

New Testament Response To The Challenges Of The 21st Century Marriage And Family

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Abstract: *Marriage is a union of male and female, instituted by God from creation to meet the fundamental human need for love, companionship and community. There appear to be a misunderstanding and misconception of the origin, meaning, elements and purpose of marriage in this 21st Century which has caused lust, childlessness, divorce and polygamy. This paper sought to respond to these challenges from a New Testament perspective. Qualitative method of analysis was used for this inquiry. It was discovered that acceptance of Jesus principles of marriage in the New Testament reveals the redemptive plan of marriage and family.*

Keywords: *New Testament, Marriage, Family*

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage is defined as the sacred conventional union of one man and one woman formed when the two swear before God an oath of lifelong loyalty and love to one another, the sign and seal of which is sexual intercourse (Butler,2003). Coming together of two mature individuals - male and female - who have affectionately agreed to be joined together as husband and wife during their entire lives. Marriage was instituted and divinely blessed as the closest human relationship. On the sixth day of creation week God performed the first wedding, bringing together the first man and woman as equal partners (Gen. 2:18-25). The divine intent was for the first marriage to be the pattern for all future marriage relationships: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). During His earthly ministry, Christ reaffirmed the creation plan for marriage (Matt. 19:3-6; Mark 10:6-9). In the Genesis account, marriage is a lifelong, exclusive union between a male and a female. It has three essential elements: 1) leaving father and mother; 2) being joined to each other; and 3) becoming one flesh. "Leaving" implies the creation of a distinct family unit publicly recognized by the couple's families, the community of faith and the society at large. "Being joined" refers to the mutual

commitment of the couple expressed in a formal marriage covenant. "Becoming one flesh" describes both the sexual union and the process of growth in intimacy, unity, and fulfillment that God intends a couple to experience in all aspects of their lives.

Marriage was instituted by God to meet the fundamental human need for love, companionship and community (Gen. 2:18). It is the divinely ordained setting for sexual intimacy and is intended to safeguard the virtues of purity and faithfulness (Gen. 2:24, 25). God designed the complementary relationship between the genders to enhance the development of human wholeness and a fuller understanding of each other and of God and His love. The first couple was given the shared task of caring for the earth and its resources (Gen. 1:26). They were also privileged to cooperate with God—reflecting His creativity, sharing in the joys of establishing family, providing for the care and nurture of children, and perpetuating the human race (Gen. 1:28). While divine revelation places a high value on children and expresses the joy to be found in parenting, Scripture never presents procreation as an obligation of every couple in order to please God (Matt 19:14; Ps 127:3). The narratives of Scripture illustrate how the tasks and priorities related to these purposes vary over time and circumstances for each marriage.

There seem to be a misunderstanding and misconception of the origin, meaning, elements and purpose of marriage in this 21st Century which has completely and grossly distorted marriage and posed challenges of lust, homosexuality, lesbianism, adultery, distant marriages and incessant divorce. This paper therefore sought to give response to these challenges and suggest solutions to such challenges.

According to Eme (2010) a family that does not maintain a consistent family religious devotion to God, is not an ideal family. He argue that it is the platform in which religious, moral and social teaching are passed on to the family by the parents for good behaviour. Iduma (2011) posits that family religious devotions are lacking as many have left family responsibility, but busy with public affairs hence putting families in shambles. Taylor (2010) argues that very many of the problems about which people seek counseling help is with marriage and family life due to abandonment. The truth is that in many families fathers are struggling to manage their homes while mothers are in constant stress. Little wonder Lahaye (1989) posits; "knowing what is right is not always easy in our complex world". Manuel (2004) maintains that family Godliness and spiritualities which young lives has been abandoned. This abandonment is the bane of problem in 21st Century marriage, sex and family.

II. CONCEPTIONAL CLARIFICATION

For the scope of this research, family instability is the abandonment of the family responsibilities by all in the home. Madugba (2011) opines that carelessness in the family on spiritual matters has brought about dysfunctional families hence parents must learn to use their time and income, however limited to create happy home. This will inculcate proper roles and good moral in the children. Longman (1995) defined family as "The group of people who are closely related to each other, mother, father and children (nuclear), extended as all the people in a family, father, mother, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, in-laws, grandparents". This means family is a group of people who consider themselves bound to each other by enduring ties and responsible for each other's well being. Longman (1995) and Williamson (2008) see marriage as: "The relationship between two people who are legally married". Okwueze (2004) asserted marriage relationship goes beyond bride(s) and groom(s) but involves numerous parties who take interest in ensuring the formation and nourishment of the relationship among principal parties.

Williamson (2008) see sex as "the activity in which a male and female join their sexual organs in order to create babies or for pleasure". Religion is peoples' way of life, the knowledge of God, people behavior and relationship with God and one another. Ekwunife (1992) sees it as Man's consciousness and acknowledgment of his reliant on a relationship to transcendent being the absolute order. Durkheim (1961) sees it as an integrated structure of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. Nevertheless, religion has no single stretch-jacket definition that is satisfactory and accepted by all.

III. CHALLENGES OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Marriage and family are garbling with many challenges which include but not limited to lust, childlessness, polygamy, lack of child home training and divorce.

The Problem of Lust: Lust occurs because people's normal desire has been corrupted by sin. Desires by themselves are not evil. Our desires come from the way God made us. God made people to need food to sustain life. Having a desire for food when a person is hungry is not a sin. But a gluttonous craving for food is a corrupted form of the normal desire for food. It is a form of lust. God made men and women with a natural physical emotional attraction for each other. That attraction is not a sin. Attraction for the opposite sex is part of God's original creation and God pronounce everything in His creation good (Gen. 1:31). The problem is that our God-given sexual desire has been corrupted by sin. Since the fall in the garden of Eden, people have become corrupted in every part of their character, including their desire. Because of their sinful natures, men and women are not satisfied with their marriage partners as God intended them to be. Instead they look at other men or women with lust, which leads to sexual sins.

Love or Lust: One question, which troubles many young people, is the difference between love and lust. Both love and lust include very strong sexual desire. One simple test, which a person can apply, to determine if his or her desire is love or lust is the test of unselfishness. If a man loves a girl with a godly love, he will be unselfish in his desire for her. He will not want to embarrass or defile the girl he loves by encouraging or forcing her to have sex with him before marriage. This principle is clearly in the story of the lust which Amnon, the son of King David, had for his half-sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-12). Tamar was actually willing to marry Amnon, if necessary, but Amnon was unwilling to wait for marriage. Amnon selfish desire for Tamar was not love but lust. The problem of lust does not apply to single men and women only. Married people are often troubled by lust. One way for married people to escape lust is to have regular sexual intercourse (1cor.7:3-5). In many African marriages, wives will refuse to have sex with their husband for up to two years or more after a child is born (oral interview). This is not good. It leads may husband into lust and immorality. The scripture says "Do not deprive each other (sexually) except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1Cor. 7:5).

Childlessness: The presenter is writing from Christian bias, much of the emotional pain of childlessness in Africa life has to do with traditional value of children. Some of these values are not Christian ideas. Most cultures have a very strong sense of community. Children are seen an essential status in the spirit world. In some cultures, these values are so strong that a husband would say he has had no child until he had a male child. In some cultures, the traditional idea of eternal life is an endless continuation of the person's family line, in such a culture, the ability to have children takes on religious importance. Such cultures believe that a couple is cursed by God if they are unable to have children. These

traditional beliefs about childlessness are not found in the Bible. However, Christians from such a community may be influenced by the beliefs of their people without realizing it. It is this influence, and not the teaching of the Bible, which makes them angry and bitter when they cannot have children. If the couple is seeking to follow the Lord faithfully and there is no hidden sin in their lives, the couple is not being cursed by God as traditional beliefs many state. In cases such as these, religious couples must learn to not rely on the traditional beliefs of their people, but on the eternal truth of the word of God. The two systems of beliefs of religious and tradition of the people are very different in approaching the issue of childlessness. Also, good medical attention is necessary and should be consulted.

The scripture speaks of children as a gift from the Lord (Psalm 127: 3). However, the idea that childlessness shows that a couple is cursed by God is false. Also it is a totally non-Christian idea to assume that eternal life has anything to do with having children. Psalm 84: 11 says "The Lord bestows favour and honour. No good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless". So, if a couple have a reason to believe that a curse has been placed upon them by another person, such a religious couple that believe in the Lord as their God has authority to break such a curse in the name of Jesus Christ (Luke 10: 19, I John 4: 4). In every situation the couple can pray and ask the Lord, for children. This was what Isaac of the Bible did for his childless wife Rebecca (Genesis 25: 21). This also, was what Hannah the childless wife to Elkanah did (Sam. 1: 10 – 6).

If God seems still withholding children from such a religious couple after they have prayed about it, the Lord may have a reason for it. Also it may be a medical problem that can be treated medically at the same time with prayer of faith in the Lord who alone gives children. The hard truth could be that God knows that it would not be a good thing in the case of a couple's concern. Perhaps God knows that the wife would die in childbirth, breaking the heart of her husband, even her families. The Lord is a faithful and loving father to his faithful children, so, if having children will cause the couple more harm than good, the Lord is willing to spare his children from unnecessary pain and suffering. He may withhold children from a godly praying couple for their good. There may also be other reasons why God may not grant children to some couples, best known to the Lord alone.

Perhaps one reason is that he would like the couple to adopt an orphaned child to train for God. The scripture has much to say about God's compassion for the widow and the orphan (Deut. 14: 29, 24: 19 – 21). In some cultures twins are thought to be evil because of traditional beliefs. When twins are born in these societies, they are either killed or abandoned. A religious couple can have a beautiful ministry of love by taking abandoned children, do the necessary registration and give them good religious training and a home they may not have in life. Adoption of children may be a very beautiful religious solution to the problem of childlessness.

Warren (2002: 22) interpreting Isaiah 44: 2, claimed that: "Nobody on this earth is an accident. Your birth was no mistake or mishap, and your life is no fluke of nature. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did it. The above submission may imply, God may allow childlessness in some

homes to create homes to the children in the orphanages and other abandoned children on our streets.

Polygamy is the proactive having more than one husband at the same time in a society where this is allowed. Polygamy is a difficult problem in Africa. O' Donovan (1996: 288) posits that there are strong cultural arguments in support of polygamy in African society, such as: (a) having several wives as a symbol of power, wealth and influence in traditional African societies for many centuries. The same pattern probably explains why kings in the Old Testament often had several wives. (b) A man in traditional society to continue his family name into future generations. Having several wives usually ensures that he will have many male children to continue his name. (c) To have several wives and many children makes a person feel secure about his or her care at old age. (d) In agricultural societies, several wives is a way to ensure having many children and hence, the necessary laborers for farming, cattle herding and housework.

Though all these and even more are very important in traditional societies. These are part of the failures many families could not be in the ideal of God's plan. Family life itself is a product of marriage relationships. It may be because of modern/man-made life of sin and wayward life style of people that God seems to have given them into a debased mind. This sinful lifestyle hinders young adults and older ones from seeing marriage union as sacred and religious union. The implication is, duties and obligations which are essential for the good upbringing of the children are neglected and abandoned. Okwueze (2004: 250) noted that the implication of the submission above is, it gives room for promiscuity. This is an act of having sex with a lot of people not minding the consequences. No matter the arguments, polygamy makes sense from a traditional African point of view. However, the Bible is clear that polygamy is not the will of God.

Divorce: In developed countries where polygamy is not lawful, unfaithfulness and adultery leads to divorce and often to marriage with the 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. Divorce is also extremely painful to the children. God hates divorce (Malachi 2: 16). Divorce destroys God's plan for marriage and the family. Children, who see their parent's love turn to hatred and eventually see them divorce, are deeply hurt for life. They often become bitter and negative about marriage and angry at everyone. When a divorce has taken place in a home, the children are the ones who are most hurt. The children often develop such a low view of marriage that they repeat the same pattern of immorality and divorce, which they saw in their parents. It is a pity divorce is becoming a serious problem in our world, especially in big cities. Fewer people are willing to make marriage the lifetime commitment, which the Bible teaches (Matthew 19: 6). What does God want people to do when his or her marriage partner has been unfaithful? God wants people to forgive one another. (Col. 3: 13; Matt. 6: 14 – 15). Repentance, forgiveness and healing of broken human relationships, is always God's perfect will.

There are many other problems in marriage beside unfaithfulness. The most common problems come from disagreements about money, tension over loyalty to extended family, cultural differences and the lack of talking things over. Most marriage problems have two sides to the story. Proverbs 18: 17 “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward to question him”. This is true in many marriage disputes. One person may claim they have been badly treated by their partners. However, when the whole story is known, the person who was badly treated often hurt the other by a lack of love, hurtful words, or cruel behavior. There is a medicine to cure the problems of marriage. The medicine has two parts. The two parts are called love and forgiveness. Proverbs 10: 12 “Love covers all wrongs”. Also, Colossians 3: 13 – 14 “Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them altogether in perfect unity”.

IV. FAMILY LIFE OF RELIGIOUS PEOPLE

Proverbs 18: 22 (NIV) “He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favour from the Lord”. From the scripture above, God approves one wife not wives for one man who reverence the Lord and the favour of the Lord follows him and his children. Marriage is used as an image of what the church should be in relationship to God and his Christ (Eph. 5: 25 – 32). The husband is to love his wife unconditionally and sacrificially, as Christ loved the church (Eph. 2: 25). The wife is to submit to her husband as she would submit to Christ (Eph. 5: 22). Both of these responsibilities are only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Parents’ task of raising children includes the responsibilities of giving their children thorough good religious instructions with good moral examples in the way of the Lord (Gen. 18: 19; Eph. 6: 1, 4). The training and instruction of children is a responsibility committed to parents by God. God wants the house to be a place of security, love care, provision, training and loving discipline for the children. The family was planned to be the special place where children would grow up in the right way. God is concerned that his people raise children who know him and obey him (Deut. 4: 40; Deut. 5: 29).

V. NEW TESTAMENT RESPONSE TO THE 21ST CENTURY MARRIAGE

In Jesus Christ, the fullness of God’s redemptive plan was revealed (John 1:16; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:10; Heb. 1:1-4). In Him, the kingdom of God has come to us, to rescue us from this present evil age and to enable us to be filled with all the fullness of God (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20; 17:21; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 3:17-19; Heb. 6:5). Because Christ has made all things new, the institution of marriage is now part of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). With His inaugural miracle at Cana, Christ honored and blessed marriage and thereby signaled His will to effect a radical transformation of the marital experience among believers (John 2:1-11). He reaffirmed the creation

view of marriage as a lifelong covenant before God between a man and a woman (Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). He exalted marriage, as did the prophets, by frequently referring to Himself as a Bridegroom (Matt. 9:15; 25:1-13; Mark 2:19, 20; cf. John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:6, 7). The gospel opens the eyes of marriage partners to see one another as persons of value and worth redeemed by Christ, each deserving of dignity and respect. This is manifested in the gracious way they love, accept and forgive each other, their willingness to listen, to understand and to connect with each other. It can also be seen in the way they reconcile their differences and resolve their conflicts. The gospel has the power to transform both natural and cultural practices, freeing each couple to explore their giftedness and develop a partnership compatible with God’s original design for marriage.

Jesus taught and modeled the way of spiritual leadership, demonstrating the appropriate limits of power and authority in relationships. He cautioned His followers not to lust after power, or to allow others to exercise undue power over them, as this is out of keeping with the principles of His kingdom. With Jesus came a new paradigm that invited both men and women to reach their full potential and to be responsive to each other’s needs. Service to one another, humility and respect, rather than domination and control, characterize His followers (Matt. 18:1-4; 20:25-28; 23:1-12; Mark 9:35; 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:2-17; Phil. 2:1-8).

The marriage and family relationships of Christians are shaped by these gospel principles (Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Peter 3:1-7; 1 John 2:9, 10). At the cross of Christ humankind has been brought together and the barriers that have created inequalities between Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female broken down (Rom. 2:11; 3:23; 1 Cor. 11:11; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-18). Unity in marriage is achieved by mutual respect and love. No one is superior (Eph. 5:21-28). Paul’s understanding that husbands and wives have equal rights and responsibilities in their sexual relationship exemplifies the larger mutuality to which Christian couples are called in marriage (1 Cor. 7:3, 4). The entrance of sin led to the subjection of the wife to the husband, however, the gospel emphasizes the love and submission of all believers, including husbands and wives, to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21). Scripture gives special attention to the accomplishment in marriage of this mutual submission of believers. Husbands and wives are to submit to one another, wives through their love, respect and honor for their husbands (Eph 5:33; Col. 2:18; Titus 2:4; 1 Peter 3:1, 2), and husbands through their self-sacrificing love for their wives (1 Cor. 7:3, 4; Eph. 5:21, 24, 25). Husbands are called to honor their wives as fellow heirs of salvation in a grace-filled marriage (1 Peter 3:7). The principles of the gospel preclude either husband or wife assuming rulership within marriage.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Young people preparing for marriage should be well tutored with practical counseling of what marriage is all about. They should know their responsibilities as parents

- in teaching, training, correcting their children in love and be ready to show good godly examples to their children.
- ✓ Parents should avoid favoritism among their children/wards. Rather equal love to all in the family even outside.
 - ✓ Family altar is important in every religious family teaching religious and good moral principles, these will guide all in the family to please the Lord.
 - ✓ Parents should practice what they teach or claim to be, not saying one thing and doing another.
 - ✓ In the schools, especially primary and post primary, much attention should be given to moral instructions to both students and teachers to correct the errors carried from homes.
 - ✓ There should be legal backing to discipline in our school system to check indiscipline in our schools and society at large.
 - ✓ Welfare institutions should give punitive measures toward uncaring parents who allow indiscipline in their homes and society.
 - ✓ Men/fathers should know, carry out their legitimate duties in training their children, wives, unclear or extended families.
 - ✓ Godly morals should be the ideal and should be admired by all, homes offices and at all position of authority.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Religious family should desire uppermost to make each member of the family know what is expected from him/her. As soon as the father, mother and children understand their roles, and enforcement to make sure each person is discharging his or duties and responsibilities, God will be glorified. There will be peace and harmony in our homes and society. One clear fact is marriage is found in all cultures of the world in some form. According to the Bible, marriage was the very first human social institution. God himself planned marriage when he created mankind as male and female and then performs the very first marriage himself.

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