

Subpoenaing Luther on Questions of Polygyny: Assembling Submissions towards Delimiting Proxy Rejoinder via Biblical Theology Curriculum in Africa

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Abstract

The study discussed debatable questions of Martin Luther's support to polygyny, which are considered perennial enough to warrant a rejoinder of curricular relevance to Biblical Christianity and theology from a contemporary African perspective. Accordingly, the study proposed that establishing an effective understanding of the debatable points against polygyny is necessary to developing Biblical theology curricular tools for deliberating on Luther's stand in support of polygyny. The study pursued two purposes. Purpose 1: to consider the historical grounds for a contemporaneous subpoena to Luther on perennial questions of polygyny. These are the grounds upon which a proxy rejoinder can be delimited to facilitate formal learning exercises, via the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa. Purpose 2: to address the contemporaneous submissions of the church in Africa against polygyny in support of the historical grounds for subpoenaing Luther on perennial questions of polygyny, upon which a proxy rejoinder can be delimited for treatment via the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa. The study was facilitated by the qualitative research methodology, via which primary historical documents were examined primarily using the documentary analytical method. A key conclusion of the study is that, learners and teachers, as participants in the Biblical theology course, are both responsible for the success of the curriculum. When controversial issues (such as polygyny in Christianity) arise in the teaching-learning process in a Biblical theology class, all kinds of considerations are usually engaged for and/or against it. Therefore, course participants need to be equipped with the skills of discussing these considerations, to guard the debate from getting derailed. A fundamental recommendation from the study is that there is a need to reformulate the curriculum for Biblical theology in African theological schools, with Biblical marriages (monogamy and polygyny) as one of those controversial issues to be addressed by the curriculum.

Keywords: Subpoena, Polygamy, Polygyny, Bigamy, Monogamy, Biblical Theology, Curriculum.

Introduction

This study focuses on discussing questions on Martin Luther's support to polygyny, which were not raised in the court (as it were) for him to answer in any of his trials, but which are perennial enough to warrant a rejoinder of curricular relevance to Biblical Christianity and theology from a contemporary African perspective. This simply means the trials of Luther are not over, as it were, sequel to which he needs to be re-issued with a subpoena of contemporary consequence.

Just as Martin Luther struggled with the question of polygyny, the church in Africa today is also struggling with how to respond to that question. On the one hand, it is not difficult to grasp why Luther struggled with the question, because he had to reconcile the tension between his monogamy-only European culture and the abundance of Scriptural evidences in support of polygyny. On the other hand, one may wonder why some churches in Africa, (many of whom are products of the protestant reformation propelled by Luther) where polygyny is culturally accepted, are so against it to the extent of eisegizing (importing meanings into) Scriptures other than what the Scriptures themselves reveal. A way of analyzing the question of polygyny in African Christianity is to consider it from the historical position of Martin Luther, with those qualified to make advocacy that is as faithfully as possible to Luther's propositions, standing as his proxies.

Statement of the Problem

This study seeks to address the question of polygyny in the African church from Luther's point of prominence in Christian history, in view of the fact that many contemporary African churches simply ignore this history in dealing with the question. It is generally-known that the ideas that brought about the practice of monogamy-only as the acceptable form of marriage came to Africa consequent upon the arrival of colonizers or Western missionaries, many of whom subscribed their articles of faith and practice to the reformation teachings on Luther. It is also known that these missionaries communicated many "Scriptural" teachings, for example on marriage, with either deliberately-imposed or oblivious bias to their Western cultural constructs. There is no shortage of scholars within and outside Africa who consider polygyny as one of the areas to which this bias is applied. Due to this bias, polygyny is condemned (just as many other African Scripturally-acceptable cultural practices have also been misjudged), whereas Western culture on monogamy-only was systematically inserted to Africa, and defended with Scriptures, in the name of civilization or evangelization. Many regulatory canons, policy documents, and even works of scholarship in traditional theological seminaries within a sizeable part of church denominational bodies, for example, in Africa today, simply re-echo this western bias on the basis of which polygynists in the church are mistreated, denied rights and privileges, and generally assigned what appears to be second-class membership statuses! There is a need to provide an alternative view to the question of polygyny in Christian history, which is a research gap that this study desires to bridge, by locating itself where Luther's participation in addressing the question could be researched. A way of differentiating between Western cultural redefinition of marriage as monogamy-only and African pre-westernization understanding of marriage as both monogamy and polygyny, can be charted by reverting back to Christian history, particularly major players in the history, such as Luther. Thus, in reverting to Luther's part of the history, this study seeks to delimit boundaries for addressing contemporaneous submissions against polygyny from the 21st century church in Africa.

Objectives of the Study

The study is designed with a two-point purpose concerned with subpoenaing Luther on questions of polygyny. Firstly, the study determines to consider the historical grounds for a contemporaneous subpoena to Luther on perennial questions of polygyny. These are the grounds upon which a proxy rejoinder can be delimited for further study in a formal learning exercise, via the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa. Secondly, the study addresses the contemporaneous submissions of the church in Africa against polygyny in support of the historical grounds for subpoenaing Luther on perennial questions of polygyny, upon which a proxy rejoinder can be delimited for treatment via the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa.

Contemporizing Subpoena to Luther on Questions of Polygyny

For proper tackling of the questions related to Martin Luther's support to polygyny, an appropriate action to take is to extend the sitting of the court which originally tried Luther, by holding at least one more session in the 21st century world, preferably with Africa being the venue. Africa would be the right place to hold this special court session because polygyny is more present in every part of the continent both within and outside the church, than in other continents; in fact, the West and Central Africa are known as the "polygamy belt" (Kramer, 2020:1). Meanwhile, even if it were possible to extend the sitting of the original court which determined several weighty cases against Luther in 1521, to the present, there would be issues to factor into that possibility. Firstly, it would be impossible to extend the life of the original judges of the court, since God no more generally grants humans life that is equivalent to a century based on current life expectancy statistics which for Africa was 61-64 years in 2022 (Kamer, 2023:1), only a few are allowed very limited time in a second century. However, this challenge could be addressed by appointing new judges to the court who are also biased, following the example of the original judges, against the position of Luther. As it is today, there is no shortage of all kinds of Christians, even African Christians where polygyny has been part of the culture, (Catholics and Protestants, Clergy and Laity, educated and unschooled, Africans and non-Africans, Men and Women, Young and Old, Active and Passive Christians, Rich and Poor) who would be quite willing, either as other-appointed or self-appointed judges, to condemn Luther's position on polygyny, even without hearing from him! Secondly, Luther himself would not be around to directly respond to the questions that would be raised. However, in line with the legal traditions of modern times, it is possible to put an acceptable defense for Luther by proxy. In this case, the writings of (or credible documents on) Luther can be accepted in evidence in the court. In effect, this means Luther can still be issued with a subpoena via his proxy, which is a summons with legal authority, to come and make a response to questions on polygyny directed to him.

Résumé of Jury and Proxy. Knowing the composition of the court from which a subpoena is issued is of utmost importance to charting a robust defense of Luther in his support for polygyny. With this knowledge, it should be reasonably possible to predict how the final verdict could be. Accordingly, the courts that deliberated on Luther's cases were originally

made up of judges whose sympathies lied with the established Roman Catholic Church system. However, and as already noted, those who sit in jurying the case against Luther concerning his support for polygyny have complicated Résumés.

These are the jurists: Catholics and Protestants, Clergy and Laity, educated and unschooled, Africans and non-Africans, Men and Women, Young and Old, Active and Passive Christians, Rich and Poor. The common trait of these jurists is that they are united in their challenge of polygyny, especially in view of it being supported by a towering figure like Luther.

It is also important for those who stand proxy for Martin Luther to have an effective Résumé. On the minimum, they should have a knowledge of the history of Martin Luther and his context, as well as some of Luther's contemporaries in the reformation movement: Ulrich Zwingli, 1484–1531; Hugh Latimer, 1487–1555; Martin Bucer, 1491–1551; William Tyndale, 1494–1536; Philip Melancthon, 1497–1560; John Rogers, 1500–1555; Heinrich Bullinger, 1504–1575; John Calvin, 1509–1564 (Lawson, 2022:1). Furthermore, they should have a good grounding in Biblical hermeneutics, Biblical theology, and systematic theology. Having a working background of practical theology and the polity of various contemporary churches is also an added advantage. At a psychological level, they should be courageous people because, like Luther, they are going to face an uphill task, much more like what prophet Jeremiah was up against. So each proxy for Luther must personalize this message: Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD. (Holy Bible: Jeremiah 1:17-19, NIV).

Significance of the Study. On a general level, this study is beneficially to Christian monogamists, polygamists, single-ladies, and Christians who practice every-day theology in their daily experiences. But specifically, the study is presented as a scholarly document for the benefit of three categories of major stakeholders listed below.

Firstly: Theological Educators

The term “theological educators” is used here to refer to theological seminaries, Bible and clergy training schools, faculties of theology and/or department of religious studies in universities, teachers of the aforesaid education agencies, and participants in curriculum theorizing, designing, construction, and development for theological education. At a general level, there is too much emphasis in favor of monogamy in the Christian home and marriage curriculum of theological seminaries in Africa, although both monogamy and polygyny are culturally and biblically defensible in Africa. However, many curriculum designers and teachers as curriculum implementers, already have a preconceived idea, encapsulated in Biblical terminology, that polygyny is unbiblical; hence, the one-sided teaching approach on marriage-related teaching. This study will call the attention of

theological seminaries, universities concerned, and pastoral training institutions in Africa, to consider revising their curricula and pedagogical strategies in a manner that allows equally or impartially presenting and emphasizing the polygynous side of marriage in curriculum delivery processes, thereby giving a more equilibrated outlook to the learner.

Secondly: Pastoral Ministry Participants

There are three categories of pastoral ministry participants targeted by this study. Firstly, there are those already working as pastors who voluntarily or forcefully resigned from formal employments in churches because, along the way, they became polygamists while serving as employees of churches that disagree with polygyny. There are also some in this category who voluntarily resigned from formal pastoral services in the churches concerned because they intended to take an additional woman as a wife. Secondly, there are evidences from some churches, particularly in the African Initiated Church tradition (also known as African Independent Churches), whose previous and/or current official policies or unwritten practices (here and there), allow polygynists to be pastors. In any case, it has never been a secret that "some of the African Independent Churches, accommodate polygamists and allow them full and active participation in the life of the church" (Baloyi, 2013:2). Thirdly, there are Christians who have been empowered with the spiritual gift of pastoring, but who see the door of formal pastoral services as closed to them. In any case, they would not be accepted to pastoral training schools for them to earn the formal qualifications required for employment in those church denominations where polygynists are not recognized in pastoral ministries. This study will motivate the emergence and/or consolidation of an inclusive perspective for enriching the pastoral calling with all kinds of gifts, talents, skills, and experiences from people, whether monogamists or polygamists, who have been empowered by the Holy Spirit for various works of ministry. Irrespective of their marital status (whether subscribed to monogamy or polygamy), this study will benefit men and women called and empowered by the Holy Spirit for pastoral and pulpit ministries, with support to become more solidified in their call regardless of the religious cages built by church systems and policies that relegate people to the background because of their marital statuses.

Thirdly: Church Policy-Makers

Even in church denominations where polygyny is not recognized, they have local assemblies that were started or planted with only polygynists (or an overwhelming majority being polygynists) as members and leaders. Yet, after the churches have grown in size the polygynists are not just relegated to the background, but are roundly condemned with terminologies worthy of being directed only at unbelievers in Christ. If this is not hypocrisy from the church, what else is? Another form of hypocrisy, which is more prevalent in Western societies, is to grant official recognition to same-sex marriages while denying recognition to polygyny. This study will encourage the church to develop policies aimed at giving all Christians (monogamists and those linked to polygyny) a real sense of belonging.

Scope of the Study

This study is subject to a four-point delimitation. Further details are given below. First, the focus of this study is not on monogamy, although it will be mentioned severally in the process in order to better communicate or clarify points. The overriding concentration of this study is on polygyny. However, the validity of both monogamy and polygamy in the Biblical canon is acknowledged by this study, and neither is condemned.

Second, the study attaches itself almost exclusively to the ideas of Martin Luther, the legendary protestant reformer. Consequently, the study was not preoccupied with other reformers of the time of Luther or other periods in the history of Christianity.

Third, this study is not concerned with the interconnections of polygamy with polyandry or polygynandry (Zeitzen, 2008:11-12). In cultures where it is possible for a woman to be married to be more than one husband, the marriage is called *polyandry*; in this case, a woman can be either married to a group of the same brothers (which is fraternal polyandry) or unrelated males (which is non-fraternal polyandry). Also, there are a number of researches that consider a woman who remarries after the demise of her husband or after divorce as being involved in consecutive polyandry, the study is also not concerned with this. *Polygynandry* comes from a combination of “polygyny” and “polyandry” to mean group marriage in which several men and women consider themselves married to all other members of the group, which also gives them sexual access to one another.

Fourth, this study does not intend, primarily, to give answers to questions of polygyny surrounding Luther or other questionnaires on polygyny. This also means there is no intend by the study to actively participate in the debate as to the acceptance or rejection of polygyny in African Christianity. Accordingly, the study principally focuses on setting parameters for the debate for participants supporting it using perspectives from Luther; specifically, the study engages the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa towards delimiting proxy rejoinder for such a debate. However, while this study is not designed to debate issues of polygamy, there is an ongoing work by the researcher aimed at participating in the debate via a book, proposed as “The Trials of Polygamy in Christianity: A Logical Cross-Examination towards Consolidating Biblical Theology from an Africa Curricular Perspective”, and a monograph, proposed as “Cross-Examining Questions of Polygyny in the Curriculum of Christian History: from Jerusalem to Africa via Chalcedon”, to be published at a future date.

Limitations of the Study

There is an abundance of well-publicized scholarly studies either against or in support of polygyny in Christianity from various Christian denominational, modern Christian missionary movement, western, Islamic, Biblical, and African perspectives. What is generally lacking is a study on polygyny in history of Christianity, especially with due reference to the patristic period, protestant reformation period, and other critical periods of Christian history. This study is designed to be a valuable contribution towards bridging gaps of absence of relevant literature related to these periods. Accordingly, Luther is

engaged in the study, with an aim of providing an angle of history of Christianity on polygyny, thereby providing what is lacking in evaluating the practice on the platform of Biblical Christianity from an African perspective.

Proposition of the Study

This study proposes that establishing an effective understanding of the debatable points against polygyny is necessary to developing Biblical theology curricular tools for deliberating on Luther's stand in support of polygyny. Accordingly, it is also encapsulated in this proposition that many of the points against polygyny have been in the debate largely in the making of Christian history, particularly within the European cultural context, which necessitates reviewing the points towards addressing contemporary questions of polygyny from an African Biblical Christianity perspective.

Methodology of the Study

The study is facilitated by the qualitative research methodology, as narrowed down to examination of primary documents. Firstly, primary historical sources (such as original documents, eye-witness accounts as reported in literature), were engaged to generate data. Secondly, these sources were examined chiefly via the documentary analytical method, but (where necessary) supported by "Historical Theology as a Critical Tool". This method of examination was designed to help interrogate questions and ideas on polygyny that emerged or were discussed under definite historical circumstances, in this case the time of Luther and its lessons for contemporary times in Africa. Thirdly, an allowance is made within the qualitative research methodology for the textbook component of documentary research to be incorporated in the study. In view of their capacity to present well-established data, project prescribed information, project accepted standards and beliefs, while also serving as gatekeepers of knowledge, (McCulloch, 2004:67). Accordingly, data in line with the textbook component was generated from one of the major resources engaged by the researcher in facilitating the Master of Arts course "BST 612 Biblical Theology" at ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro (Nigeria), with the name "Biblical Theology Framework for Hermeneutical Practice." The title of this resource was retained in this research, while gleanings to develop the framework in this study were made from this and other resources.

While this study uses the qualitative approach, it also largely distances itself from providing categorical responses to debatable items encapsulated in the polygyny question. Distancing is necessary for the purpose of allowing the use of both structured and unstructured data-gathering tools, (triangulated with primary documents on polygyny from history of Christianity in times such as Luther's) in propelling the debate forward by all sides and participants. In this way, any potential bias and weaknesses in this current study shall be neutralized, while areas of strength become more consolidated, as the debate progresses.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theoretical framework for this is basically “Historical Theology as a Critical Tool” for understanding history of Christianity. With this framework, it is possible to cross-examine questions of polygyny in history of Christianity at the time of Martin Luther, with theological tools that have also developed within the formulation of that history.

While Christian theology generally concerns itself with God’s actions in every historical period, it is also characterized by its particularity via historical theology as an experience of God’s actions in particular cultural contexts, and how that experience is framed by the ideas and values of Christians that acted within a particular context. It can be noted that while Christianity developed, it sometimes (consciously or unconsciously) assimilated ideas and values from its cultural milieu (although regarded today as Christian ideas, but may turn out to be actually introduced or “smuggled” in from non-Christian, non-Biblical, or other contexts), which are not necessarily supported by the its prescriptive documents (Old Testament, New Testament, etc.), or implicated in its foundational resources. An example is the rejection of polygyny in the African version of Christianity, even those it is accepted in the prescriptive documents, particularly the Old Testament. Additional examples are given below.

Firstly, in most Western countries with principally Christian populations, the laws are secularized to the extent that polygynous marriages are not legalized. In those Western countries, polygamy/polygyny is considered as wrong legally, religiously, morally, and socially; the basis for such rejection is basically cultural. That people can be practicing polygynists and also, at the same time, be practicing Christians is generally considered as an impossibility by the Western church. Accordingly, many African countries transfer laws from Western countries (with no significant modifications) and impose on their African situations, from which even the church in Africa absorbs without serious review of Christian history or historical theology as it interconnects with Biblical theology. Secondly, in teaching the history of Christianity in Africa, the curriculum and pedagogy in many theological schools leaves out (either deliberately or unconsciously) the positions of polygyny of prominent personalities (like Martin Luther during the Protestant reformation) who, along with other theologians in his contemporary context, either accepted polygyny or were not opposed to it. Thirdly, some of those who reject polygyny sometimes do so in diversion to the basic principles of hermeneutical practice in Biblical theology, since there are no specific prohibitions against polygamy in the New Testament, which is a canon foundational to history of Christianity. Fourthly, a reason why some Christian churches in Africa condemn polygamy (although some may disagree with this reason despite overwhelming evidence on that), is connected to the over two centuries of colonial history, and Western missionary involvement in colonial history, in Africa. No doubt, both European colonizers and Western missionaries banned polygyny as unreligious and uncivilized in order to make rejection of it as one of the main issues with which to impose their lifestyle upon their new colonial subjects, thereby facilitating conversion to Christianity.

Sequel to notations above, engaging “Historical Theology as a Critical Tool” as a framework for this study is targeted at delimiting the cross-examination process of questions and ideas on polygyny that came into being and mistakenly addressed under definite historical circumstances. This delimiting mechanism would also facilitate further studies on how the mistakes of the past on polygyny are being massively repeated in the present, and how (since theological development is reversible) the mistakes may be corrected in contemporary times based on lessons derived from Christian history. By such engagement, the contemporary church in Africa would be assisted by this research to make an informed debate and/or consideration of the questions of polygyny, using the times of Luther as a case study, without repeating the mistakes already addressed in history of Christianity.

Clarification of Key Terms

This study defines five operational terms towards providing a better working guide to comprehending the discussion. These are: Subpoena, Polygamy, Polygyny, Bigamy, Monogamy, Biblical Theology, and Curriculum.

Subpoena. This engages several perspectives of the term “subpoena” in one of the most authoritative legal dictionaries, Black’s Law Dictionary (Garner, 2009:1563). Accordingly, a subpoena is “a writ or order commanding a person to appear before a court or other tribunal, subject to a penalty for failing to comply.” For Luther, this subpoena can hardly be considered as a “friendly subpoena”; by description, a friendly subpoena is “a subpoena issued to a person or entity that is willing to testify or produce documents, but only if legally required to do so. The subpoena may protect the information provider from retaliation from others because the provider is required to comply.” In many cases, what obtains is that any attempt to discuss polygyny is met with stiff resistance, condemnation, demonization, sanctions on those who make the attempt, and various kinds of negative consequences. Those who study or discuss polygyny in Christianity constantly need to respond to one subpoena or the other, hence this operational definition.

Polygamy. It is considered by the researcher that Zeitzen’s definition of polygamy is applicable to this study. Simply,

Polygamy is the practice whereby a person is married to more than one spouse at the same time, as opposed to monogamy, where a person has only one spouse at a time. In principle, there are three forms of polygamy: polygyny, in which one man is married to several wives; polyandry, where one woman is married to several husbands; and group marriage, in which several husbands are married to several wives, i.e. some combination of polygyny and polyandry. This broad definition is based on the etymology of the word polygamy, which contains *polys* (= many) and *gamos* (= marriage). (Zeitzen 2008:3).

While this study generally located itself in the area of polygamy, it specifically contracted itself to polygyny. This contraction also meant that the study was not concerned with those researches which consider a man who remarries after the demise of his wife or after divorce as being involved in consecutive polygamy. On this note, polygyny is defined below.

Polygyny. Zeitzen gives this definition: “Polygyny is a form of plural marriage in which a man is permitted more than one wife. Where co-wives are customarily sisters this is called

sororal polygyny. The other main form is *non-sororal polygyny*, where co-wives are not related" (Zeitzen 2008:9). The study adapts this definition. However, it shall not apply if there are instances where the Bible clearly considers sororal polygyny as incest.

Bigamy. The difference (if any) between polygyny and bigamy is not much. Zeitzen defines bigamy this way:

Bigamy refers to someone who has entered into any number of 'secondary' marriages in addition to one legally recognized marriage. Many countries have specific statutes outlawing bigamy, such that a man with three wives, for example, would be charged with two counts of bigamy, for two 'secondary' marriages after the first legally recognized one. Before the twentieth century, Western rulers and the elite were sometimes 'married to the left hand', if their informal unions were recognized as *de facto* (rather than legal) marriages. Today, this is no longer acceptable for legal, social or moral reasons in the West (Zeitzen 2008:17).

Based on above, it can be seen with relative ease that bigamy is simply a Western construct and a term for polygyny when it is outlawed even by African countries who import this Western construct to their legal systems, although polygyny is undeniably African. Consequently, the term "bigamy" shall not be used in this study on the basis of this Western construct, it shall be used on the basis of "polygyny" as generally understood in most African cultural contexts; this means the word "bigamy" shall be consumed in this study by the term "polygyny", thereby making "bigamy" to be just another name for "polygyny".

Monogamy. This term can simply be considered as the opposite of polygamy. But, the term "monogamy", as extracted from Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus in the Encyclopædia Britannica is found more suitable for this study. It is defined thus: "**1** *archaic*: the practice of marrying only once during a lifetime **2**: the state or custom of being married to one person at a time **3**: the condition or practice of having a single mate during a period of time" (Webster, 2015: Electronic Dictionary Display).

Going by the first component of the definition, people who marry after the decease of a previous wife cannot exclude themselves from the term being applied to them. Those who support polygyny should also hold to this definition in responding to a monogamy-only idea of marriage: if polygyny is unbiblical, are there sufficient Biblical evidences permitting men to remarry after their spouses passed away? This is a question for another research. Meanwhile, the second component of the definition shall apply to this study, while not missing the implications of the first and third components.

Biblical Theology. The term "Biblical Theology" as used in this study, is a direct extraction from a current Biblical Theology Class Memorandum in Nigeria-based theological seminary. It is defined thus:

Biblical Theology is the delimitation within which Biblical hermeneutical foundations are established. Biblical Theology will challenge your assumptions, background, biases, and previously held beliefs which may not be Biblical, but which you have possibly held for a long time thinking they were Biblical. Biblical Theology may confirm some positions which you have held for a long time as being Biblical. If so, stay focused and don't be distracted by

the overwhelming pressure from those who seek to systematize theology without understanding theology, or those who feel threatened by the overwhelming pressure Biblical Theology puts on their previously held positions (Dogara, 2023:2).

Curriculum. Unwuka's definition of the term "curriculum" is found suitable for this study. Basically, the term includes this: "It embraces purposeful experience provided and directed by educational institutions to achieve predetermined goals" (Onwuka, 1996: 3). This study also considers the churches and their agencies as educational institutions which also constitute the total environment in which education or guidance for life is found or in which (or from which) teachings and practices can be developed, underdeveloped, promoted, demoted, imported, exported, objectively or subjectively crafted, monopolized, or pedagogized in any way by the powerful or majority, towards achieving predetermined goals.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study. These are:

1. What are the historical grounds for a contemporaneous subpoena to Luther on perennial questions of polygyny, upon which a proxy rejoinder can be delimited for treatment via the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa?
2. What are the contemporaneous submissions of the church in Africa against polygyny in support of the historical grounds for subpoenaing Luther on perennial questions of polygyny, upon which a proxy rejoinder can be delimited for treatment via the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa?

Historical Grounds for a Subpoena to Luther on Perennial Questions of Polygyny

Research Question 1: What are the historical grounds for a contemporaneous subpoena to Luther on perennial questions of polygyny, upon which a proxy rejoinder can be delimited for treatment via the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa?

Luther: A Monogamist Supporting Polygamy

Although Martin Luther was himself a monogamist, he held that monogamy was not pertinent to every situation, which meant that polygyny was also applicable. Some research reports mention Luther as holding that, not only was polygyny approved in the Law of Moses (Old Testament), but the liberty of a Christian man to have more than one wife was not interfered with in the Gospel (Barrett, 1968:117). Although other reformers like Melanchthon supported Luther's position, there were others (like John Calvin) who held that polygyny contrasted with natural law and generated inferiority complex in the co-wives, thereby impeding peace in the family (Hillman, 1970:60-73).

It should be noted that prior to Luther, there were towering figures in Christian history who also supported polygyny. For example, both Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas approved polygyny and held that it was right, not only for the purpose of multiplying the human race, but also because it did not contrast with natural law or even the law of marriage itself (Muthengi, 1995:55-78).

Did Luther, in fact, Support Polygyny?

The study relied heavily on Faulkner's "Luther and the Bigamous Marriage of Philip of Hesse" to address this question (Faulkner, 1913:206-231). Other resources available to the researcher while developing this study were not as scholarly, authoritative, and satisfactory for the needs of this study, as Faulkner.

Understanding the circumstances surrounding the second marriage of Philip of Hesse, a member of the nobility, is important to responding to the question as to whether, indeed, Luther supported polygyny. As a young man of about twenty, Philip of Hesse, Landgrave of Hesse, was forced by the customary ways of nobility in his time, to marry Christina, the daughter of Duke George of Saxony. But his heart preferred other women, and it was then that there arose in his mind the question of the possibility of him being allowed, under exceptional circumstances, to take another wife, following examples in the Old Testament, which the New Testament did not oppose. Besides, Philip supported his wish to have a second wife on the Old Testament basis that God forbade adultery and permitted polygyny. He then directed this question to Luther, first in 1526 without reference to himself, and directly attaching the question to himself over a dozen years later, around 1539, with hopes of getting support from the camp of the reformers. One of the reasons Philip sought support from Luther was so as to maintain his (Philip's) credibility before the evangelical Christian world; another reason was to satisfy Margaret von der Saal, the mother of the girl he wished to take as a second wife, whose desire it was to safeguard her daughter from any possible dishonor.

Luther's (and in some instances Luther's and Melancthon's) answer to Philip's direct and indirect questions, was given in difficulty. This answer is organized and summarized via points below:

Point 1: Christians should not take more than one wife because doing so was scandalous. Accordingly, a Christian should avoid scandals with the most diligence.

Point 2: Based on the Old Testament, the ancient Fathers had several wives because they were driven in that direction either by necessity or the weakness of the flesh. Where no necessity existed, (as in the case of Isaac, Joseph, Moses, and many others) the ancient Fathers did not have more than one wife.

Point 3: Although the Fathers (Patriarchs) in the Old Testament had more than one wife, their action did not constitute sufficient grounds for a Christian to also do same. The Christian must have a divine permission or word of God specifically to himself, which made it certain for him to have a second wife, just as the Patriarchs did. Otherwise, it was noted that right at the beginning, God established marriage as a union between two persons only, and the two shall become one flesh; Christ also affirmed the Old Testament that the two shall be one.

Point 4: It was not pleasing to God for a Christian to take a second wife. Although the Heathen and Turks might do what they pleased, or even the Anabaptists who took many wives, Christians could not; besides taking a second wife was not considered to be in line with "the German way."

Point 5: In the Old Testament records, kings could inherit the wives of their friends. This was in accordance with the Law of Moses.

Point 6: Christians were strongly advised against taking more than one wife. However, an exception was unless in cases where there was high necessity, such as if the wife was leprous or similarly afflicted; in such cases a man could take a second wife, with the advice of his pastor.

Point 7: In situations when it became necessary to maintain the line of succession in a monarchical system of governance, and for the good of the kingdom, a king could take a second wife. In such situations, Luther's camp considered that polygyny was not absolutely prohibited by divine law; it was permitted in the Law of Moses, and also not forbidden by the Gospel. Example: a king whose wife had no child to ascend the throne after the king's demise, could take another wife for the purpose of child-bearing, but without divorcing the first wife. If a king did that, it would still be "according to the examples of the ancient patriarchs and kings who had two wives at the same time." It is in order to note at this point that, in 1531, Luther and Melancthon approved in writing that rather than Henry VIII divorce his validly married wife, Catherine, (because she could not give him a successor), he was allowed to take another wife for the good of England.

Point 8: In view of the difficulty of Philip's question to Luther, an open-ended submission of Luther's camp was that if Philip determined to take another wife, then he should do that in the strictest of secrecy in order to prevent both public and legal scandal. Luther was carefully acting in the awareness that not allowing Philip to take a second wife would be equivalent to indirectly pushing him to adultery or living him in it. On this, Luther's camp considered the Flood to be an example of one of the causes of adultery of the rulers; another example was that the Apostle Paul often spoke that adulterers would not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Point 9: Luther acknowledged that in "other cases however I know not how to defend." Therefore, Luther should not be unjustifiably crucified if his tackling of polygyny fails at some points to adequately address issues pertaining it on a case-by-case basis.

Now, back to the question: did Luther, in fact, support polygyny? Sequel to the details above, it is not possible to escape the obvious: Luther gave a *qualified* support to polygyny. The support was qualified in the sense that it was attached with some caveats (which at times were either unclear or outrightly contradictory), which needed to be considered by a Christian before getting involved in polygyny. So, in line with Luther's caveats:

1. The Christian must have a divine permission or word of God specifically to himself, which made it certain for him to have a second wife, just as the Patriarchs did.
2. Polygyny was allowed in exceptional circumstances, such as when a wife was afflicted, health-wise, in a manner that she could not fulfill her marital duties. However, an exceptional circumstance should be considered with the advice of a pastor.
3. A Christian ruler in a successional system of monarchical rule could have a second wife, for the good of the land, if there was no offspring from the first wife to inherit the throne.

4. Polygyny was not entirely prohibited by divine law, as it was permitted in the Law of Moses, and also not prohibited in the New Testament.
5. Polygyny was allowable when acting otherwise could compel an already-married man to be either involved in adultery or keep on living in it.
6. When polygyny becomes unavoidable, it should be done in the strictest of secrecy, so as to avoid any scandalous repercussions.
7. Luther acknowledged that he lacked the capacity to address every case of polygyny that concerned Christians. He said in "other cases however I know not how to defend."

The Subpoena

A contemporaneous subpoena to Luther could be crafted this way: "You are being summoned to respond to this demand: to vacate your support (irrespective of the qualification or non-qualification of the support) for polygyny. This demand is being served upon you on the basis of the reality that the long held established position of the church is that monogamy-only, is the divinely sanctioned act of marriage."

Contemporaneous Submissions of the Church in Africa against Polygyny

Research Question 2: What are the contemporaneous submissions of the church in Africa against polygyny in support of the historical grounds for subpoenaing Luther on perennial questions of polygyny, upon which a proxy rejoinder can be delimited for treatment via the curriculum of Biblical theology in Africa?

Summary of Submissions from Churches and Christians across Africa

This is a general summary of the various contemporaneous submissions, representing the established position of the Church and Christians across Africa, against polygyny. These submissions represent perennial questions against polygyny, to which Luther is being called (via his proxies) to make a contemporaneous rejoinder.

Submission 1: Polygyny Lacks Original Basis. The thrust of this submission is that in the beginning, God created one man (Adam) and one woman (Eve) and joined that one man and one woman in marriage (Genesis 2:24). Therefore, God originally brought about monogamous marriage, and not polygamous marriage. By this, it can be concluded that Polygyny lacks original basis.

Submission 2: Polygyny Lacks Ideal Basis. This submission holds that God established monogamy as the best, or even unique, model of marriage on a one-man-one-wife mandate. At the beginning it was one man and one woman. Likewise when God wanted to start a new dispensation of His interaction with the world, He rescued Noah and the three sons of Noah, each of whom had only one wife, from the world-wide flood. At the beginning of the new dispensation there were only four human males and four human females, with each of the males having only one female as a wife. Likewise the different kinds of animals that were admitted into Noah's ark were selected based on one male and one female. Therefore, by this Genesis 6—9 account, monogamous marriage is grounded in an ideal way

designed by God. In contrast, there is a basis for concluding that Polygyny lacks ideal basis. Meanwhile, many African Christian men who adhere to the one-man-one-woman monogamous position of the church, do so if all goes well for them in the marriage especially it produces children (particularly male children, in some cases); otherwise, the man takes a second wife, sometimes secretly, even if doing so attracts sanctions on him from the church (Ademiluka, 2020:1-2).

Submission 3: Polygyny Lacks Classified Basis. The basic element of this submission is that Polygyny occurs in contrast to God's original "*intent*" that marriage should be between one man and one woman. Those who hold on to this submission somehow so much assume they possess the capacity and even monopoly of knowing God's secrets (other than what is clearly revealed in His Word), to the extent that they (and they alone) can ascertain what God's intends, and can say with finality that monogamy is implicit in the Adam-Eve narrative, whereas this intent remains classified to those who believe Polygyny is also right. In other words, while monogamy has a secret grounding, Polygyny lacks classified basis.

Submission 4: Polygyny Lacks Moral Basis. This submission stands on previous positions of adherents of monogamy that God established marriage as being between one man and one woman only. As such, Polygyny should be viewed as amounting to adultery (for example: between an already man and any other marriage partners different from the man's first wife) even though polygyny is never equated with adultery in African culture (Kunhiyop, 2008:224), or stealing (for example: a woman who comes as a second wife is considered as stealing the man she married from the first wife), or coveting or favoritism (since the man cannot love multiple wives equally) or jealousy (since there must be rivalry between multiple women married to one man, as evident between Jacob's two most senior wives in the Genesis-based Biblical narrative), or selfishness (by one man acquiring multiple wives for himself, whereas another man needs just one but has none), or a sociological problem (whereas if one man marries more wives whereas others are yet to get one, it could lead to adultery, rape, abductions, and other problems that could arise, due to societal imbalances. Because of these ethical deficiencies, it is concluded that Polygyny lacks moral basis.

Submission 5: Polygyny Lacks Pastoral Basis. The thrust of this submission is that the Bible supports that an overseer (that is the pastor, as it were) in the church must be the husband of one wife. The apostle Paul is called upon to support this submission: "Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife..." (Holy Bible: 1 Timothy 3:2, NIV). A dominant western interpretation of this passage is usually generally extends to stating that "anyone who practices polygamy is either godless and should not partake in the church sacraments or uncivilised and need civilisation" (Peters, 2020:4). Similarly, it is claimed that none of the New Testament apostles was married to more than one wife. By these details, it can be concluded that Polygyny lacks pastoral basis.

Submission 6: Polygyny Lacks Mathematical Basis. This submission holds that God made a wife (Eve) for the first man (Adam) from one of the ribs of the man; just one rib, not two or more ribs (Genesis 2:21-23). Not only that, the one-flesh union between a man and a woman (especially one husband and one wife), as originally begun in the experience of Adam and Eve, meant $1+1=1$. Adherents of monogamy consider details in this submission as

constituting what they call “Biblical Mathematics”, which cannot be applied to Polygyny. Consequent upon these details, it can be established that Polygyny lacks mathematical basis.

Submission 7: Polygyny Lacks Ecclesiological Basis. The weight of this submission is dependent on questions from the laity of the church, especially those with limited Biblical and/or theological understanding. If Polygyny is allowed in Christianity, why are there churches that do not allow polygamists to be baptized? If Polygyny in Christianity has Biblical basis, why are there churches that discipline those who participate in it and even deny exclude them from partaking in the Lord’s Supper? How come polygamists are not allowed (or withdrawn from) full membership in some churches, whereas monogamists are not? Based on circumstances from which questions like these arise, it is submitted that Polygyny lacks ecclesiological basis.

Submission 8: Polygyny Lacks Doctrinal Basis. This is a methodology of those who disagree with Polygyny, by which they simply dismiss any support for it as liberal theology. Accordingly, any teaching on Polygyny, (even with sound Biblical support) is considered false, and those who propagate this “false teaching” in support of polygyny are called false apostles. This submission connects with early submissions that sound teaching is that which recognizes one-man-one-woman marriage union as the only combinations sanctioned by the Bible, whereas any other is not. Hence, by this submission, Polygyny lacks doctrinal basis.

Submission 9: Polygyny Lacks Community Basis. This submission holds that Polygyny has no support in the regulations of various Christian communities, especially denominational bodies. Considering each denomination as an interpretive community, it is noted that many evangelical Christian denominations in Africa have denied recognition of Polygyny in their various official regulatory documents: constitution, bye-laws, church-practices, and policy documents. Due to non-recognition of Polygyny by organized Christian communities, whereas monogamy is acknowledged, it is submitted that Polygyny lacks community basis.

Submission 10: Polygyny Lacks Pragmatic Basis. The drive of this submission is that polygamous marriages are full of problems between children of different mothers, between wives, and so forth. Problems such as intra-family jealousies and rivalry and related consequences of such problems are usually pointed out by those who support monogamy against Polygyny. Even health-related reasons are given in opposition to polygyny; for example: “It often contributes to poor health among family members, particularly young children. It encourages the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS” (Yitayish Damtie, Bereket Kefale, Melaku Yalew, Mastewal Arefaynie, and Bezawit Adane, 2021:1). Those opposed to Polygyny are usually quick to point at problems within the families of Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon, and many other polygamists in the Old Testament narrative as examples of evidences against Polygyny as an acceptable form of marriage. However, Christians opposed to Polygyny (blinded by a desire to promote monogamy over and/or against Polygyny), deliberately refuse or avoid to examine numerous Biblical passages that also give account of equal or even weightier problems in

monogamous marriages. Hence, the categorical position that Polygyny lacks pragmatic basis.

Submission 11: Polygyny Lacks Pre-Tainted Basis. The submission posits that monogamy existed before the fall of humans into sin. Otherwise, based on this submission, Polygyny would not have arisen. So, Polygyny is considered as a byproduct of sin. In other words, before marriage was tainted by sin, it was monogamous; after marriage was tainted by sin, Polygyny became introduced. Since it did not occur before humans became polluted with sin, it is, therefore, submitted that Polygyny lack pre-tainted legacy.

Submission 12: Polygyny Lacks Enlightened Basis. The submission holds that Polygyny is a practice that belongs to people who lack modern educational exposure. By this submission, it is also said to be a practice of people in primitive societies. This means modern civilization, democracies, constitutions, and sociology have invalidate Polygyny, thereby making it archaic. Consequent upon being assigned to antiquity, it is claimed that Polygyny lacks enlightened basis.

Submission 13: Polygyny Lacks Pedagogical Basis. The submission holds that while polygyny is clearly in the Bible, however, it is not the teaching of Scripture. This submission is premised on the rationalization that not every matter that is in Scripture should be considered as the teaching of Scripture, and polygyny is considered as one of such matters. Therefore, endorsing or giving any form of recognition to polygyny would be fundamentally irreconcilable with the teaching of Christianity.

Submission 14: Polygyny Lacks Sociological Basis. The thrust of this submission is that polygyny takes away dignity and autonomy from women. It also puts women at a disadvantageous position since it grants the male gender monopoly over women, contradicts the principles of an egalitarian society, and generally creates or solidifies inferiority complex in women. Further, more polygyny is said to be opposed to natural law, and the natural law substantiates only monogamy.

Submission 15: Polygyny Lacks Democratic Basis. To buttress this point, advocates of this position try to democratize theology by saying that even majority of African women theologians across the majority of Christian denominations in Africa are opposed to polygyny. The popular saying "the voice of the majority is the voice of God" is even applied on this reasoning, to further this point, to say that majority of Christians (in general) and Christian women (in particular) are either entirely opposed to polygyny or prefer monogamy.

Submission 16: Polygyny Lacks Legal Basis. This submission holds that majority of countries and civic authorities do not recognize polygyny, and have in-fact made it (legally redefined as "bigamy") a punishable offence. It holds that what is provided for and supported in the legal statutes of these countries is monogamy. And since it is a Biblical command for the Christians to be subject to civic authorities (Romans 13:1-7), there is no point in accepting polygyny, whereas the civic authorities are opposed to it.

Submission 17: Polygyny Lacks Historical Basis. The strength of this submission is in holding to a position that history of Christianity does not grant a basis to polygyny. To support this submission, the position of some prominent bodies and Councils in Christian history who

opposed polygyny, are mentioned. Therefore, according to advocates of this submission, since a precedent has already been established in history of Christianity, it is futile to attempt to “reinvent the wheel” since history cannot be reversed.

Towards Delimiting Proxy Rejoinder via Biblical Theology Curriculum in Africa

In view of the submissions of the church and Christians in Africa, against polygyny, three complimentary approaches are outlined at this juncture, in an abridged form, towards delimiting a contemporaneous proxy rejoinder to subpoena on Luther on perennial questions of polygyny. The approaches involve developing a roadmap, via a course guide, for curricular experiencing of Biblical theology. The roadmap needs to be supported by a Biblical theology course memorandum, while teaching parameters also need to be established towards solidifying pedagogical processes of the course.

Firstly: Course Guide. A key element of the course guide is the course description. It should be designed in a way that generally explores the unfolding and revealing relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament in the Christian canon from the context of Biblical theology. This exploration should assist students to deal with both the Old and New Testaments via a unified strategy to Scripture, thereby allowing them to basically follow Scriptural revelation wherever it leads. The theology of each Biblical book shall be analyzed in its historical context, and then compared and contrasted with other Biblical books to set each book in its canonical context. It is in the process of these analyses that perennial questions of polygyny should be discussed, putting Luther and other influential Christian personalities in perspective.

The course guide will be more realistic if clear objectives are stated in the domains of cognitive, affective, and behavioral areas of learning, and with specific learning indicators attached. Perhaps a few examples are necessary here. Cognitively, students should be guided to formulate a working understanding of key questions of Biblical theology as an academic discipline, and as a tool for Christian exegesis, life, and practice; some of the questions on polygyny can be formulated or reformulated at this point keeping cognizant of the various cultural backgrounds of the students. Affectively, students should be guided to reflect on some significant debatable issues in Christianity (particularly African Christianity) using a Biblical theology approach, with focus on understanding how those issues unfold in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation; polygyny should be one of the debatable issues to be raised. Behaviorally, students should be guided to apply insights from contemporary issues raised in the course, to Christian life, African churches, and the broader African community.

Secondly: Course Facilitation Memorandum. This is a document designed to support the course guide in further facilitating the learning experience, and developed with a view to making it available to the learners. The term “Biblical Theology Framework for Hermeneutical Practice” is often engaged by the researcher to identify this memorandum. While it is necessary to set parameters within which proxies for Luther would respond to the subpoena on Luther, it is essential to fix boundaries within which students shall be

guided to understand the jurying processes and evaluation of evidences for or against polygyny. Therefore, the Biblical Theology Framework for Hermeneutical Practices serves as a curricular frame of reference (a compendium of ideas, terms and conditions, conventions, logic, references, or a paradigm) for the learners in comprehending the processes that regulate any proxy rejoinder or otherwise, to the subpoena concerned.

Thirdly: Pedagogical Parameters. Sequel to notations above, it is considered in order for Luther to make a contemporaneous defense in response to the subpoena on him, via a proxy channel. While the proxy (which in this case may be students) may be preoccupied with *how* to mount a successful defense for Luther, as well as making the defense in *actuality*, it is obviously the teacher's responsibility to set and implement *parameters* for the process. While setting this parameters, it should be noted that, it is easier for Africans to read Scripture with Western perceptiveness than with African eyes, especially when it comes to debatable issues such as polygyny, although defenders of polygyny may see this particular debate as unnecessary. For the African, Biblical theology is tasked with the duty of challenging any prior assumptions, biases, perspectives, or cultural elements, borrowed or imposed from the west which have no Scriptural warrant. Christians in Africa need to make this challenge as a step towards a truly African understanding of Scriptures, so as to also avoid "Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes" (E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, 2012:Cover Page).

Conclusion

Summary

Learners and facilitators (teachers), as participants in the Biblical theology course, are both responsible for the success of the curriculum. When issues seen as controversial by some (such as polygyny in Christianity) arise in the teaching-learning process in a Biblical theology class, all kinds of considerations are usually engaged for and/or against it. That is why all course participants need to be equipped with the skills of effectively discussing these considerations, to guard the debate from getting derailed. Also, guarding the debate means participating in the academic exercise in a manner that prevents unnecessary imposition of biases or myopic opinions on debatable issues, as well as encouraging open-mindedness in learning.

Recommendations

Three recommendations are developed resultant from the study. Each of the recommendations is designed for a category of stakeholders earlier outlined to which this study shall be of primary significance.

1. Theological Educators

There is a need to reformulate the curriculum for Biblical theology in African theological schools so as to make it more balanced in equipping students to address controversial issues of theology in their various areas of service. Biblical marriages (monogamy verse polygyny) should be one of those controversial issues to be reflected in the curriculum. A dedicated

area “Biblical Marriages” could be crafted in mapping or remapping Biblical theology as an academic course in the theological schools.

2. Pastoral Ministry Participants

Christians gifted in various areas of pastoral and pulpit ministries who, because they are linked in one way or the other with polygyny, are denied opportunities for service in the current formal church systems, need to personalize Christ’s call and commands to them to also actively participate in His harvest. For indeed, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Holy Bible: Luke 10:2, NIV). So, while sections of the church (by officially excluding spiritually-gifted participants in polygyny from active and public pastoral ministries and other Christian services), are impeding their own progress, let those linked to polygyny serve their Lord Jesus Christ unofficially, deliberately, strategically, and compellingly, in ministries where the official church has no control. Example: it is possible to do this as teachers in government-owned universities and colleges in Africa, as well as divinity schools around the world.

3. Church Policy-Makers

There are instances here and there in which participants in polygyny have been baptized, granted access to partake in the Lord’s Supper, and also engaged in some aspects of the church at local assembly levels. However, churches at denominational levels in Africa need to innovate deliberate policies that take into consideration all the diversities that exist among Christians, (monogamists or those linked to polygyny) who constitute members of such churches, so as to equalize the membership status of all Christians in the churches.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study on questions of polygyny that link with Luther also interconnects with other concerns of history which need further research. Accordingly, two possible areas for further research are suggested below, towards addressing this interconnection:

1. Interconnecting History of Monogamy-Only Position with Imposition of Monogamy-Only Biblical Interpretation: Towards Consolidating Christianity from an African Biblical Theology Perspective.
2. Appropriating Richards and O’Brien’s “Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes” to Polygyny Questions via Biblical Theology Curriculum in Africa.

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