

THE TEACHING OF PAUL ON THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF MARRIAGE AND HOME: THE RELEVANCE TO THE CHURCH

BY

Rev Edwin .O. Nwanchor (PhD)

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

Faculty Of Arts

Department of Religion and Human Relations

+2348037508681 oe.nwanchor@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Marriage, which is essential to Gods plan of happiness was instituted among our first parents Adam and eve, even before the fall. In every dispensation, prophets bearing the holy priesthood have taught Gods internal plan and have been witnesses to the central nature of marriage and the family or the home in that plan. One of those prophets was Paul. During his ministry in the meridian of times, Paul encountered a church membership that was changing with the influx of Gentile converts. These converts many of whom were Greek, had been reared in a morally corrupt society and were often undisciplined and self-conceited. At times, their background created disorder within their branches and prompted numerous questions as they struggled to understand what true discipleship entailed. Questions arose regarding marriage. Paul responded with sensitivity yet directness as he clarified the relevant doctrines. It is evident from the frequency of Paul's counsel on marriage and family that he placed great importance on the subject of marriage and the home. Paul's teachings on marriage and home centered on mutual love, honour

and fidelity viewing marriage as a sacred covenant reflecting Christ and the church, he highlights marriage as honorable encouraging sexual intimacy within it to avoid temptation, while also valuing singleness for devoted service to God. The home is to be characterized by mutual submission and sacrifice. Paul exhorts the women in the Ephesians branch of the church to submit themselves to their own husbands (literarily becomes subject or obedient to), as they would to the lord, comparing the husband and the family to Christ and the church. And he also charges the husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5; 25), as their savior loved the church, so that they might sanctify and perfect their families through love. Paraphrasing one of the great commandments, 'so ought men to love their wives as their own body, he that loveth his wife loveth himself' (Ephesians 5; 28). A husband is not to rule as a tyrant over his wife but is to preside in love. Methodology, primary and secondary sources are used for data collection while multidimensional approach is used for the interpretation of data. The purpose of the study is to investigate the relevance of this teaching to the society. One of the findings of the research is that marriage and the home is the bases upon which the larger society is built. It is recommended that marriages should be patterned according to Christ and the church relationship.

Keywords: Paul, Teaching, Biblical, marriage, Home

Introduction

Thus the need to discuss how we should make “Paul’s teaching on Marriage and Home” relevant to the church, based on our cultural setting. “If the gospel of Jesus Christ is to have a deep impact on the African people, so that ‘they have life and have it abundantly’, then we must allow the Gospel to speak in cultural situation of the Africans. Marriage is a good venture, just as undertaking a leadership role is also a good venture. Paul says in I Cor. 7:8, “To the unmarried... I say that it is well for them to remain single... but if they

cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflamed with passion. "From the above statement, it is obvious that Paul advocates a chastity and purity style of life that is not marred and stained by sexual immorality. Paul opines that the purity of the body should be maintained. He therefore "warns in I Cor. 6 against sexual looseness." He drives home the truth that the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord (v.13). Paul thus makes a valid distinction between the need of the body for food and satisfying sexual appetite. The body cannot exist without food, but it can exist without sexual indulgence. The body, unlike food, will not be destroyed but will be transformed and glorified.

The youths who are involved in pre-marital relationships have a different concept of sex. A female girl who plays at sex for which she is not ready, what she fundamentally wants is love, and a body who plays at love, for which he is not ready, what he wants is sex. This is not the way for two people of opposite sex to satisfy their sexual urge. Not only is the body for the Lord, but the Lord is for the body. The spirit of God and sensual appetites struggle to dominate man's desire. It is man's responsibility to accept one or to reject the other. Christ wants to be Lord over man's total being. Thus marriage should be done properly, and decently. Why? This is because "sexual union constitutes a permanent bond between two parties." The act is incorporated into their lives and can never be removed. "Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, the two shall become one flesh".

Though marriage is a "legal union of a man and a woman as husband and wife... it does not matter whether the marriage was contracted prior to or after conversion, whether it is a customary or court or church marriage". To Paul, marriage is more than just a legal contract, it is a spiritual contract also, which is established through sexual intercourse. Therefore whether both of them are Christians or not, neither of them can renounce this union. They are

psychosomatically one. It is a mystical union that can be likened to that which takes place between a believer and Jesus Christ (v.17). A believer being the wife, and Christ the husband and metaphorically – a believer is one body with Christ.

As for the Yoruba people of West Africa, it is a taboo for a lady to be disvirgined before she is legitimately given in marriage to her husband. The tradition is that, until the night of the marriage the couple were not to have sex together. On the night of marriage a white cloth would be spread on the bed to receive the virginity blood. This blood-stained cloth would be sent to the parents of the bride with keg(s) of Palm-wine and some other gifts in appreciation of the fact that the parents took a good care of their daughter. Her parents too would bless her for not bringing shame upon the family. But if it happened otherwise, it would become a dance of shame, and the lady might be cursed. In order to check the spread of HIV/AIDS, high rate of divorce and broken homes, unwanted pregnancies and bastards, all of which the occidental civilization has brought to us, we need to return to our cultural heritage of premarital chastity.

The Concept of Marriage and Home

“Paul’s teaching about marriage as presented in I Corinthians 7 is multifaceted and somehow complex. His remarks need careful examination. His ideas of marriage was a reaction to the Corinthian situation and cannot be regarded as Paul’s total view of marriage.” According to Erdman;

It seems certain that some Christians regarded marriage as an absolute duty. Others considered the marriage state as an inferior moral condition, a weak concession to the flesh. Still others held that by accepting Christ all existing social relationships, including marriage, were dissolved.

“In simple terms, Paul considered that marriage was to be maintained as inviolable.” This idea of marriage was so much a part of Paul, that almost without “thinking” he could use it as an illustration while discussing another subject altogether. He writes;

Do you not know brethren – for I am speaking to those who know the law that the law is binding on a person only during his life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as she lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband.

Paul reiterates this same understanding of the life-long permanence of marriage union, repeating and affirming the law of Christ (Rom. 7:1-2, cf I Cor. 7:10-11).

Paul also considering there should be order, harmony and decorum within any Christian group, small or large, and that within the marriage relationship the husband is head of his wife, did not fail to acknowledge the existing cultural norms of his day and to stress the equality that should exist between husband and wife and the mutual responsibilities of both of them.

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule his own body, but the wife does.

Key Aspects of Paul’s Teachings On Marriage:

Monogamy

Paul’s advocacy of monogamy and abstinence from fornication and adultery is very strong. Many scholars agree that polygamists should not be prevented from becoming members of the Church and should not be denied the right to sacraments. But people who are already Christians should be encouraged not to become polygamists. If not

for any strong reason, but for the now-prevalent venereal diseases and especially the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In the past polygamy was prevalent in Africa because of infantile mortality and it allowed individuals to have many children to work on the farm. However this is no longer the case today. Paul does not deny the romantic aspect of marriage neither does he regard marriage as a concession to fleshly appetite, nor as an escape mechanism for those too weak to bridle their passions.

Christians Are Members of the Body of Christ

For Paul marriage is honorable (Eph. 5:25-27), and that one of the practical results of marriage is the avoidance of temptation in the area of sex. Christians are members of Christ's body and concerning this Paul says, "shall I therefore take the members of Christ (i.e. Christian bodies) and make them members of a prostitute? (I Cor. 6:15b; cf. 12:27). In this statement Paul included "an incidental prohibition of polygamy". Thus, the husband and wife should not give chance to anything that will lead either, the husband to another woman or the woman to another man, either in remarriage or for temporary enjoyment. For Paul, the prevailing circumstances as well as the inviting and enticing societal pressure should not be allowed to hold a believer captive. Therefore, a Christian couple should not engage in a prolonged abstinence from each other. To Paul, celibacy means abstention (I wish that all were as I myself am, but each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another), and marriage means no deprivation from one another. Why? Because, both celibacy and marriage are gifts (charisma – gracious gift) from God. Therefore just as abstinence, is important to celibacy so also is sexual relation important to marriage. "For Paul, the marriage bed is both a union (cf 6:16) and an affirmation that the two mutually and totally belong to one another." Sex is a way of expressing physically the inner unity of two made one flesh. It is a way of sharing oneself

with the beloved and of being fused together in union and communion.

Believers Not To Marry Unbelievers

Another problem at Corinthian Church is the issue of ‘mixed marriages between believers and unbelievers. If the unbeliever refuses to remain with the believer in marriage the Christian is free from obligation to sustain the marriage, but Paul is silent on the issue of remarriage. Paul’s opinions on divorce conform with Jesus’ injunction in Mk. 10:12; Mt. 5:31; 19:9; Lk. 16:18). Here Paul gives no room for a Christian to give a letter of divorce, but to remain with each other for life and for better for worse. But initiation of divorce must come from the unbelieving partner. In that case, the Christian partner would no longer be under any obligation (I Cor. 7:15). There is no consensus about what Paul precisely meant. Paul was probably saying to the Christian husband or wife: “if you find yourself abandoned by your non-Christian spouse, you are no longer bound by the constraints of the divinely given laws that govern marriage. You are free to remarry”.

The high standard of marriage viewed by Paul is not lowered at all in Ephesians (Eph. 5:22-23). Thus, Paul uses marriage relationship between husband and wife as an analogy for the bond that has been forged between Christ and the believing community. Concerning this mystical union Paul says: “this is a profound mystery but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). Why, of all human institutions that existed at that time, did he select the institution of marriage as an illustration of the relationship between the believing community and the Lord? The answer would seem to be that Paul held marriage in high esteem as the perfect example of “oneness” forged through love between two parties.

Marriage of Church Leaders/Priests

On marriage of church leaders Paul says that each of them must be above reproach, and husband of one wife. This is a notoriously difficult expression, and consequently it has resulted in various translations and interpretations:

- (1) It has been understood as prohibition of second marriages (e.g. Tertulian);
- (2) It is an enforcement of monogamy for Christian ministers as opposed to polygamy often practiced in the contemporary heathen world;
- (3) It means simply that a bishop should show an example of strict morality (Scott). It can therefore be deduced here that Paul advocates in strong terms a return to the kind of marriage which God instituted; a marriage of one husband to one wife. Thus I advance the view that polygamy is the daughter of sin, and it can only thrive outside the will and control of God. Now that the marriage contract has been signed and agreement reached, it is required that the home be maintained and sustained. There must be harmony and peace that makes the home enjoyable and lively. (Col. 3:18-4:1)

Paul's teaching On the Home

This issue of mutual submissiveness in marriage is part of the ethical teachings of Paul (Rom. 12:9-16; Phil. 2:3-4). Thus, in the sections of Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and Col. 3:18-4:1, the Christian wife is enjoined to be submissive but this is a virtue which all Christians are encouraged to show to one another. Paul says: "Be subject to one another out of reverence of Christ. Wives be subject to your husbands as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:21-22). According to Bruce:

The household (familiar) was recognized as a stabilizing element in ancient society, and treatises on household administration were

common. The household was wider than the nuclear family of the Western world today. It included all who were under the authority of its head.

In New Testament times the head of a household might be a woman, like Lydia of Philippi (Acts 16:1), Chloe of Corinth, who may or may not have been a Christian (I Cor. 1:11), and Nymphas of the Lycums valley (Col. 4:15).

But usually the head of the household was a man, who exercised within it the authority of a husband, a father, and a master. In the literary treatment of household administration, codes of domestic behaviour were a regular feature. In these, the mutual duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves, and so forth were prescribed.

Obviously, the inclusion of such summaries of domestic responsibilities here and in (Eph. 5:22-6:9), shows a sense of values of the closest and most familiar relationships of daily living that the reality of one's Christian profession will normally manifest. This is called "house-tables" or "house-hold tables" or "family-tables". They are here divided into three correlative parts of discussions.

Husbands and Wives (Col. 3:18-19)

This aspect deals with the mutual duties of wives and husbands. The family was a long-established social unit, as the church was not. The church was God's new creation, and provided a setting in which the principles of the new creation could be put into practice. "In the church, women had equal status with men and slaves with free persons, just as Gentiles had with Jews". But the structure of the family was already in existence and it was no part of the business of early Christianity to destabilize society, which would have been the effect of a radically changed family structure. The introduction of the new principle "as is fitting in the Lord" later happened to be indeed

more revolutionary in its effect than was generally foreseen in the first Christian century. "The authority of the husband, father, and master continued to be exercised, 'as was fitting in the Lord', and it was this principle which continued to govern the relationships between the husband, wife, children and household slaves". Whatever method may be adopted for Paul's view in regard to marriage and home it should be governed by "as it is fitting in the Lord".

It is not suggested anywhere in the New Testament that the woman is naturally or spiritually inferior to man, nor the wife to the husband. The phrase "as is fitting" has a thoroughly stoic ring; but it ceases to be stoic when it is baptized into Christ by the added words, "in the Lord". When the relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, is viewed in the context expressed by these words, the essential dignity of women in general, and of wives in particular, is placed on a firm foundation.

Paul believed that there was a hierarchical order in creations, and that in this order, the man was the 'head' of the woman (I Cor. 11:3). But when he speaks his own language instead of reproducing Christian household codes, he shows himself to be ahead of his time in the liberality with which he insists on equal rights between husbands and wives, (I Cor. 7:3-4).

The wife's subordination to her husband has as its counterpart; the husband's obligation to love his wife. This is not simply a matter of affectionate feeling or sexual attraction, "it involves his active and unceasing care for her well being". Outside the church in Paul's days, a husband's legal authority over his wife was such that she had little hope of redress at law for harsh or unfeeling conduct on his part. But such should not arise in a Christian household, the forbearance and forgiveness which are enjoined in the preceding section of the letter together with compassions, kindness, humility, gentleness, and

patience, forbid a Christian man to be harsh in his treatment of anyone, especially of his own wife. In homes where there is love, good children who become good leaders in the future are produced and reared.

Parents and Children

As harmony between husband and wife is established, come the duties of children and parents. Children are enjoined to render obedience to their parents, as something, which is acceptable "in the Lord". When obedience "in all things" is laid of His the Christian family that is in view. The situation is not created here in which parental orders might go contrary to the law of Christ. In such a situation the law of Christ would have to take precedence even over parental orders, but in a spirit of love, not of since the law of Christ is the law of love. In the household forever, children and parents are bound together, "in the Lord" by the ties of natural kinship.

Children are exhorted to render obedience, parents and fathers, are urged not to irritate their children by being so little in their demands so as to make the children lose heart and think that it is useless trying to please their parents. It is Africans especially the Yoruba to train their children to be kind and humble.

Important Notes on Marriage and Home

Purpose and Sanctity: Marriage is seen as honorable and in many cases, a necessary, God given state to manage sexual desires or burn with passion.

The 'One Flesh' Union: Marriage creates a new unit, with spouses leaving their original families to form a new inseparable bond.

Mutual obligation and intimacy: Paul emphasizes that both partners have a duty to fulfill each other's sexual needs, with neither depriving the other unless by temporary mutual consent for prayer

The ‘Christ and the Church’ model: Husbands are commanded to love their wives unconditionally, sacrificially and as their own bodies, just as Christ loves the church. Wives are urged to respect or reverence their husbands.

Permanence: Marriage is intended to be for life, with divorce discouraged.

Singleness: Paul who was likely single or widowed himself, regarded singleness as a valid, sometimes preferable, gift that allows for greater devotion to the lord, though not superior to marriage.

Teachings on the Home and Relationships

Household Order: in Ephesians 5 and other letters, Paul outlines a structure where wives submit to their husbands and husbands lead with love rather than tyranny.

Sanctification of the Home: Paul notes that a believer can sanctify an unbelieving spouse, encouraging believers to stay in mixed faith marriages if the partner is willing.

Fidelity: Absolute sexual faithfulness is demanded within marriage, reflecting the purity required of the church.

Paul’s writings particularly in 1st Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5, 1st Timothy 3, provide a comprehensive, practical and spiritual guide for Christian relationships and family lives.

Conclusion

One of Paul’s most misunderstood and misquoted teachings relates to marriage. His most extensive discourse on this subject is found in the first epistle to the Corinthians, as he responded to their belief that ‘it is good for a man not to touch a woman’ 1st Corinthians 7; 1. Addressing multitude groups, Paul defended marriage as a conventional relationship.

In studying Paul's epistles, it becomes clear that Paul had a high regard for marriage. In a latter letter, Paul even described marriage as a mystery (Ephesians 5: 31-32). This word was carried over into English from the Greek word *mysterion* – was originally understood to describe the sacred rites associated with some kinds of temple worship. As such throughout all of Paul's writings marriage is to be seen as a sacred covenant connected with a temple ordinance.

To avoid misunderstanding or misconstruing Paul's counsel regarding marriage in 1st Corinthians 7, these passages must be placed in their proper context. Both missionary service and marriage were held in great esteem by Paul and were needed in their own time with nuanced recommendations given for different circumstances. Ultimately, according to Paul, 'neither is the man without the woman, neither is the woman without the man, in the lord' (1st Corinthians 11:11).

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