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# To Baptize or Not to Baptize? Adventists and Polygamous Converts

by Stefan Höschele

## Abstract

*The theological questions connected with the baptism of polygamous converts have been answered in divergent ways. This article gives an overview of perspectives that Seventh-day Adventists have taken on this issue and analyzes the factors that have led to several turns in the stance of the denomination toward this problem. The multiplicity of factors involved in the discourse on baptizing polygamists repeatedly eclipsed the need of appropriate theological reasoning. It is suggested, therefore, that a missiological hermeneutic, in which local cultural meanings are taken seriously, is crucial in such complex issues.*

## Introduction

Polygamy, a marriage model common in many societies both in Africa and on other continents, has elicited much debate both within and outside Christian communities.<sup>1</sup> Its most widespread mode, polygyny - the marriage of a man with more than one woman - in some cases constituted a formidable hindrance to the expansion of Christianity due to differing views on the acceptability of such marriages for church members. Until the present, the theological discussion on polygamy and polygamous converts continues to reveal grave disagreements.

This article gives an overview of Adventist views and reasoning regarding polygamy and thus provides a case study of the way in which a denomination as a whole has struggled with the issue. At the same time, the discourse on polygamy as a missionary problem and the question as to whether polygamous converts may be baptized is a test case for the complex manner in which missiological ethics needs to be discussed. In this context, the Adventist debate shows that most of the aspects to be taken into consideration raise more general questions about theological hermeneutics.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the many works on polygamy, see, e.g., the classic of Geoffrey Parrinder, *The Bible and Polygamy: A Study of Hebrew and Christian Teaching* (London: SPCK, 1950); four articles in *Polygyny and the Church in Africa*, special issue of *Africa Theological Journal*, no. 2 (1969); the defence of polygamy by David G. Maillu, *Our Kind of Polygamy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1988); and, for a recent discussion focusing on a specific Christian tradition, Timothy W. Jones, "The Missionaries' Position: Polygamy and Divorce in the Anglican Communion, 1888–1988." *Journal of Religious History* 35.3 (2011), 393–408.

## The Differing Positions Regarding Polygamy and Baptism

Christians have taken rather divergent positions regarding polygamy: that it is (1) intrinsically sinful, similar to adultery, and is therefore to be rejected in all circumstances; (2) an unacceptable inferior form of marriage; (3) a practice to be tolerated in some cases though not God's ideal; or (4) an acceptable alternative to monogamy.<sup>2</sup> Many followers of Christ view polygamy as such a great evil that it can only fall into the first category. Some, however, have taken the position that polygamy is actually an adequate type of marriage based on either an explicit biblical permission or on toleration of the practice in the scriptural record. Eugene Hillman made this case in 1975 with his book *Polygamy Reconsidered*.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have rejected his exegetical and anthropological arguments, and although they would not necessarily call polygamy an outright sin in every single instance given the cultural contexts in which it is generally practiced, they maintain the second position that this mode of marriage is still unacceptable for a Christian since it falls short of God's ideal. Blum's 1989 response to Hillman, *Forms of Marriage: Monogamy Reconsidered*, is a fine example of this position.<sup>4</sup>

### Polygamy and Seventh-day Adventists

Seventh-day Adventists encountered the issue of African polygamy in a somewhat unprepared manner. After their beginnings as an evangelical apocalyptic-oriented mid-19<sup>th</sup> century revival and a subsequent development into a Protestant denomination, the Adventist movement gained significant missionary impetus in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> Missionary success was especially visible in Africa, where denominational operations soon resembled the outreach and church life of other ecclesiastical bodies.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Adventists tried to remain true to their initially rigid ethics and biblicist hermeneutics, which, however, did not lead to automatic agreement on a course of action regarding the polygamy issue.

In one respect, the denomination's missionaries, theologians, and African church leaders were always united: they rejected the fourth concept

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<sup>2</sup> These four options are listed by Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1973), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> William C. Blum, *Forms of Marriage: Monogamy Reconsidered* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the development of Adventist mission thinking and the dynamics of this denomination's worldwide expansion, see Stefan Höschele, *From the End of the World to the Ends of the Earth: The Development of Seventh-Day Adventist Missiology* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Stefan Höschele, *Christian Remnant - African Folk Church: Seventh-Day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903-1980*, Studies in Christian Mission 34 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

mentioned above - that polygamy is an acceptable alternative to monogamy. In other words, they all agreed that polygamy is neither God's ideal nor part of it, that the creation of a first human couple implies monogamy as a standard for all humans, and that a Christian cannot marry more than one wife or husband. Given the strong Adventist theological emphases on creation, family, and sanctification,<sup>7</sup> this is hardly surprising. Consequently, no theologian belonging to the Adventist tradition has ever advocated that adding second wives or husbands is a tolerable option for those who have been baptized into the body of Christ. Adventist scholars and church leaders have thus stood in continuity with the denomination's 19<sup>th</sup> century prophet, Ellen G. White,<sup>8</sup> who clearly rejected the practice in several statements.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there have been different views among them as to how else polygamy should be regarded. All of the other positions (1: sin, to be rejected; 2: inferior, unacceptable; and 3: problematic reality, at times to be tolerated) have been found among the denomination's biblical scholars, ethicists, and missiologists.

Thus, while there has been unanimous agreement on the concept that choosing a polygamous lifestyle is no acceptable alternative to monogamous marriages for *all who are Christians already*, the history of the discourse in the denomination reveals considerable debate on the manner of *dealing with polygamous converts*. This discourse was fuelled by several controversial questions: (1) Who among them may be baptized if the polygamous union continues: no one, husband, one wife, and/or all wives? (2) Under which conditions may these persons be baptized: no divorce, divorce of added wives, or divorce of all wives except one? (3) What constitutes the basis for such actions: biblical commandments, biblical examples, theological principles, traditions, administrative "necessities," or missiological reasoning?

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<sup>7</sup> "Creation" and "Marriage and Family" are no. 6 and no. 23 of the denomination's 28 "Fundamental Beliefs," respectively; sanctification appears in several units such as "Law of God" (18), "Experience of Salvation" (10), "Growing in Christ" (11), "Stewardship" (21), and "Christian Behavior" (22). See the related chapters in SDA., *Seventh-Day Adventists Believe ...: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Until the present, Seventh-day Adventists continue to regard Ellen G. White's writings (1827–1915) as a prophetic voice; at the same time, a body of critical scholarship on Ellen White has developed since the 1960s. See, e.g., Ronald Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Roy E. Graham, *Ellen G. White: Co-Founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (New York: Lang, 1985); Alden Thompson, *Escape the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy - and Helped Me to Do It Too* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3 (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1864), 67, 100, 104, 126; cf. also Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1890), 81, 91, 145, 208, 338.

## **A History of the Adventist Positions on the Baptism of Polygamist Converts**

At a first glance, it may be surprising that Adventists reached conflicting conclusions on each of these questions given the very strong agreement on doctrinal matters in this denomination. However, I argue that such a variety of answers was actually unavoidable. Because of the diversity in biblical materials related to the issue, the polygamy case defied a biblicist approach if this approach was to be combined with conservative ethical convictions derived from 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism. What is more, both the Adventists' missionary drive and their common view of the Bible, which gives more prominence to the Old Testament than many other Christian traditions, potentially enhanced a more generous perspective, which led to a situation in which a unified view could not be reached as easily as in doctrinal matters.

### **Changing Positions until the 1940s**

The first two questions (whom to baptize, and under which circumstances) were the focus of the discussion until the 1940s. The Seventh-day Adventist discourse on polygamy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was closely linked to a rejection of Mormon practices in the United States, and when Western missionaries reached out to peoples of radically different cultures in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this heritage evidently played a significant role.<sup>10</sup>

The first Adventist statement on polygamy was produced in 1913.<sup>11</sup> A missionaries' meeting during a session of the General Conference, the executive assembly of the worldwide denomination, revealed that different local modes of handling polygamy existed. So divergent were the views at the Round Table meeting - ranging from a cautious permission for baptizing some polygamists to complete rejection of this approach - that it was the unanimous feeling that the General Conference should not design any definite ruling on the matter but simply formulate some advice to help missionaries in the field. Consequently, the final recommendation was not a consensus of the participants, which could not be found, but a semi-informal and cautious counsel. It stated that a polygamist should dissolve polygamous unions and support his former wives; the baptism of plural wives was advised against. Thus the 1913 meeting recommended a stricter course of action than all the

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<sup>10</sup> Clifton R. Maberly, "The Polygamous Marriage Variant: The Policy and Practice of a Church" (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1975), 5–9. This thesis provides a good overview of the discussions at the missionary meetings mentioned in the following paragraphs. However, at Maberly's time other archival items such as the letters mentioned in this article were not yet accessible to researchers.

<sup>11</sup> SDA. Informal Discussion on Dealing with Converts from Polygamous Families at Missionary Round Table, Takoma Park, June 1913 (Minutes, General Conference Archives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Silver Spring, MD [hereafter GCA], RG 21/Documents/1913).

later resolutions, but implicitly recognized the importance of local circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

The strength of the 1913 resolution was also its weakness. As a recommendation without binding force, it did not solve the matter for those who desired a uniform Adventist practice. The African and South Asian regions subsequently introduced “probationary” membership for polygamists while others, including the denomination’s “European Division,” to which part of Africa belonged, completely barred them from baptism.<sup>13</sup> Soon these different practices made administrators feel that the matter had to be debated again. Therefore, polygamy once more appeared on an agenda at a missions round table during the General Conference Session of 1926.

In this meeting, some denominational leaders advocated a firm stand against polygamy. William T. Bartlett, for instance, the superintendent of the East Africa Union Mission, considered it “the stronghold of heathenism” in his field, which he felt Adventists had to “fight ... to the bitter end”.<sup>14</sup> By way of contrast, Ernst Kotz, one of the most gifted missionaries that Adventism has brought forth and a later General Conference secretary,<sup>15</sup> admitted he had refused baptism to some polygamists who were “very earnestly seeking after the Lord” only because “we did not want to go against the organization of the denomination, and we thought there was an agreement.” Kotz felt that declining to baptize such persons had been one of his “saddest experiences” in Africa.<sup>16</sup> Yet different from 1913, the desire for a uniform practice prevailed this time,<sup>17</sup> which led to an official church policy that ruled out any baptism for

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<sup>12</sup> The texts of the 1913, 1926, 1930, and 1941 resolutions, but none of the Round Table minute texts, are also found in an appendix of an article by Russell Staples, “Evangelism among Resistant Peoples with Deeply Entrenched Polygamy,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 2.1, (2006), 4–28 (here 23–26).

<sup>13</sup> SDA. William H. Branson - B.E. Beddoe and Ernst Kotz, February 7, 1927 (Letter, GCA, African Division Correspondence); cf. Maberly, “The Polygamous Marriage Variant,” 40–44.

<sup>14</sup> SDA. Missions Round Table, June 6 (Minutes, GCA, RG 21/Documents/1926 Mission Round Table Discussions), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Stefan Höschele, “Ernst Kotz,” in *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, 2007, [http://www.dacb.org/stories/tanzania/kotz\\_ernst.html](http://www.dacb.org/stories/tanzania/kotz_ernst.html) (accessed May 10, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> SDA. Missions Round Table [1926], 3.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the parallel in the discussion among Moravians: Gustav Warneck, the leading Protestant missiologist in Germany, asked Moravians to refrain from baptizing polygamists in 1909 until other missions had reached the same persuasion; see Klaus Fiedler, *Conservative German Protestant Missionaries in Tanzania, 1900–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 62.



polygamous men but allowed for the baptism of wives in polygamous marriages.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that a one-for-all policy did not satisfy everyone is evidenced in the variety of responses to a 1928 survey of missionary opinions on whether converted polygamous Africans should keep their first wife while dismissing the others and whether multiple wives should be baptized.<sup>19</sup> Evidently the resolution was also still being debated, for only two years after the survey, at the General Conference Autumn Council in 1930, William H. Branson, the leader of the denomination's African region and later General Conference president, was the main promoter of an alternative solution. Drafted by a three-man committee, the new policy allowed that in areas "where tribal customs subject a cast-off wife to lifelong shame and disgrace, even to the point of becoming common property," polygamists of both sexes "upon recommendation of responsible field committees be admitted to baptism and the ordinances of the church" while being classified as "probationary members."<sup>20</sup> Essentially the same policy had been drafted in the early 1920s and followed until 1926 in the African Division.<sup>21</sup> The strength of the 1930 resolution was certainly its missiological hermeneutic; its weakness was the lack of support by those engaged in missionary service, except some leaders. Interestingly, the text did not refer to any biblical material either - presumably because this would have raised too many other questions.

This more liberal regulation was received in very divergent ways. In some regions of Africa and in India, probationary membership had already existed anyway. In Kenya the missionary workforce strongly opposed it, while in Tanzania the church leadership adopted the 1930 policy in 1939. Although the new rule was apparently never applied in actual cases in Tanzania, it soon paved the way for another revision of the policy. British missionaries in Kenya complained that a change of direction in the neighbouring country would certainly become known among Kenyan Adventists. They feared that thirty years "without making any concession to polygamists" could thus be invalidated and demanded that the Tanzanian side comply with their mode of handling the issue.<sup>22</sup> Because of this conflict, the more liberal mode was again rejected by the denomination's General Conference in 1941 with the argument

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<sup>18</sup> SDA. Polygamy and Marriage Relationships (Minutes, General Conference Committee of Seventh-day Adventists, June 13, 1926, GCA).

<sup>19</sup> SDA. Polygamy Subject File, n. d. (GCA, RG 25/Subject Files/Polygamy).

<sup>20</sup> SDA. "Polygamous Marriages in Heathen Lands" (Minutes, General Conference Committee of Seventh-day Adventists, November 3, 1930, GCA).

<sup>21</sup> SDA. Branson - Beddoe and Kotz, February 7, 1927.

<sup>22</sup> SDA. J.I. Robison - E.D. Dick, May 16, 1940 (Letter, GCA, RG 21/Miscellaneous Documents 1920s-1950s/Polygamy); SDA. "Polygamy: Statement to the General Conference Committee", [1940] (Statement by the Northern European Division, GCA, 21/Miscellaneous Documents 1920s-1950s/Polygamy).

that the difference between the 1926 and 1930 actions “created confusion, embarrassment, and perplexity”.<sup>23</sup> The 1926 policy was reaffirmed in principle and was made a directive for all Adventists through incorporation in the denomination’s General Conference *Working Policy*, where it is found until today.<sup>24</sup> With this approach to the intricate problem of polygamy, Adventists followed a trend in those churches that arose from classical missions and also those initiated by faith missions.<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy that neither missionaries nor indigenous Christians were involved in the 1941 discussion, and that in essence the decision was based on an administrative perspective on uniformity in a global denominational organization rather than on biblical, theological, or missiological reasoning.

Thus came to an end the debate of a whole missionary generation in which an initial response of cautious counsel, local flexibility and varying practices finally gave way to a uniform and binding rule. The content of the 1941 resolution represented a more lenient stand than the original 1913 counsel but as an official policy, implementation was less adaptable. This debate and its result may be understood as resulting from sociological dynamics in a church that spread geographically, grew numerically and yet sought to ensure unity by establishing universal regulations. At the same time, the Adventist debate exemplifies the friction that almost necessarily arises when aspects of traditional African cultures, traditions of Western Christianity, different interpretations of the Christian scriptures, and various “non-theological factors” such as administrative power and the tendency towards imposing uniformity collide.

### **The Debate since the 1970s**

Being settled by an authoritative committee action, the polygamy issue ceased to be a matter of serious discussion in the Seventh-day Adventist Church for several decades. Only in the late 1970s was the problem of converts with a polygamous background discussed again by Adventist academics and church administrators, and ever since it has revealed how scholars whose basic theological persuasions are identical, or at least closely resemble one another, can come to different conclusions on particular issues. While scriptural, theological, and missiological arguments continued to be produced for the various positions and solutions, the debate since the 1970s has shown in an increasingly unambiguous manner that the third question mentioned above - what constitutes the basis for decisions on dealing with polygamous converts - must be considered on a meta level as well. Already

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<sup>23</sup> SDA. “Proceedings of the General Conference,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 10, 1941, 235.

<sup>24</sup> SDA. *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists, 2005–2006* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), 122–123.

<sup>25</sup> Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions* (Oxford: Regnum, 1994), 258.

Maberly's 1975 thesis on the topic came to the conclusion that denominational resolutions in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had lacked a thorough biblical foundation and were prompted mainly by administrative concerns.<sup>26</sup>

A surprisingly tolerant position was taken in 1979 by John A. Kisaka, the first Tanzanian Adventist to earn a doctorate in the field of theology, who devoted part of his dissertation to the polygamy question.<sup>27</sup> Kisaka's reasoning constitutes a significant departure from both earlier Adventists' reasoning and the official denominational position, which is particularly significant as he is the first major African Adventist voice on polygamy. After conceding that God instituted monogamous marriage as an ideal according to the Bible and that it is set forth as a principle even in the writings of Ellen G. White, the major body of the argument tries to defend the cultural validity of polygamous marriages once they have been contracted and suggests the acceptance of polygamists into the church on the basis of the meanings attributed to such marriages in the respective cultures. Kisaka thus became the first Adventist theologian to emphasize the necessity of an anthropological-missiological reasoning in responding to the polygamy issue.

Shortly afterwards, the denomination's global leadership commissioned an extensive study on the topic. Its author, the leading Adventist missiologist Russell L. Staples, followed the line of Kisaka by advocating "cautiously admitting some polygamous families to membership."<sup>28</sup> Referring to incidences of polygamous patriarchs in the Old Testament and arguing with the biblical silence on barring polygamists from baptism as well as an anthropological perspective, Staples suggested a stance that combined the Adventist tradition of biblical theologizing and the missiological hermeneutic [which is] needed particularly when several cultures are involved in reasoning on ethical issues. Yet voices such as those of Kisaka and Staples, like a similar proposal from South Asia,<sup>29</sup> did not lead to a reversal of church policy,<sup>30</sup> partly due to strong opposition from West Africa.<sup>31</sup> What these voices

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<sup>26</sup> Maberly, "The Polygamous Marriage Variant," 91–92.

<sup>27</sup> John Aza Kisaka, "The Adventist Church's Position and Response to Socio-Cultural Issues in Africa" (D.Min. diss., Andrews University, 1979). Kisaka's career included work among the Maasai as an Adventist pioneer missionary, 1963–1964, and principal of the Ministerial Course at Ikizu, 1972–1973, and at Tanzania Adventist College and Seminary, 1979–1982.

<sup>28</sup> Staples, Russell L., "The Church and Polygamy in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Working Paper Produced at the Request of the General Conference," unpublished manuscript, 1981 [48 pp.]; a much shorter version of the findings is Russell L. Staples, "Must Polygamists Divorce?," *Spectrum* 13.1 (1982), 44–53.

<sup>29</sup> SDA. "Admission of Members of Polygamous Marriages into Church Membership" (Minutes, Southern Asian Division Administrative Committee, February 20, 1985, GCA, RG 25/Subject Files/Polygamy).

<sup>30</sup> SDA. "Plural Marriages (Polygamy) - Report" (Minutes, General Conference Committee of Seventh-day Adventists, October 13, 1987, GCA).

were able to do, however, was to initiate a renewed discussion, which continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2003 the denomination's Global Mission Issues Committee prepared another recommendation for an amended policy. It proposed to accommodate polygamists in the contexts of some cultures with "deeply entrenched" polygamy,<sup>32</sup> a recommendation yet to be discussed by committees with an executive function.

As in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was unity among Adventist theologians during this whole period regarding the conviction that God instituted monogamy as the model for marriage and that he generally requires believers to adhere to this ideal. Thus, it is not surprising that the *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology* and the more popular book *Seventh-Day Adventists Believe*, the two major General Conference sponsored doctrinal works, briefly refer to polygamy as being incompatible with the biblical witness.<sup>33</sup>

However, when it comes to the question of interpreting the way God deals with actual polygamists, interpretations have differed. *Flame of Yahweh*, a *tour de force* on sexual ethics in the Old Testament by Richard Davidson, a leading Adventist biblical scholar, includes a chapter on polygamy<sup>34</sup> that comes to the conclusion that the Old Testament data should not be construed to mean that God commanded, permitted, or condoned polygamy in any instance. Davidson even maintains that polygamy is expressly forbidden in texts such as Lev

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<sup>31</sup> Jacob J. Nortey, "Africa-Indian Ocean Division: Comments on the Church Policy on Admission of New Members in Societies Where Plural Marriage Is the Accepted Family Structure," [1986] (Unpublished report, GCA, 25/Subject Files/Polygamy).

<sup>32</sup> SDA. "Polygamy" [2003 statement by the Global Mission Issues Committee], in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission: Global Mission Issues Committee Papers*, vol. 2: 2002–2005, ed. Bruce Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2007), 175–176. The Global Mission Issues Committee serves the denominational leadership by making recommendations and includes several of the leading Adventist missiologists.

<sup>33</sup> Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 728; SDA. *Seventh-Day Adventists Believe*, 335. These reference works do not discuss, however, the question of how polygamous converts should be treated. Other Adventist standard works such as the *Seventh-Day Adventist Encyclopedia* (ed. by Don F. Neufeld; Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1966) and major Adventist books on ethics (e.g. Michael Pearson, *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas: Seventh-Day Adventism and Contemporary Ethics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990]; and Sakae Kubo, *Theology and Ethics of Sex* [Nashville, TN: Review and Herald, 1980]), do not mention the issue, presumably because they were written with a western audience in mind.

<sup>34</sup> Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 177–212.

18:18, albeit without an associated punishment.<sup>35</sup> In a larger study dealing specifically with plural marriages, Ronald A. G. du Preez<sup>36</sup> comes to the same conclusion. Both suggest that none of the texts that are generally used to support divine sanction or tolerance of polygamy actually describe support of the practice among the people of God. Rather, they should be interpreted in the light of the pattern visible in Genesis 1 and 2. Even though laws regulating polygamy exist, according to Davidson and du Preez they indicate as little theological backing for its practice by believers as laws regarding theft provide divine support for stealing.

By way of contrast, a dissertation by Jean-Jacques Bouit<sup>37</sup> and a biblical study by another leading Adventist biblical scholar, Roy Gane<sup>38</sup> evaluate the biblical data with a focus on how God *interacted with polygamists*, not only on how to *view polygamy*. Thus they merge a biblical-theological point of view with a pastoral-missiological perspective. Bouit concludes that no single biblical verse entirely rejects polygamous practice; Gane tries to establish biblical principles for making decisions regarding the baptism of polygamous converts. A major outcome of his study is that God “tolerates polygamy” in the Old Testament “but regulates it, mainly for the benefit of the women involved, in order to mitigate evil consequences.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, while polygamy is not God’s will, according to Gane at times he leaves people in the condition in which they are in order to avoid greater harm.

Naturally the two basic positions in interpreting the scriptural record lead to two different views on dealing with polygamous converts when reaching an actual missiological application. Du Preez comes to the conclusion that polygamists must not be baptized in any instance.<sup>40</sup> Even though he does not discuss ecclesiology, presumably a particular view of what the church is and what baptism entails play an important role in his reasoning. Bouit and Kisaka, on the other hand, consider the issue a dilemma, for the church and converts generally have to choose between two evils: tolerating plural marriage or forcing divorce upon a couple with consequences that in some instances are not acceptable from a Christian point of view. Thus, their advice was to proceed extremely carefully in separating existing polygamous marriages since this often leads to enormous upheaval - e.g., former wives being

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<sup>35</sup> Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 193–198.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald A. G. du Preez, *Polygamy in the Bible* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1993). This study is the published version of a D.Min. dissertation.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Jacques Bouit, “A Christian Consideration of Polygamy” (D.Min. dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1981).

<sup>38</sup> Roy Gane, “Some Biblical Principles Relevant to Evangelism Among Polygamous Peoples,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 2.1 (2006), 29–43.

<sup>39</sup> Gane, “Some Biblical Principles Relevant to Evangelism Among Polygamous Peoples,” 31.

<sup>40</sup> du Preez, *Polygamy in the Bible*, 316.

considered free-of-charge prostitutes in certain societies. For this very reason, it was Russell L. Staples' advice to identify specific people groups among whom divorce should not be suggested for polygamous families and where polygamists may be baptized under certain circumstances, even if they should not be given church offices.<sup>41</sup>

Although Adventist authors dealing with the polygamy question have not explicitly lifted the discussion to a theological hermeneutical level, some clearly do incorporate into their reasoning an interpretative brake that helps us to avoid reading issues and meanings into scriptural texts that do not belong there. What would be called for in the whole discussion on polygamous converts is the application of a well-constructed missiological hermeneutic, in which both the biblical record and cultural meanings are taken seriously.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the case of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with its worldwide administrative structure and strong theological unity illustrates the problem of transcultural ecclesiastical guidelines in a particularly forceful way; issues such as desired degrees of uniformity, power issues, and the significance ascribed to policy traditions were hardly addressed in the entire Adventist polygamy discussion even in its recent phase.

The 2003 Global Mission Issues Committee recommendation - the only instance in which women played a significant role in discussing the topic<sup>43</sup> - to allow for decentralized solutions to the question of baptizing polygamous converts also applies the logic that prompted the Anglican bishops to reverse their century-old position in 1988.<sup>44</sup> This same reasoning led to the Lutheran

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<sup>41</sup> Russell Staples, "Evangelism among Resistant Peoples with Deeply Entrenched Polygamy," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 2.1 (2006), 4–28; cf. (with a similar thrust) Josephat R. Siron, "Polygamy: An Enduring Problem," *Ministry*, April 1991, 23–24, and the case studies of Stefan Höschele, "Polygamy among the Tanzanian Maasai and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church: Reflections on a Missiological and Theological Problem," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 2.1 (2006), 44–56; and Kwame Annor-Boahen, "Cultural Practices Challenging the Adventist Church: A Case Study of Polygamy in Ghana" (D.Min. dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> A fine Adventist approach to such a missiological hermeneutic is found in Jon L. Dybdahl, "Doing Theology in Mission: Part 1," *Ministry*, November 2005, 19–22, and "Doing Theology in Mission: Part 2," *Ministry*, January 2006, 19–23. Dybdahl's thinking is indebted to evangelical classics of inculturation theory such as Charles Kraft's *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> Patricia Gustin, at that time Director of the denomination's Institute of World Mission, chaired the committee ex officio.

<sup>44</sup> Lambeth Conference. "Resolution 5 [on Polygamy]," 1888, <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1888/1888-5.cfm> (accessed November 10, 2012); "Resolution 26: Church and Polygamy," 1988, <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1988/1988-26.cfm> (Nov. 10, 2012); cf. Jones, "The Missionaries' Position."

practice among the Maasai in Tanzania, where polygamists can be baptized if they promise not to marry any more wives after baptism.<sup>45</sup> In a way, such a course of action would take the denomination back to the situation in 1913, when it was deemed inadvisable to establish a once-and-for-all law on a custom that has varying meanings, importance, and consequences in different contexts.

Altogether, the discussion suggests Christians need to strongly uphold both of the two scriptural ideals: the creation institution of monogamous marriage and God's unfailing mercy for people who live in situations that do not conform with his plan. Even if the question as to how these should be applied continues to be debated, Davidson points to these very principles when he argues, "The fact that there is no explicit legal sanction attached to the prohibition of polygamy in Lev 18:18 reveals a God of grace, expressing his disapproval of polygamous relationships but at the same time condescending to meet his people where they were."<sup>46</sup> The title of a 1986 editorial on polygamy in the major denominational magazine not only describes the complexity of this particular issue but also appropriately characterizes the whole of Christian existence as "Between the Ideal and the Actual." The final words of the reflections presented there<sup>47</sup> correctly portray humans as *simul iusti et peccatores* (at the same time righteous and a sinner) and put the issue into a framework of salvific intent:

Adventists are idealists; may we ever remain so! But the world isn't ideal: men and women have been broken by sin. Faced with the situation, we could opt for one of two extremes - make the church the exclusive province of those who measure up to the ideal, or capitulate to the norms of the world. But the Master calls us to a different course. It is more difficult than either of these, because it lacks the simplistic approach of "either-or" and is fraught with dangers. He challenges us to uphold the ideal but also to minister to people in their brokenness. If we would do His work, through compassion, courage, and conviction we must act to draw all people in all circumstances into His kingdom.

### Conclusion

When dealing with an issue as multi-faceted as polygamy, it would be surprising if a religious community found a solution that satisfies all of its leaders, members, mission practitioners, and theologians. Therefore, an end to the Adventist debate and the contradicting perspectives of its protagonists is

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<sup>45</sup> Leonard A. Mtaita, *The Wandering Shepherds and the Good Shepherd: Contextualization as the Way of Doing Mission with the Maasai in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania - Pare Diocese* (Erlangen, Germany: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 1998), 211–231.

<sup>46</sup> Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 212.

<sup>47</sup> William J. Johnsson, "Between the Ideal and the Actual," *Adventist Review*, May 29, 1986, 4–5.

not in sight. After all, women's voices and some alternative positions have not been given due attention at the level of authority where policies are made. This especially includes the position that an answer to the question, "Can Christians who were already in pre-existing polygamous marriages before their conversion may be accepted for baptismal candidates?" is possible only with specific societies in view. In spite of decades of discussion, it is understandable that Adventists were not able to provide a global solution to the problem. Probably only a certain variety of contextual responses can translate the gospel into societies where polygamy exists. The few studies on the topic done by Adventist Africans so far<sup>48</sup> point in this direction as well.

Beyond the polygamy debate as such, this case study of a denominational discourse also demonstrates the complexity of ethical issues in the context of Christian mission. As local meanings and universal claims meet, at times the salvific purpose of the mission enterprise can be pushed to the background. Cherished but narrow interpretations of biblical texts, traditions of doing theology, inherited ethical conventions, peculiar ecclesiological assumptions translating into missiologically disputable baptismal practices, administrative pressures toward uniformity, and even conflicting missionary approaches can all create situations in which appropriate theological reasoning is eclipsed. What is needed for such cases is theologizing informed by a thoroughly missiological hermeneutic.

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<sup>48</sup> Kisaka, "The Adventist Church's Position and Response to Socio-Cultural Issues in Africa," and Annor-Boahen, "Cultural Practices Challenging the Adventist Church."



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