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**Social Relations and Implications on Families in Africa: Applying Biblical Principles of Marital Practices Amongst Contemporary Husbands and Wives Relationships**

By

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**Abstract**

Christian marriage and the family are the most important building block of any given society. But in a sick world of humanity, the institution of marriage and family is an endangered species among husbands and wives especially in context of Africa and in particular Nigeria. Unbiblical ideas about marriage and family form a weak foundation among those who put their trust in human wisdom only, even among those who call themselves people of God. Christian marriage as an institution today faces a myriad of challenges with many of them ending in divorce. Rooted in a scriptural understanding of marriage, this article thoughtfully and theological engaged the issues surrounding marriage being debated today and laid the groundwork for the crucial conversations regarding Christian marriage and family. The article challenged people of God in Nigeria, Africa and other Christians around the world to rediscover the beauty of God's design for marriage. It concretizes marriage is sacred and divinely consecrated by God

**Keywords:** Church and society, Christian Marriage, Counselling, biblical studies, theology

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**Introduction**

Much has been said about Africa both by the Westerners and Africans themselves. Samaila Kure (1993:98) describes “The story of African people is like the story of three blind men who went to see an elephant for the first time. When they came near the elephant, each one put forward his hand to touch the elephant to feel what it was like.” Kure (1993:98) reports their responses when people asked them to tell them about the elephant.

Kure (1998:98) argues that “The first blind man said an elephant is like a stick because he touched the tusk and the nose. The second blind man said it was like a tray because he touched the ear. Then the third blind man said an elephant is like a huge stone because he touched the back of the elephant.” From this story, whoever desires to help children of Africa today must know which Africans he or she is dealing with, because there is an old Africa and there is a modern Africa and there is a future Africa to come which is going to be determined by how every generation in Africa is molded. Africa was once asserted by Portuguese explorers as a dark continent. They claimed it was dark in the sense that there was no modern civilization. However, Africans were known for good kingship and family. Kingship has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life. It is kingship which controls social relationships between people in a given community. It governs marital customs and regulations. It determines the behavior of one individual towards another. It binds together the entire life of the ethnic clans.

The African meaning of family includes a much wider circle of members than the meaning when used in western countries. In African traditional society, the family includes parents, children, brothers, sisters, who may have been married, uncles, aunts, and all immediate relatives, in short, all the extended family. The family in this context is the nucleus of both individual and corporate existence by way of religious belief, worship, and decision making. In each case, it was always the head of the family who would take the lead. Africa today is like a broken home in a sense that Africans are neither themselves or Europeans or even Americans. In fact, even those Africans who by reason of slave trade found themselves in America, call themselves Africa-American.

Clarence Walker (1992:15) opines that “There is credibility ...on evidence of afroisms found among the Africans of North America, the Caribbean, and some part of South America. These afroisms are used in art, music, religion, and kingship relations of these regions. Walker (1992:15), reiterates concerning the kingship, that “The work of Gutman has shown that African families exhibited amazing survival resilience in the face of adverse conditions. Gutman examined documents and census data that had accumulated between 1750 and 1925 and discovered most African homes were two-parent homes and that a strong kingship network remained intact.” However, one thing is sure. Human efforts cannot improve moral, spiritual and cultural deterioration. This is the world in which the Christian families in Africa find themselves. This creates a problem for biblical perspective on marriage and Christian family. How can Christian families in Africa maintain a biblical standard of a Christian home? There is need to go back to the Bible to find out what a family

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is. From there a person may be able to start a new family according to God's standard. Christian marriage must begin with God because it was God who originated marriage. "Then the Lord God said, it is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18).

The primary purpose of marriage in this context was for a partnership and for fellowship that leads to a happy married life. That is why Henry R. Brandt and Homers Dowdy (1976:8) note "Happy marriage does not depend on one fortunate choice of perfectly matched partners. Rather, it is a lifetime process depending on many choices and many adjustments arrived at by two free individuals who deliberately choose the same to harness and who continually sacrifice personal freedom and self-interests for mutually agreeable way of life." The Christian should bear in mind these candid principles the authors have offered because without God, there is no peace. Outside of traditional beliefs, a Christian is to ask God in prayer to show and guide him or her to whom to marry.

New couples marry with the understanding that their married partners are worthy of fellowship. Marriage means to leave and to cleave. "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). It is interesting to note from this biblical text that the leaving of father and mother was strictly to the man and not specifically to the woman. In biblical context, man is the one to do the cleaving to his wife. I am of the opinion that the reason for this action is because in God's point of view, the man is always the head. If he remains in his father's house while married to a woman, there would be two heads in that family. If this happens, which head will the members of the family obey?

In Africa, contemporary challenges surround issues of marriage, divorce and remarriage that have adverse and negative impact on families become a great concern for a return to the biblical order. Wilbur O'Donovan (1996:288) maintains that "Polygamy is a difficult problem in Africa. Since it involves the commitment and responsibilities of marriage, it is not the same issue as sexual immorality or adultery." Therefore, biblical insight shows the violation consists in the implication that the wives put away will be badly and unjustly affected as also the children of polygamous marriage whose mothers are put away. O'Donovan (1996:291) concludes "It would be unjust and irresponsible behavior from a husband who has made a commitment to care for his wives" (Numbers 30:1-2,16). Therefore, there is need to state by way of defining the problem.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Africans are between two worlds and neither of these two worlds of life is a criterion for the Christian family. For example, in most homes in Nigeria, there is no true leaving. Some parents still stay and linked together with their own sons even when they are married. In Africa, contemporary challenges surround issues of marriage, divorce and remarriage. The Edinburgh 1910, International Missionary Conference struggled with some of those issues which include marriage and polygamous practices. God's design for marriage ensures that children are born into the safe harbor of the family where parents are committed to loving one another. Therefore, the starting point for having a happy family is a vital relationship with God because the family is the vehicle for passing on the truth of God's kingdom. Nate Adams notes one of such strategy of passing godly heritage to children born out marital life is reading. Adams (2004:13) notes, "Reading is fundamental to a child's development and success in life and parents should read with their children often."

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Paul describes this saying “Bring up children in training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). A united husband and wife normally teach their children all sorts of principles and skills to equip them for life and the basis for doing this is through God’s Word (Psalm 78:5-7). That is why Edmund W. Janss (1979:69,70,82) counsels that it should include “A course of training which corrects, molds, strengthens or perfects such as chastisement and penalty to produce a harvest of righteousness and peace in those who have been trained by it.” Stormie Omartian (1995:21) notes above all, “The battle for children’s lives’ is waged on the knees.” Danfulani Kore (2004:125) concludes “Parents need to know that there is a lot of gain when they spend time with both young children playing games, catching fun, sharing humor and participating in creative leisure activities. Having this time together enhances inter-personal relationships.” That is why in this kind of beautiful description of the family, polygamy is not welcome as presented in the Bible.

On the one part, the African cultural worldview assumes that every grown-up person must get married and bear children which places enormous pressure on important men and women with vaginal agenesis to also marry in deceit. This problem presents a dilemma to the spouses of such persons who accuse leaders of churches for being indecisive about their plights. Even some married men, when they move into urban cities without their wives, they enter illicit relationships which usually lead them into polygamy in certain instances. Some of the men get married only to abdicate their responsibilities. There is infiltration of worldly theologies. This calls for a better way of applying biblical principles for godly Christian homes in Africa. This work explores the biblical-theological blueprints of marriage from the perspectives of both the Old Testament and New testaments.

### **Biblical-Theological Basis for Marriage in Old Testament**

Issues related to marriage are explored under this heading. The search is from the creational accounts and marriage as an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman. Certain procedures for marriage, rules and regulations with regards to whom to marry, the choice of a bride betrothal, bride price, marriage ceremony and the responsibility and legal rights of a Hebrew wife are also explored. Marriage, as presented in Ancient Israel was patterned after the Ancient Near Eastern tradition. Traditionally, marriage was highly esteemed, but celibacy was rare. Celibacy was not a practice in the Old Testament. The only exception which is recorded in Jeremiah (16:2), was an unusual instruction where Jeremiah was not allowed to marry. Marriage had three purposes in the Old Testament. Marriage was for fellowship, maintenance of family life, and procreation.

Rabbis formulated some marriage regulations around these purposes of marriage (Leviticus 18:20). Rosemary Curing (1994:25) opines that “One of the peculiar laws of marriage in Jewish tradition is the law which prohibited the remarriage of a woman whose husband got missing without any proof of his death.” Polygamy is recorded in the early account of human origins where Lamech was recorded as the first polygamist in the Bible (Genesis 4:19). Polygamy became rather rampant during pre-exilic period because the Israelites copied it from nations around them. But the situation changed after the captivity when monogamy became the normal practice. God created the first man and woman as a biblical example opposed to polygamy. Genesis 2:24, is the epitome of biblical teaching on marriage. It says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” Therefore, the concept of the family as the basic social unit is traced from creation in Genesis 1-2. Humanity was made male and female and blessed with fruitfulness to increase. God created him male and female. Genesis 2:2; 18,23

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show the incompleteness of man without a wife. God's divine and perfect arrangement from the beginning about marriage is for man and woman who marry each other so as to have a faithful and committed relationship as one flesh. They separated themselves from their families to form a new family. Such relationship allows for sexual union which reflects their oneness. This oneness between the husband and his wife is a picture of Christ's relationship with the church explains in Ephesians 4. Stephen Georgia (2013:9) agrees that "Marriage is not man's invention. It is not simply a social contract or an arrangement of convenience. It is a gift and creation of God with rules to obey." However, marriage was regarded as very exclusive in the Old Testament era.

### **Marriage As Exclusive**

The Old Testament authors viewed marriage as an exclusive relationship between a man and woman. Marriage was considered a total unity of persons physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually comprehended it as one flesh which was meant to be endured for the lifetime of the two partners. The one flesh concept eliminates polygamy as an option. Marriage partners are to find in each other spiritual and emotional satisfaction formerly drawn from relationships they drew from their parents. To sunder one's parental relationships and join oneself in intimate, lifelong union with a person who hitherto has been a stranger demands a considerable degree of maturity. Mipo E. Dadang (2019:13) notes that "The joining is meant to be permanent and to involve commitment. This joining is so intimate that it is usually referred to in Scripture as becoming one flesh." Everett. Worthington also opines that "The intimacy, in which spouses are described at being of one flesh, graphically tells the main purpose for marriage relationship." L.I. Grandberg (1984:694) opines that it is "Expressed in an ability for self-giving love, emotional stability, and the capability to understand what is involved in committing one's life to another in marriage." This was the reason for which during the Old Testament period, there were procedural for marriage ceremonies.

### **Procedural for Marriage Ceremonies**

In the Old Testament era, marriage ceremonies were not allowed on holy days particularly on the Sabbath. Also marrying from the Gentiles was prohibited in Jewish law as there was no connection between darkness and light (Deuteronomy 33:2). Further to that, marriage to a close relation was not allowed. However, where a deceased brother died without a son, the surviving next of kin was allowed to marry his wife which was called leverage marriage. The reason for the practice was to allow the living brother to raise a son for the deceased brother so that his name would not be extinct within his clan (Deuteronomy 25:5-9).

The marriage ceremony was performed at the groom parents' house unlike the betrothal ceremony that was usually done at the house of the bride's parents. The bride would move in procession to the groom's house. She wore perfume, jewels and white dress signifying purity (Isaiah 49:18; 61:10; Psalm45:8). The groom put on special clothes with turban (Psalm45:8). A betrothal and a newly married groom were exempted for one year from military service and any function that would take them away from home (Deuteronomy 20:7; 24:7). After the marriage the proof of the bride's virginity was the observation on their bedding with a stain or lack thereof. Stephen Georgia (2013:9) rightly puts its that "Marriage is not man's invention. It is not simply a social contract or an arrangement of convenience. It is a gift and creation of God with rules to obey." Georgia's view is biblical. This is because marriage itself is a mystery. God created marriage to help people transcend their egocentrism



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and to mirror his faithfulness to people. Because God made marriage important to understanding spiritual truths, he joins people together spiritually when they marry. This joining is permanent, intimate and more powerful than they realize. Marriage is permanent. The joining is so intimate that it is usually referred to in Scripture as becoming one flesh, geographically, tells the main purpose for marriage. Everett Worthington (1989:33,334,35,36,37) affirms “Marriage is a relationship of separation and union designed to produce growth and fruit.” Thus, in the Old Testament, there were rules and regulations governing the choice of whom to marry.

### **Regulations and Rules for Choice of Marriage Partners**

A Jewish wife had some responsibilities in the home which include that she superintended the domestic affairs (Genesis 18:6; II Samuel 13:6; Proverbs 31:15). She was equally, one that controlled food stuff in the home. She further had rights over food, garments and over conjugal rights (Exodus 21:10). A question that needs answer is whether the Old Testament writings condone polygamy and concubinage? In the first instance, polygamy and concubinage were not part of God’s will in Marriage. This is because polygamy happens when a married person whose wife is still alive contracts another marriage. The Old Testament provides a number of examples of Bible Characters who married more than one woman when their first wives were still alive. Lamech in the Bible married a second wife (Genesis 4:18-24). Jacob married Leah and Rachael (Genesis 29:1-30). Moses had two wives (Exodus 2:21; Numbers 12:1). While a polygamist man marries more than one woman at the same time, some men also pick concubines alongside their wives. But concubines had lesser status than wives in homes and were mostly kept in different houses.

Concubines were basically sex partners that exclusively belonged to each man that picked them. They had children of their male owners. Some of these men who had concubines include: Nahor, a Levite, Saul, and Solomon (Genesis 22:24; 35:22; Judges 19; 2 Samuel 21:11; I Kings 11:1-3). These are few examples of men in Israel that had concubines alongside their wives. Both polygamy and concubinage did not meet the original intention of God for marriage, which was meant for companionship, fellowship for both the man and his wife and for procreation. Dadang (2019:5,6) upholds that fact that the biblical meaning of marriage is a “Divine institutional union between two consenting male and female Christian and adult who have covenanted to live together till death, unconditionally, for the purpose of honoring God companionship and procreation.” God created only one woman and not two women for the man. This laid an exclusive nature of the union between a man and a woman. To reiterate the assumption that God’s original intention was monogamy and polygamy, Kings and their people were cautioned against multiplying wives (Deuteronomy 17:17).

The foregone Bible passages were given to demonstrate that they followed the culture of their times against God’s original order for marriage. God’s model for marriage is one man one wife. Death only brings a marriage to its end. All the records pointed out in the Bible reveal that polygamous families did not experience peace, unity and oneness between the wives, their children and the husbands (Genesis 19). Neither did they have unified worship of and relationship with Yahweh the true God (I Kings 11:4). However, one important section I would want to establish under the aspects of marriage in the Old Testament is the area of childlessness and polygamy.

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### **Childlessness and Polygamy**

In Jewish tradition, children were highly desired in every marriage for the keeping of the family line. This practice is particularly carried out in Nigeria among many husbands. In light of cultural norm, it is expected that the moment a woman is married, she is expected to conceive within a short period of time because in the opinion of many people that is what constitutes a successful marriage. When this does not happen, problem sets in. The enemy uses this challenge to cause confusion to frustrate every effort and plan between a couple and their in-laws, which could lead to either divorce or the man marrying a second wife. This practice characterized some men in the Old Testament era.

Therefore, when a woman was childless, the husband married a second wife in order to have children. In some cases, the woman could allow her husband to go into her housemaid in order to have children as was the case with Abraham and Sarah and other similar instances (Genesis 16:30; Exodus 21:7ff; Deuteronomy 15:12). In civilized Mesopotamia, a childless wife allowed her husband to have children with her housemaid (Genesis 16; 30:1-8). Preference for male child over the female was prevalent just as it is for many Nigerian men. It was considered necessary for a father to have at least one male child who would carry the family lineage to the next generation. Since male children mostly inherited the property of their late fathers, paramount among them being landed property. The desire to have male children among the Hebrews became even more serious and compelling. While these were the complexities of the aspects of marriage in the Old Testament, it would be a good venture to also look at the aspects of marriage in the New Testament.

### **Marriage Issues in the New Testament.**

The early church Christians perceived marriage as an honorable estate ordained by the triune God. The New Testament also presents marriage to be for fellowship, companionship and procreation. In that context, Christian marriage involves a lifelong faithfulness between the husband and the wife(monogamy). Only death is responsible and the breaker of marriage bond. Later, in Church history era, the Roman Catholics believe marriage to be a sacrament, while the Protestants viewed it as an ordinance which means it is not enjoined upon the believer.

While for Catholics, marriage is for the sake of serving God, so one could choose celibacy to be free from the responsibility of a family life so as to serve God uninterruptedly (I Corinthians 7). This ideology is one of the reasons why Catholics priests remain unmarried. However, during the reformation in the West, this notion was approached differently. The reformers argued that it should be chosen voluntarily and not imposed on all those who would enter the priesthood. Larousse (1994:324) opines that “Martin Luther and his fellow reformers dismissed the idea that the unmarried state was superior to marriage, or that priests, monks, and nuns, were called to attain higher spirituality than other Christians.”

Luther argued that each Christian has to be faithful to his calling or vocation whether married or not married. The early church during the Roman world promoted equality in Christian marriage. John McManners (2002: 76,77) notes that “Clement of Alexandria in his time strongly addressed the issue of marriage using St. Paul in I Corinthians 7, thereby recommending that married couples treat sexuality as a means to a higher end, not as an end in itself.” The early church fathers also wrestled with the issues of adultery with regards to remarriage. For example, Augustine prohibited remarriage under any circumstances, while others like Chrysostom allowed remarriage if a spouse committed adultery.

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William Heth (1990:147) notes that “The Shepherds of Hermas took a Stricker stand that a husband must divorce an adulterous wife if she was unrepentant but he must not take another wife.” From the New Testament explanation and teaching on marriage, monogamy is upheld above polygamy. In a monogamous marriage, a Christian man is required to marry a fellow Christian woman or vice versa.

The New Testament upholds God’s original intention for marriage which exclusively dwells on monogamous marital relationship between a man and his wife. Jesus, Peter, and Paul upheld the biblical ideal of monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the norm, relating it to Christ’s relationship with the church (I Peter 3:1-7 compare with I Corinthians 9:5 and Ephesians 4:21-33 and Colossians 3:18-19). The Scripture therefore, disallows any form of extra-marital sexual intercourse. This is why Jesus called sexual immorality (pronoia). It comprises of all forms of adultery, incest, or other forms of illicit sexual relationships (I Corinthians 6:9; I Thessalonians 4:3-6). Jesus further taught that adultery can be committed in a person’s heart (Matthew 5:32 compared with Hebrews 13:4). Although adultery is the only ground for divorce as in the Bible, but even so it is not compulsory because there is always the need to choose to forgive (Matthew 5:32, 19:7-8). F. Luskin (2002:69) believes, “Forgiveness is the experience of peacefulness.

Forgiveness does not change the past, but it changes the present.” Luskin (2002:69) opines that “Forgiveness means that even though you are wounded you choose to hurt and suffer less. Forgiveness means you become part of the solution. Forgiveness is the understanding that hurt is a normal part of life.” M. B. Nelson (2000:36) notes that “Forgiveness can become a daily habit, and freedom will be the reward when husbands and wives imbibe the spirit of forgiveness to keep their marriages enjoyable.” Rachael Dingis (2011:71) opines that “This does not mean that divorce should automatically occur when a spouse commits adultery. Those who discover that their partner has been unfaithful should first make every effort to forgive, reconcile, and restore their relationship. We are always to look for reasons to restore the marriage relationship rather than for excuses to leave it.”

Dadang (2018:72) lament that “Pride and self-righteousness hinders forgiveness for reconciliation to happen.” However, from biblical perspective, Paul is of the view that if an unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved and it means God has called such to peace,” (I Corinthians 7:15). From the text of First Corinthians 7, the biblical passage sanctioned instances of divorce when sexual marital unfaithfulness occurs and when an unbelieving spouse refuse to continue the marriage after conversion of the other partner. In addition to these two, separation may be needed in cases of persistent physical spouse abuse. When this happens, because of the possibility of sexually transmitted diseases, it might be unwise to have sex with a person who has committed adultery. The Greco-Roman world also treated marriage as a lifelong monogamous commitment because divorce often disrupted marital bond. From the foregone, it is only right to conclude that God’s perfect intention for the marriage institution is exemplified in the first marriage between Adam and Eve prior to the fall, and typified in the relationship of Jesus Christ with his church. Distortions crept in to destroy this order only as a result of a rebellious heart.

In the Roman world of the New Testament, polygamy was almost non-existent, even though it could have not been the norm because monogamy prevailed. Monogamy also had its competing elements through practices of prostitution, homosexuality and divorce involving men and woman alike. It appeared the rural social setting of the ancient world encouraged polygamy for economic reasons that turned out to become an economic liability.



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Today, polygamy has continued to thrive in Africa. O'Donovan (1995:289) affirms thus noting that "Because African culture has very strong community values, have many wives ensures having a large family, which is seen as the very way to increase happiness and meaning in life. Polygamy solves the problem of single parent mothers. To have several wives, and many children, makes a person feel secure about his or her care in old age." While Protestant Christians in Africa continue to stand against the practice of polygamous practice, there are still some Bible believing Christians who find themselves falling back into it. It is true that becoming a polygamist does not preclude a person from salvation in Christ, the practice goes against God's original plan for one man and one wife prescription for marriage.

The Bible is clear that polygamy is not the will of God. It is certainly not approved by God in any way. O'Donovan (1995:289), emphatically notes that "Polygamy is man-made arrangement to satisfy the desires of a person with a non-Christian world-view. It represents walking by the flesh rather than walking by the Holy Spirit and trusting God in faith for the needs of life. The Bible says without faith, it is impossible to please Him (Hebrews 11:6)." Hence, in God's original plan, there is no polygamy and there is no room for divorce and remarriage either. That is why Howard Marshall (2008:60) opines that "Paul upholds marriage as the only divinely authorized setting for sexual activity."

Howard (2008:60) advises that "Divorce and remarriage lie factors as the obligation to live a holy life in obedience to divine commands and awareness of future coming of the Lord and concern for the work of the Lord." Richard B. Hays (1997:115,116) opines that "Marriage is one of those commitments that remains in force and it is to be seen not merely as a burdensome obligation but as a sphere in which God's holiness and transforming power may operate." Bill Bright (2010:69) adds that it involves spiritual breathing which is a "Principle that enables the husband and wife live consistent lives just as they exhale and inhale physically, so they can also exhale and inhale spiritually and second, to confess each sin to each other by name." Hence, there is need to discuss divorce and remarriage in biblical view.

### **Divorce and Remarriage in Biblical View**

Divorce, since the fall, has continued to be one of the major challenges confronting both the church and society. The devastation that divorces causes go beyond the immediate individuals and families concerned. O'Donovan (1995:291,292) argues that "In Europe and North America where polygamy is not lawful, unfaithfulness and adultery leads to divorce and often to marriage with the same adulterous partner. This is somewhat similar to polygamy, without having the different wives in the same home at the same time. Divorce, however, is usually much more emotionally painful and hard on the injured wife or husband than polygamy, because it involves the outright rejection of one person in favor of another." The Bible categorically shows that divorce destroys God's plan for marriage and the family (Malachi 2:16). Most Bible scholars have no problem with remarriage as a result of the death of a spouse.

For example, Paul "Counsel younger widows to marry, to have children to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander" (I Timothy 5:14). This implies that a widower is not prevented from remarriage as long as he is strong enough to shoulder the responsibility of a new wife. Philip S. Usman (2017:81) shares that "The pressure that is brought to bear on the widower to marry again brings to the forefront the issue of remarriage in his life. If there is any sensitive area in the life of the widower, it is the issue of remarriage." Usman (2017:81) laments further that "In our culture (Nigeria) this is an issue

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that sooner or later will come -up in the life of a widower irrespective of the age of the widower. For the very elderly widower, the common cliché is someone to give water.”

Usman (2017:81) concludes that “For the younger widower, the issue is that he is too young to remain unmarried having tasted the marital state.” In Nigeria, anything other than remarrying, is unacceptable to most people. This is often said with a feeling that he or she cannot be trusted to hold himself or herself in purity and therefore, he or she should marry as quickly as possible. This idea of having a widow or a widower remarrying as quickly as possible has implication.

While the Bible does not condemn a widow or widower from remarrying a second or a third time, caution needs to be taken and wise counsel is to be sought when remarrying subsequent to the death of a spouse. It should not be entered into in a rush. Theresa Adamu (2019:8) notes biblically, that “After the fall of humanity, death became the end of humans here on earth. While the Bible seems to be silent on widowers, widows feature prominently in the Bible.” Richard B. Hays (1997:115) advice that “Widows and widowers to remain as they are.” The contribution to scholarship of Hays seems similar to what students asked me in Seminary. When I taught marriage, family and sexually at ECWA Theological Seminary Jos from 2014-2016, curious students asked me these questions: In the case of widowhood or widower, should singleness be encouraged; or should it be legislated, rather than remarriage?

Since the Bible does not give grounds for divorce and remarriage, under what circumstances should remarriage take place? Since one of my major theological disciplines stands out in Biblical studies both in the Old and New Testaments, they were guided with explanation to their questions according (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:1-10; and I Corinthians 7:10-16). Moses, Jesus and Paul did not approve divorce. But due to human weakness and rebellion, they seemed to have made a provision for it under certain circumstances. Moses allowed divorce because married men of his time hardened their hearts and insisted on the practice (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). When the Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus whether it “Is lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matthew 19:3). They must have bought into its theological and historical background in question. The background to their question was the debate between two theological schools of Rabbis.

Followers of Rabbi Shammai school of thought said that divorce is permissible for only major offences that is for unfaithfulness leading to adultery. But followers of Rabbi Hallel school of thoughts insisted that divorce is not permissible for any reason at all. These two schools of thoughts were in accordance with (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). It reads in the New International Version that “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband who divorced her is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.” From history of this background text, men perceived their wives as pieces of property, which could be disposed of at the husband’s whim. That might have been the reason for a devout Jew to thank his creator for not making him a woman.

In Jewish tradition, divorce was a male prerogative. A wife was a husband’s possession in a manner similar to his property, his animals, and his slaves (Exodus 20:17). However, Jewish law did not permit a woman to initiate a divorce. She could remarry only if given a certificate of divorce. According to the law, the husband could have his bride stoned

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if on the wedding night he discovered that she was not a virgin (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). In contrast to this tradition, the Roman custom allowed a wife to divorce her husband (Mark 10:11-12). Scripturally, God did not permit men unlimited power over their wives. Some laws were given to protect women to make their husband know that women are not property. It is not certain when Moses began to allow divorce.

Deuteronomy 24, is clear that God did not permit divorce. Jesus later told a group of Jewish leaders and teachers of the law that “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives,” (Matthew 19:8). Moses was not allowing divorce in essence that adultery was an offense punishable by death (Deuteronomy 22:22). The uncleanness must have refereed originally to conduct on the part of the wife that the husband deemed shameful or offensive, but was not limited to physical adultery. Overall, the implications of easy and uncontrolled divorce for the society at large brings about many social ills, that leave most of divorced women and children vulnerable socially, economically, physically, and spiritually weakened. In many traditional societies, it is often a consequence of the inordinate quest for male children to be treated preferentially over against females. This practice can promote the neglect of and non-education of female children because they may be abandoned along with their mothers.

Females are generally exploited by males. This could further be as one of the reasons that the typical African male practices polygamy, since the man thinks that he and his wife are not equal even before God. A biblical lesson for Christian husbands in context of Africa is for each husband to know what submission is not (Ephesians 5:22). When it says the wife has to submit to her own husband it does not mean that the woman is inferior or unequal, but that she remains under the authority of her husband. Submission does not imply stripping a woman of her rights or regarding or reducing her to a slave.

On the contrary, submission allows her more freedom because she is obeying the love of God and following the path of righteousness. Just as humans can only be truly free when they submit themselves to the law. So, a husband can only be truly loved when obeying God’s principles. Submission therefore, does not mean suppression or silence. It does not incarcerate a woman in a concentration camp. Thus, Craig S. Keener (1992:166) notes that “Paul does not call on wives to take charge of their husbands, but calls on husbands to love their wives in such a radical way that husbands become their wives’ servants too.” To be a real helpmeet means to help by offering one’s thoughts, insights, and feelings. Every wife would have opinion and personal conviction on most subjects and they may not always agree with their husbands. To Christian husbands in Africa, let it be resounded that submission does not involve closing her mouth, shutting off her brain, and surrendering her individuality. Ibrahim Adamu Bakoshi (2016:4) rightly notes saying “When gender is used as a weapon for oppression as it is common in Africa and beyond today, then something fundamentally wrong is happening.”

The loving husband who is wise will seek the insights of his wife before he makes a decision that affects the family. When the wife entrusts her husband and the decision of God, she is submitting fully and is leaving the consequences, good or bad, to her heavenly Father. Submission is reserved to the wife’s own husband. Some extreme human philosophical teachings from this biblical command includes the false idea that women should be subjected to all men, or that single women should be under the authority of their single male dates. Therefore, according to this ideology, they think there is no need to understand the explicit limits of the Scriptural command. However, although the wife is to respect and reverence her own husband, a single woman considering marriage is to ask herself whether her prospective

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husband is one to whom she could lovingly submit to him after she is married to him? A biblical passage warns that a non-submitting wife who nags and quarrels all the time makes it unbearable for her husband (Proverbs 19:13; 21:19).

The result of or dividend of submission is that it opens the heart of the husband towards his wife in the same way his love opens up her heart. However, biblically, the husband is required to manage his family affairs well by protecting his wife and children from harm. A husband should not be the one who harms them by being the one who serves them. Jesus is an example of one who was the leader but served (Mark 10:45).

The husband as the leader is the provider for his family. Biblically, Proverbs say “Any man who strays from his home or does not care for it, is like a bird that strays from his nest” (Proverbs 27:8). Paul furthers affirms that “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (I Timothy 5:8). Ross West (1997:23) notes that “Working is the norm, the expected, and the ordinary because idleness is not only unusual, but unacceptable in a person of faith who has the capability to work.”

Being a provider means that a man has to work to ensure that the family will have money. If a man will not work, he shall not eat nor speak to people about the importance of honest hard work, priorities and being skilled (II Thessalonians 3:10,11; Proverbs 16:3; 19:9; 22:29; 23:4; 24:27 & Ecclesiastes 2:26; 3:22; 9:10). Darrow L. Miller (2009:8) opines that “In many of the countries of the world, where people are materially impoverished, some people are lazy as there are lazy people everywhere.” A Christian husband should therefore, use his skills and opportunities God provides him with to work hard to feed his family. When every husband understands this well and applies the concept during his life time, the issue of inheritance and widow of a deceased husband will be a lot better addressed.

### **Inheritance of Resources and Widow of a Deceased Husband**

In context of Africa and in Nigeria, there are two kinds of traditional inheritance that are similar with the property and family of a deceased husband. They are the inheritance of wealth and or widow of the deceased by his relatives. The permanence of marriage has been terminated by death which always carries along with it some discomfort and levels of emotional trauma that either need time to heal or sometimes do not heal at all. Some spouses left behind soon go to the grave as a result of grievous shock that comes with the dead of their loved husbands or wives. One of the issues that troubles a widow generally is the property they acquired together with their dead husbands. The writing of will as practiced mostly by western world is like an inheritance in an African context.

Most men in Africa have not learned to write their final will and testaments. Furthermore, only a hand full of men even think about writing a will. I recall in Jos city of Nigeria, my brother in-law lived and worked without writing a will until fifteen (15) weeks to his death when his younger sister who happens to be my wife drew his attention “not to be like one of those foolish African husbands who ignore writing a will.” That counsel helped her brother. He wrote his will as if he knew he was dying soon. After he finished writing the will in consultation with his lawyer, he signed and sealed it. He appointed two trustees to execute the will after his death and notified them. However, the two witnesses who were to sign their parts on November 1, 2021, could not converge to sign theirs. Remarkably, that was the day my brother in-law slept in the Lord. The decision he made happened to be the survival of his widow and his children which he left behind.



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Not writing a will can leave the widows and their young children at loggerheads with relations of their late husbands and fathers. This is because the relations normally lay claim of ownership of property of the deceased, leaving the widow with nothing. Usually, they come under the cover of taking over the upkeep of the widow, her children's education and other needs. The widow of the deceased is normally distraught, traumatized, confused and helpless as she is additionally bombarded with insurmountable pressures from many angles. Such pressures range from physical, material, to social, emotional and magical intimidation and harassment on a widow. Widows with under-aged children suffer the most because their children are not old enough to stand for their mother and against their father's relations.

Promises made are not fulfilled as soon as relations take control of the property. In some cases, the house in which the widow lives are also taken, while she is pushed out to find an alternative accommodation or to return to her parents' house and community. Samuel Waje Kunhiyop (2008:259) notes that "The practice of widow inheritance means that a widow could easily be remarried in a matter of months. A widow may be inherited by a relative along with her husband's property, or she may have to marry someone from the husband's family so as to continue bearing children in his name." Kunhiyop (2008:259) further opines that "The case of the widower is however different. He can choose another woman as soon as he desires and no one threatens him. While it is true that widowers are rarely harassed, there are cultures in which relatives of the deceased wife come and carry away whatever they believe belonged to their daughter." However, the hope of the widow lies in God.

God provided for the widow whom he considered in Scripture as defenseless. He calls himself the Father of the fatherless, and defender of widows (Psalm 68:5; Proverbs 22:23; Isaiah 5:22). God made provisions for the widows to be catered for and protected (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-21; 26:12). God fights whoever maltreats widows. They are not materials or property to be inherited under any circumstances. There is no biblical support to show that God will change the equality of men and women before him (Genesis 1:26,27; 2:7). That is why God has positioned the church universal to become a voice for the widows on earth. Sadly, the church in the past has been mostly docile and negligent to the plight of widows instead of looking after orphans and widows in their distress. Dadang (2019-95) asserts that "Theologically, the church should take care of widows who do not have families to take care of them. Christians who do not take care of the widows in their families are worse than unbelievers are."

The church can evaluate widows who are qualified for help. For a widow to belong to this group that a church can assist, widows had to meet the requirements of at least 60 years old who will give themselves to prayer day and night, and have no intention of remarrying, serve the saints, and show hospitality, and help the indigent (I Timothy 5:3-16). Indeed, contemporary culture in Africa and in Nigeria in particular is in deep crises regarding a clear biblical- theological understanding on marriage and family under current review. While the crisis has political, social, and economic ramifications, only a spiritual return to the biblical foundations can address the root issue of the crises which has a major factor in corruption of a Nigerian nation. Stephen Vongdip (2015:35) opines that "The deadening effect of corruption in Nigeria has been a challenge to right values, injustice and lack of models." His assertion makes sense in that high moral standards can make a nation strong to make Nigeria a leading country among nations if individual Christian families live lives of purity in their homes. It is therefore, ripe to draw a conclusion.



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### **Conclusion**

Marriage is an illustration of the relationship between the Triune God and Israel in the Old Testament. This relationship continues through Christ and the church in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God was the husband of Israel and Christ is the bridegroom of the Church. The Triune God aimed at bringing about a cordial relationship expressed in fellowship. The Godhead in relationship to Israel and the church epitomize the perfection of husband-and-wife relationship. In this same manner, in Christian marriage, relationship has the solemn responsibility of maintaining the love-relationship faithfully to their wives in permanence towards presenting them blameless and without wrinkle to Christ on the final eschaton.

Christian wives are to walk in humility and godly submission to their husbands. Both husbands and wives are to consciously draw their strength for godliness and daily living with Christ so that they are able to constantly mirror God's intended permanence of marriage. This can serve as a tangible check on divorce perversions that crept into the church from the world. Moses permitted divorce but with stringent measures. Jesus lifted the status of marriage back to its original state, except in the case of habitual immorality. By the pronouncement of Jesus, Christian men cannot divorce their wives as they wish and in a case of adultery, forgiveness should be pursued to keep the marriage. The mission of the church is in no way that of encouraging divorce and remarriage. Rather, the church is saddled with the task of reconciling broken families to God and to sustainable marriage.

### **Recommendations**

(1). Biblically, God recognizes marriages between matured men and woman and women couples only. (2), The church should keep faith that God's original intention for marriage is that of one man and one woman committing themselves in matrimonial bond till death of either partner. (3), It is true also that the African traditional context and some other religions allow polygamy but this is not to be a norm in Christianity. Those who were polygamists prior to conversion should be accepted as full members of the church but they should not be given leadership roles in the church. (4). It is true that Scriptures do not subscribe to polygamy. However, polygamists in the Bible were not subjected to divorcing their wives. Neither there is Scriptural injunction linking salvation to monogamy. If Christ does not deny polygamists salvation, it will be unfair for fellow Christians to deny them a demonstration and a celebration of their salvation in Christ. (5), Therefore, the church in Africa should not recommend that husbands send their subsequent wives away before they can be baptized and accepted as full members in Churches. The importance of marriage in human life cannot be overlooked because it is a necessity for co-existence between the church and society and it is also necessary for procreation. Above all, marriage is God's institution and no tradition overrules this divine order.

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