He sets the date. He can forbid beer at the wedding, if he desires. Therefore relatives should not be allowed to take the upper hand. Authority goes with age. Christian parents can also invite church elders to talk about dowry in order to prevent dowry from becoming a burden.

The Church Should Teach their Members: The church is responsible to educate the Christians in general and the parents in particular not to require excessive dowry. The church must also teach the people from the pulpit not to allow non-Christians to chair the dowry committee and go contrary to the wishes of the Christian parents. The Christian parents should have the primary voice. If the unsaved chairman of the committee to discuss the dowry makes certain recommendations, others often fear to contradict him.

Genesis 24 seems to provide a basic principle for us. Something is given to show appreciation to the guardians of Rachel, but nothing was demanded. Without being asked for a gift, the servant volunteered to give gifts. After agreement was reached, the girl was given the opportunity to decide whether to wait or to go immediately for marriage.

The problem today is that the young man's parents do not always appreciate the young woman's parents. Or her parents are greedy for school fees. The young man needs to give what he has, not what he does not have. Falling into debt before marriage is a very poor practice. The church has an important role to play in teaching Christians from the pulpit to have biblical priorities. Nothing should be done to over rule the wishes of the parents. Christian parents should request Christians to chair and lead the discussion.

Pastors Should Counsel and Advise Christian Parents: Before the time of discussing dowry, the parents need to be counseled by the pastors in their homes. Although negotiations for dowry include other members of the

family, Christian parents can set the standard. Christian families need to understand the importance of Christian weddings and the problems that high dowry can bring to young people wanting to marry.

Teaching from the pulpit and pastoral counseling in the homes of parents are both needed so that Christians will understand "Dowry is not selling." Counseling is also needed for the young men so they understand the purpose of dowry: "Dowry is for the purpose of talking and having mutual understanding and commitment."

Pastoral counseling has been neglected. Because Christian pastors fail to counsel, the parents simply follow traditional customs. Pastors have not offered solutions to the problems.

Having a Christian Wedding is Most Important: The church should teach the importance of having a Christian marriage above everything else. When Christian parents refuse to give consent to their daughter being married in church before a large payment of dowry is given, this frustrates the Christian couple, tempts them to sin and destroys the real purpose of dowry.

In many cases, however, high dowry is not the major problem preventing Christian weddings. It is lack of Christian commitment. Young people need to be taught how to choose and court the girl for marriage. The problem is that many young men keep three or four girl friends. Because the girl fears being dropped by him, she quickly decides to live with him. But as the saying goes, "the cheaper you come, the cheaper you go." There is a lack of commitment in such relationships. Young couples need to be taught the importance of placing Christ first in their lives and committing their marriage to the Lord through a Christian wedding.

Dowry does not need to be completed before marriage. A Christian wedding should be encouraged by the Christian parents before all the dowry is paid. Dowry payments may continue after the marriage ceremony takes place in church.

Young people intending to marry need to be counseled about taking to the parents. They should not fear. If a young couple desires to marry in church, parents will often agree, but this takes patience and courage on the part of the man wanting to marry.

Wrong Understanding of Dowry Should Be Corrected: We need to correct the understanding of young people concerning dowry. They fear and have a bad feeling towards dowry. This spoils everything. "Do you want to be

bought?" the young man says to his girl friend. "A good speech can persuade parents in the wedding." The young man should find a good spokesman. If the youth fear dowry because of the cost, they should understand that it is not cheap to keep a wife either.

But we should also teach young men not to give too little dowry which is an insult; nor too much so that he falls into debt. Loans are taken for the reception or the dowry. This is not good. "Cut the coat according to the size of the cloth."

As Christians we should accept others as they are. We ought not to set guidelines of how much to pay, for this may be too much for some and too little for others. We should ask according to the young man's ability to pay.

Parents should understand that it is not necessary to do exactly what others do. Most parents like uniformity. They like to do what other parents do. In traditional culture there was uniformity. They knew how many goats and cows to pay.

Christians have the ability to correct the abuse of dowry if they so desire. The experience was told of a young man and his party negotiating for the dowry. They gave all that they had but were told to go look in their pockets for more. They returned later and said, "We are Christians and did not lie. We gave you all we had." They consequently apologized and accepted what was given.

We should stress the relationship between the parents and the son-in-law in the process of negotiating for dowry and not stress the amount given in dowry.

If we can bring down the cost of weddings, we can also bring down the cost of dowry. If Christian weddings remain expensive, then dowry will remain expensive, for expenses of dowry are shared these days. The father asks 10,000/Ksh for dowry and from this he buys a bed for his daughter costing 4,000/Ksh. They use part of the dowry to save face in giving an attractive gift.

ⁱ The members of the TAG Research Team on Marriage and Family were: Rev. David Mbuvi, Pastor Joash Mutua, Rev. Joseph Kahiga, Rev. Joseph Mbunga, Pastor Joseph Musembi, Rev. Joseph Ndebe, Mrs. Joyce Muasa, Mrs. Joyce Ndemwa, Pastor Samson Obwaa, Rev. Samuel Wanjau, Mrs. Margaret Simbiri, Rev. Noah Thananga, Rev. Samuel Gituka, Pastor Stephen Sesi and Dr. Richard J. Gehman.