

**THE UNBELIEVING PARTNER IN THE DILEMMA OF CHRISTIANS' DIVORCE: AN
EXEGETICAL STUDY OF 1CORINTHIANS 7:12-15**

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Abstract

With the recent surge in domestic violence (which has been claiming lives) being witnessed in most Christian families especially in Africa, strongly heated debates on divorce is taking the stage amongst both the Christian clergies and laities. Of course, except for the sin of infidelity in marriage, Christ in the Holy Bible condemns divorce. But then when issues amongst married partners become as turbulent as to pose a threat to human life considering the sacredness of life, how can divorce be viewed especially when separation could not remedy the situation? This paper attempts an exegetical study and application to Paul's epistle of 1Corinthians 7:12-15, arguing that divorce could be applicable in handling marital quagmire when traits of an unbeliever is discovered in a Christian partner. The paper submits that doing this would go a long way in reducing the loss of human lives through domestic violence as seen in most African societies today.

Key words: Unbeliever, partner, dilemma, divorce, exegesis

Introduction

Marriage undoubtedly, remains an institution ordained by God right from the beginning of creation. Being fully aware of how lonely, boring and burdensome life would be for the first man (Adam) if he is to remain alone, God created a companion for him in the person of Eve, the first woman (Genesis 1:26-2:1ff) and this of course marks the beginning of the union of man and woman as husband and wife. Ironically, the Bible at this point did not contain much detailed records of how Adam lived with Eve. Thus coming to this present age, marriage appears to be a very difficult institution to handle. The mantra "for better, for worse" which is commonly recited by priests and couples at the officiating of weddings has apparently been interpreted from both positive and negative aspects and these interpretations have in turn influenced modern days' Christians' attitude towards marriage. As strange as it may sound, many have lost their lives just for the sake of Christian marriage. Others who appear to be on the defensive have refused to die for the sake of it and therefore have chosen divorce as their escape route despite being Christians.

Meanwhile, divorce as a concept has enjoyed various approaches from today's Christian scholars as well as laymen; the conservative ones would always raise a red flag to it no matter how difficult a marriage may appear while the liberal ones still advocate for it when sustaining a marriage becomes too vigorous. Hence, it has continued to pose a serious challenge for the Christian faith. This paper hopes to bring more enlightenment into the issue of divorce among Christians through an exegetical study of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 1:12-15). It maintains that when

the attitude of one of the partners in a marriage depicts that of a non Christian; being violent (physically, abusively and otherwise), opposed to positive change and lack of Christ-like attributes, the other partner should not be in any dilemma at all in opting for separation which can equally be accompanied by divorce if inevitable.

Clarification of Key Terms

In a critical discussion such as this, it is very vital for one to be as coherent and comprehensive as possible. Hence, for this to be achieved, it becomes very expedient that the major or key terms used in the paper be clarified or rather defined. This would be done as follows.

Unbeliever

An unbeliever, according to Hornby (2010), is a person who does not believe, especially in God, a religion etc. In other words, someone who does not accept the ways and principles of God or a religion could be tagged an unbeliever. While explaining the adjective 'unbelieving', he presents it as "feeling or showing that you do not believe somebody or something" (p.1616). It is quite easy to see that the adjective 'unbelieving' as used in the topic of the paper has a lot to do with actions which manifests out of one's feelings or emotions. This equally implies that an unbelieving person especially one who does not believe in God, will also manifest actions or behaviours that are contrary to the tenets of the Christian God.

Partner

The word 'partner' as Hornby (2010) renders it, serves as both noun and verb. Since the use in the topic of discussion is that of noun, its noun meaning would be presented. Thus, explaining the term 'partner' as a noun, he maintains that it is a person that one is married to or having a sexual relationship with. In other words, in terms of marriage, a partner is either, one's husband or one's wife. It is therefore quite common to see people talk of 'marriage partner (s)'.

Dilemma

This is a situation which makes problems (conflict of interests), often one in which you have to make a very difficult choice between things of equal importance (Hornby, 2010:407). Obviously, the above explanation fits into the condition which problematic marriage puts a Christian spouse into. Since most people would not want to deal with the stigma attached to being divorced in

marriage, they have chosen to remain in destructive marriages with some having to pay with their lives. However, with a careful exegesis on the text as presented, the paper aims at mitigating this dilemma over divorce when faced with a turbulent marriage.

Divorce

As simply put by Hornby (2010), the term divorce (both a noun and a verb) is the legal ending of a marriage. As a verb, it simply means the process of ending one's marriage to somebody legally. Undoubtedly, without marriage, no one would be talking of divorce. Marriage in itself as mentioned earlier in the introduction, is a basic societal institution which has proven quite delicate to handle over the years. Ukoma (2010) explains marriage is a mystical and physical union between a man and a woman and that marriage either in African context, biblical or the Greek concept is meant for the lifelong companionship between spouses. This explanation is apparently one of the reasons why divorce is frowned at in Christian marriage.

However, Ukpong (2014) goes on to present divorce as a legal dissolution of the marriage relation; any formal separation of a man and his wife according to established custom; a complete separation of any kind. This also implies that there cannot be divorce except there was a legal bond of marriage. For Fromme (1969), divorce is a recognized datum of modern life, though it is not socially approved. Eyo (2018) further observes that it (divorce) is anti-social and unlike marriage is not often celebrated – no fanfare, eating, dancing, etc. It is often gloomy and very traumatic because of the reason(s) and the concomitants of divorce. Divorce is never a day's journey, it takes time and in some cases it is very cumbersome. The reason for divorce process being cumbersome is to give the couple time for proper thinking and a re-think about their decision to divorce and this is where the dilemma comes into play.

Exegesis

According to the New Catholic Encyclopedia (1967), the term exegesis is the explanation of a passage or a book of the Bible. The Greek word *exhghsivj* from which the English word exegesis is derived means literally a leading out. The purpose of exegesis, therefore, is "to bring-out" "to set forth", and explain an author's thought. Since the sacred scriptures are divinely inspired books,

the purpose of Biblical exegesis is to set forth and explain their full thoughts not only as human documents but also as writings containing God's word and God's revelation.

In the words of Zuck (2002), "Exegesis is the exposition or explanation of a text based on a careful, objective analysis"(p.17). The word for him literally means "to lead out of". That means that the interpreter is led to his conclusions by following the text. Obviously, only exegesis does justice to the Biblical text. It is concerned with discovering the true meaning of the text, respecting its grammar, syntax, and setting. Exegesis allows us to agree with the Bible.

The process of exegesis involves (1) Observation: what does the passage say? (2) Interpretation: what does the passage mean? (3) Correlation: how does the passage relate to the rest of the Bible? And (4) Application: how should this passage affect one's life?

Exegesis, simply put is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, particularly a religious text. It is a systematic process by which a person arrives at a reasonable and coherent sense of the meaning and message of a biblical passage. Here, an understanding of the original text (Greek and Hebrew) is required.

The Dilemma of the Christians' Divorce

Amongst Christians today especially in Africa, so many things or rather ugly experiences in marriages have made the dilemma of divorce inevitable in most homes. To understand these ugly experiences, it would be better to consider them as possible causes of Christian divorce. Meanwhile, careful researches by sociologists, psychologists, medical scientists, as well as religious clerics, have exposed some of these causes which includes religious reasons; varying choice of Christian denominations, economic reasons, sexual incompatibility, infidelity, medical reasons, addiction, age at first marriage, unrealized expectations, change in social status, domestic violence etc.

However, looking at the above listed causes, this paper is of the view that in the face of choosing whether to divorce or not, each of them could be logically deliberated upon except for infidelity (extra marital sexual affairs) and domestic violence which is considered most dangerous. This position is taken considering the threat domestic violence poses to human life. In most recent times, the rate of people who have died as a result of fights amongst married couples has been on the rise

especially in Nigeria. Amongst many which could not make it to the wide media surface is the case of a Christian Gospel artist known as Mrs. Osinachi Nwachukwu (now late), who has been going suffering marital abuse in the hands of her supposed Christian husband for a long time. News reports even have that in all these years, many have suggested divorce to her but being a Christian who would not want to dent her Christian faith, she never considered it or probably was still in dilemma of it, till she was battered to death by her husband.

Again, many have been in this dilemma of divorce even when violently abused just for the reason of securing their children's future. Even some married men, in order to avoid being ridiculed and termed weaklings by the society have kept mute and died in the hands of their violent and abusive wives who ironically, are known as Christian mothers in various churches.

Apparently, anybody who calls himself or herself a Christian must act like Jesus Christ both in words and in deeds. Hence, anyone whose attitude does not depict that of Christ is an unbeliever and should be treated as one. This paper maintains that this notion should come to play when divorce is being considered over a married infested with domestic violence. But then, to avoid jumping into a quick and unverified conclusion, an exegetical study of the selected text becomes necessary at this point. This would go a long way in helping one to understand what St. Paul actually meant when he refers to an 'unbelieving partner' in marriage.

Nevertheless, Elkanah (2013) notes that in regards to marriage, divorce and remarriage Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7 that a Christian couple should neither divorce nor separate; however if it happens they should remain unmarried or else reconciled (vv. 10–11). To a mixed couple he said the believing spouse should not divorce the unbelieving spouse (vv. 12–13). He mentions the rationale why the believing spouse should remain with the unbelieving one if he or she agrees to remain also (vv. 14, 15c–16). Nonetheless if the unbelieving spouse decides to separate or divorce the believing one, the believer is not under bondage to the marriage covenant anymore (v. 15a–b). The Pauline treatment of the subject asks the questions: what does it mean not to be under bondage? Who is an unbeliever? Or even what does it mean to be an unbeliever? The exegetical approach as would be applied would help in addressing these questions.

Establishment of the Textual Form and Orientation

Here, effort is made to view the text, Ephesians 6:1-4 with an exegetical lens, pointing out its textual problems if any. This would be followed by the delimitation/orientation of the text.

a. Textual Criticism of 1 Corinthians 7:12-15

Nestle-Aland presents the text as:

¹² Toi/j de. loipoi/j le,gw evgw. ouvc o` ku,rioj\ ei; tij avdelfo.j
gunai/ka e;cei a;piston kai. au[th suneudokei/ oivkei/n metV auvtou/(
mh. avfie,tw auvth,n\ ¹³ kai. gunh. ei; tij e;cei a;ndra a;piston kai. ou-
toj suneudokei/ oivkei/n metV auvth/j(mh. avfie,tw to.n a;ndra¹⁴
h`gi,astai ga.r o` avnh.r o` a;pistoj evn th/| gunaiki. kai. h`gi,astai h`
gunh. h` a;pistoj evn tw/| avdelfw/\ evpei. a;ra ta. te,kna u`mw/n
avka,qarta, evstin(nu/n de. a[gia, evstin¹⁵ eiv de. o` a;pistoj
cwri,zetai(cwrize,sqw\ ouv dedou,lwtai o` avdelfo.j h'h` avdelfh. evn
toi/j toiou,toij\ evn de. eivrh,nh| ke,klhken u`ma/j o` qeo,j¹⁶

A comparison of this text with other variants reveals few textual difficulties. In other words, the text does not have many textual problems. This section would be devoted to the few prominent ones. An obvious variant is seen in v. 14. Here, Nestle-Aland has *avdelfw* (brother) and this is where the significance of ¹⁴⁶ for the text comes into play. The noun *avdelfw* as seen here is in affinity with κ (*Sinaiticus*), A (*Alexandrinus*), B (*Vaticanus*) instead of *ándri* (*husband*) which is the popular option in other manuscripts.¹⁴⁶ presents alternative translation of $\eta\mu\alpha\varsigma$ (*us*) over $\acute{\upsilon}\mu\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ (*you*) in v. 15; hence changing the phrase ‘called you’ into ‘called us’ which is in affinity with *Vaticanus* and has also been adopted by most modern translations (NIV, NASB, RSV and others). Therefore, going by the *Lectio difficilio* which states that the more difficult reading a manuscript has, the closer it is to the original, the text here is taken to be closer to the original and to account to other readings in the other manuscripts.

b. Presentation of a Working Translation

The proposed working translation is presented as follows: “¹²But the rest, I speak, not the Lord, if any brother has an unbelieving woman and she agrees to live with him, let him not let her go. ¹³

And any woman if she has an unbelieving man and he agrees to live with her, let her not let him go. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving man is sanctified in the wife and the unbelieving woman is sanctified in the brother. Since therefore your children were unclean, but now are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving separates, let him separate, the brother or the sister is not under subjection in such. But in peace, God has called us.”

c. Delimitation of the Text

Generally, Paul begins the epistle with his usual *epistolary* greetings then almost immediately responds to the problem of division and disagreement in the Church. No one owns the Church but Christ; therefore he calls them to unite in Christ (chaps 1–4). There are other serious issues within the faith community like incest for which he says the person should be disciplined; he frowned on lawsuit due to their position in Christ, and also addressed immorality (chaps 5–6). There are others issues like marriage and divorce (chap 7), food sacrifice to idols (chaps 8–11), worship and spiritual gifts (chaps 11–14), the resurrection (chap 15), collections and travel (chap 16).

The opening of chap 7: 1 (cf. 8, 12 & 16) may point to 1: 11 on the source of Paul's information. He discussed varieties of marital issues ranging from sexuality, divorce, remarriage, celibacy, interfaith marriage and others. He was careful to distinguish between Christ's command and his, which subjects his command to Christ's authority; rather than to differ from it (cf. v. 25). Just as Elkanah (2013) observes, it appears that the heart of his message may be summed up in the principle that *In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God* (v. 24) which is evident in his discussion in 7: 2, 8, 10, 11, 12–16, 26–27, 37, 40 where exceptions are allowed. Thus, Paul admonishes the faith community on the following: that married couples should remain faithful to one another and sexually active (vv. 1–6); celibacy is an option (vv. 7–8); that reconciliation not divorce is the response to separation which is not allowed (vv. 10–11); interfaith marriage (vv. 12–16). He turned his focus on the unmarried again where he substantiated his thoughts on celibacy and status (vv. 25–40).

The word *avpistoj* as used in the text

Effort is made here to briefly evaluate the word *avpistoj* (unbeliever/unbelieving) from both the New and Old Testament perspectives. This is expected to bring as well as give a better understanding and appreciation of the text.

Old Testament Perspective

Garland (2003) notes that the word *avpistoj*; unbeliever or unbelief appears foreign to the Old Testament; except one turns to *pistoj* in order to understand the concept of *avpistoj* better. The Old Testament according to him, views *pistoj* (*believe* or *belief*) as man's response, usually in either fear or trust, to God's primary action. The Old Testament synonym of the word is אמן (*firm, secure, reliable*); interestingly, it is viewed as a character which remains with the subject; therefore, it demands a relationship between abstract and practical reality without which it is no longer אמן.

The opposite of the above analysis is the absence of belief, trust, and faithfulness between the subject and object. Nehemiah 9: 30 gives the idea of a broken faith between God and Israel which Malachi 2: 10, 11, 14 address from another angle that Judah was בגד (*faithless*) to Yahweh since they profaned their ancestral covenant due to exogamy.

New Testament Perspective

For Bruce (1980), the Greek *avpistoj* and its other forms appear 23 times in the New Testament alone. Luke used it to mean 'faithless' (9: 41); 'unfaithful' (12: 46) and 'incredible' (Acts 26: 8). John used once as 'doubt' (John 20: 27) and 'faithless' (Rev 21: 8); Matthew (17: 17) and Mark (9: 19) each used it once to mean 'faithless'. Paul used it 16 times in his epistles: 14 times in Corinthian while twice in Titus and Timothy. He appears to have only used *avpistoj* to convey a state of unbelieving. Just as Bruce (1980) observes, the Gospels mostly used the word to mean the absence of believe while Paul's primary use was to address the *pistoj-avpistoj* relations since the believers are living among the unbelievers. This is a case of a minority living among an ungodly majority. Therefore, it is challenging the believers to relate with unbelievers but also be different.

Going by the above presentations, one can still ask; how do we translate *avpistoj* as seen in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15? Elkanah (2013) submits that Bible scholars across the divide have translated it as unbeliever. One can still further ask if it could be understood as 'unfaithful', 'doubtful' or 'incredible'. A careful interpretation or look at the text as it is can go a long way in providing answers to these questions.

Interpretation and Analysis of the Text (1 Corinthians 7: 12–15)

The interpretation and the analysis of the text can appear in the following form: an instruction or exhortation against divorce in all Christian believers' marital union and in a Christian believer versus non Christian believer's marital union. Apostle Paul clearly states the sources of the instructions he gave here. As is seen in v.10, he states, "not I but the Lord". Then in v.12, he states, "I and not the Lord". Apparently, just as Elkanah (2013) observes, these distinct sources raises so many questions amongst so many Christians and Bible scholars. Why the distinction? Does his command agree with Christ's or not? The questions are very important and necessary because he made the distinction and probably wanted his readers to note it for a reason. Therefore, how would they have responded to it? A look at the instruction is quite necessary here.

i. The Instruction

Paul's instruction appears in verses 12, 13 and it is directed to the believing spouse in marriage to an unbelieving spouse. The presence of *ἀφίετω* and *αὐτοῖς* together convey the meaning of *to leave* or *divorce*. The Christian is prohibited to divorce *μη ἀφίετω* their unbelieving spouse and their believing spouse (v. 11). Therefore, for Paul, the prohibition on divorce applies in both Christian and non-Christian and Christian-Christian marriage contexts. However, he was stricter on the Christian-Christian union for he seems to say no divorce absolutely; but on the Christian and non-Christian marriage he left it conditioned in the hands of the non-Christian.

The instruction is preceded by *suneudokei/* (*applaud, approve and consent*) *oivkei/n* (*to live/dwell*). If the unbelieving spouse consents to live with the believing one, the believer should not issue the bill of divorcement. Interestingly, even if the unbelieving spouse leaves, the believing spouse is obviously not allowed to initiate the divorce. Rather the unbeliever is the one who is allowed to do this (v. 15). The presence of *eiv* in the text introduces a first class condition as Wallace (1996) notes. The use of *tij* (*any*) makes it a general rather than a particular protasis and it is a valid argument. So the condition in the text is 'undetermined' because of the 'reason of man's actions or choices' (Boyer, 1981). Moreover the condition deals more with *possibilities* than *realities* i.e. the condition portrays a 'probable or doubtful' (possibilities) than a 'true or false' (realities) condition. Therefore, the ground of the above instruction is when the unbelieving spouse agrees to live with the believer despite their different faiths and this directly puts the key to the success of the marriage in their hands. This is equally why he (Paul) goes on to state that in marriage, the

unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing one and this makes their children pure or holy. Their agreement to live together and raise godly children ensures the peace which God has called them to; "called to peace" (v.15c).

1 Corinthians 7:12-15: Hermeneutical Approach

At this point, it must be stated clearly that this paper does not in any way wish to go in support of divorce in Christian marriage of the present day but then tries to look at difficult situations in Christian marriages which could make divorce an inevitable option. The paper also wishes to draw the attention of the reader to the fact that Christianity should not be seen as a mere religious identity or rather a religion. This is because, even from the biblical point of view, Christianity is a lifestyle. Of course the name 'Christian' is said to have originated in Antioch in Syria. It was given to the apostles of Jesus Christ by non-believers who observed and saw that they (the apostles) were behaving like Christ (Acts 11:26). What this implies is that as long as the Christian faith is concerned, one who does not act and is not acting like Christ is obviously not a Christian and thus is an 'unbelieving Christian' or simply put, 'an unbeliever'. Thus as against Paul's days when *avpistoj* (unbeliever) only refers to Gentiles or non-Christians, amongst Christians today, there are obviously a myriads of 'Christian Unbelievers'.

Apparently, Paul was very clear in stating that the fate of interfaith marriage should be on the unbelieving partner who decides whether to remain in the marriage or not. This is undoubtedly because in his days, it is quiet easy to distinguish between the 'Christians' and 'non-Christians'. What then happens in our contemporary African societies where Christianity has spread like wide fire and virtually a great majority profess to be Christians and yet in homes where there is Christian versus Christian marriage, domestic violence and abuse is becoming the order of the day?

The paper is thus maintaining the view that a spouse who claims to be a Christian but then exhibits attitudes that do not emanate from Jesus Christ is even worse than an 'unbelieving partner' (*avpistoj*). Thus the paper uses the phrase "Unbelieving Partner" for such a spouse and where and when he or she exists in a Christian marriage, the other partner or spouse who suffers as the victim should not dwell in any dilemma of opting for divorce. A Christian spouse who takes to abusive, verbal and physical assaults against the partner in marriage has by virtue of such acts decided not to remain, dwell or live with the partner which is the condition Paul gives in his instruction in the

exegetical text (1 Corinthians 7:12-15) as what permits separation or divorce. Hence if he or she is not showing any sign of change, remaining in such marriage could be suicidal for the victimized partner.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Paul's exhortation summarized v.15 by stating that God has called us to peace as Christians. One of the greatest attributes of peace is long and sound life. Hence whatever that poses as a threat to human life does not in any way guarantee peace. So this paper is a wakeup call to all married Christians who are going through life threatening issues in their marriages, not to relent in giving the right interpretations to their situation and as well taking the right decision. Of course, divorce should not be the first step. Separation can be applied but when it cannot give the desired result, one should not nurse the dilemma of divorce for long.

Undoubtedly, some persons who are experiencing turbulent marriages have presented the fate of their children as reasons why ending the marriage is very difficult. While such cases may play out, such persons should equally consider the fact a marriage or home void of peace and sanctity does not affect the children positively either.

The paper thus recommends the need for modern exegetical interpretation of the scriptures considering the present condition of humanity. Humans are gradually degenerating back to barbaric state in modern times. Most of the admonitions, commands and instructions seen in the Bible were given at a time when Christian and brotherly love still rules the heart of men. Hence modern biblical scholars and exegetes as well as the clergies should endeavour to always interpret the scriptures bearing in mind the current trend of things in human society. God's standard does not change; he is the giver and sustainer of life and has always revealed to man the sacred nature of life. Thus with special focus on the issue of divorce, if it is the only option that would guarantee life, let it be considered for a violent and unruly partner in a Christian marriage is an 'unbelieving partner'.

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