

The Re-Definition of Marriage: A View From Africa

In Uganda and Kenya, where polygamy is common, Christians are defending the Bible while we disdain it.

Two weeks ago when I was speaking in a women's conference in Kampala, Uganda, I asked the women to raise their hands if they grew up in a polygamous home. A majority of the hands went up. Then I asked how many wives lived in their father's home.

"How many had two wives living in the house?" I asked. A majority of the hands went up.

"Puzzling, isn't it? More and more Africans are looking to the Bible to define marriage as *one man and one woman*. Meanwhile some American politicians and thin-skinned religious leaders want to redefine marriage as *two men or two women*."

"How about three?" Still a majority of hands stayed in the air. "How about four? Five? Six? Seven?" A few hands waved.

"How about eight?" I asked. Two women near the back of the auditorium lifted their hands reluctantly.

In that group of 500 women, two lived in a family with one father and eight wives. As I addressed the sensitive issue from 1 Samuel, describing the pain Hannah experienced living with her husband's second wife, Peninnah, these Ugandan women were comforted by the fact that God understands the oppression and abuse caused by polygamy. And they were encouraged to hear marriage clearly defined as a covenant relationship between one man and one woman, as outlined in the first chapters of

Genesis.

But it was not until I arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, a few days later that I discovered what an intense battle is raging in Africa over the definition of marriage. Kenyans today are engaged in a heated debate over polygamy. One of several bills proposed in September would keep polygamy legal, but would require a first wife to grant written permission to her husband to marry additional wives.

(Should I ask for a show of hands of how many American brides would sign such a consent form?)

Kenya's Muslims, who believe a man has a right to take as many as four wives, have vehemently opposed this change in the law. Yet Christian leaders in the country have fought for years to end the pain caused by polygamy. One of them is Judy Mbugua, the continental coordinator of the Pan African Christian Women Alliance (PACWA), which is tackling other tough issues including female genital mutilation, domestic violence, "wife inheritance" (which requires a relative to marry a woman if her husband dies) and the AIDS epidemic (which touches millions of African women when unfaithful husbands spread the disease to them, sometimes through rape).

Since Mbugua started PACWA in 1987, she has stood with African women across the continent to strengthen belief in biblical marriage. She has released a document clearly stating that African Christian women believe polygamy is wrong—not because it differs from Western traditions but because "God's design for marriage is monogamy."

I found it ironic that while this war of words rages in Kenya (the birthplace of President Obama's father), we are engaged in a similar battle over the definition of marriage. Only in the United States, we are not arguing about how many wives a man can collect but about whether a man can marry another man.

I don't have to ask Mbugua or other African church leaders how

they view same-sex marriage. Homosexuality is strongly discouraged in Africa (despite attempts by international organizations to encourage it) and African bishops have rebuked Episcopalians in the United States and Anglicans in England for suggesting that God endorses gay unions.

Nigerian Anglican leader Oluranti Odubogun was not trying to win a popularity contest when he went on record by saying, "Homosexual behaviour is deviant, unbiblical, un-Christian and unnatural." But he said what most African Christians believe. In a similar rejection of pro-gay theology, Nigerian Anglican Archbishop Peter Akinola said in 2004 that Western churches are peddling a "new religion," and he vowed to send his ministerial candidates elsewhere to be trained.

Puzzling, isn't it? More and more Africans are looking to the Bible to define marriage as *one man and one woman* at a time when Muslims and some tribal activists are defending polygamy. Meanwhile some American politicians and thin-skinned religious leaders want to redefine marriage as *two men or two women*—and a growing number of Americans agree with this agenda.

One culture is moving forward and the other is moving backward, depending on how you define progress. In Africa, where indigenous Christianity is growing, the church is looking to the Bible to transform society. Here in our country, the Bible and its values are mocked in the public square while many Christians avoid the marriage debate so they won't offend anyone.

There is something terribly wrong with this picture.

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