

BASIC DIMENSIONS OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

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Abstract

The more the foundational characteristics of marriage are exposed and taught, the better. This research examined the basic theological dimensions of marriage and explained what each of them represents. Employing a qualitative method, it discovered that among the many conceptions of marriage, five of them were cardinal to Christians. These perspectives included marriage as: a sacrament, covenant, contract etc. These dimensions discussed therein, were discovered to be contained in the scripture; some from Old Testament and others from the New Testament which provided concrete evidence to the reality of marriage and its significance to humanity. Furthermore, untainted teaching of the intention of God for marriage; without ambiguity was suggested as a crucial request for pastors and those in charge of marriage counseling among other recommendations. It concluded that couple's alliance with biblical injunctions on marriage is a prerequisite in sustaining marital bond as exemplified in the relation between Christ and His Church.

Keywords: Theology, Contract, Covenant, Sacrament, Vocation, Celebration

Introduction

The inability of our society to answer questions on marriage has led to a variety of unfruitful maneuvers. Albeit churches are persuaded to reply to these questions from an entirely religious perspective, they seem not to suffice especially in this age and time.

Many people are interested in the health, wealth, and sexual benefits that come with marriage and seek answers that satisfy their cravings (Waite, 1995). Hence, the confusion about the meaning and nature of marriage is profound and is having negative consequences both inside and outside the church today. Writing on the foundation of Christian marriage, Weaver (2009) opined that, Christians typically consider marriage as a covenant which is in resemblance with the covenant relationship between God and the Israelites as recounted in the Old Testament. In fact, this conception is central to a Christian theology of marriage.

Although religion predominate the composition of conduct, norms and serves as a pertinent criterion in regulating not only marriage but also most of the behaviors of people (Onedera, 2008), modernization seen to have imprinted some influence on some theological provisions on marriage. In fact, Köstenberger (2011) argued that in recent times, marriage and the family are most often conceived as social conventions that can be entered into and disconnected by the marital partners at will. Intriguingly, many people are of the opinion that a marriage is worth sustaining only if it meets the needs of both individuals involved and is also advantageous to both partners. The most unfortunate part of it is that, a partner's decision to end a marriage relationship and entering into a so-called new, better marital union must not be legally prohibited as their self-interest, self-realization, and self-fulfillment matters the most and projects the institution of marriage as merely a contract.

In this paper, a spectrum of different dimensions of biblical theology of marriage would be discussed with the hope of re-educating and reviving the intention of God for marriage as well as noting where the diversions that have led to the misconstrued notion of marriage; emphasizing only on the benefit of an individual in a marital relationship originates from.

Marriage in Ancient times

In Africa and many other cultures in ancient history, the main purpose of marriage was to bind women to men and also authenticate his biological offspring as heirs. As was the custom, women became men's property through marriage. In the betrothal ceremony of ancient Greece for instance, a father would hand over his daughter with these words: "I pledge my daughter for the purpose of producing legitimate offspring." (The week staff, 2015). Intriguingly, marrying several wives was common among the ancient Hebrews. In fact, according to *The week staff* (2015), married Greeks and Romans has the leverage to satisfy their sexual urges with concubines, prostitutes, and even teenage male lovers, while their wives were required to stay home and tend to the household and if their wives failed to produce offspring, their husbands could give them back and marry someone else.

Biblical Roots of Marriage

Based on scriptures; especially in the second creation story, marriage was instituted by God as the pinnacle of creation. The passage reads: “it is not good for a man to be alone; I will make a suitable partner for him.” (Genesis 2:18). Since therefore both man and woman were made for each other, they are equal in dignity. This passage accentuates this fact as contained in this verse: “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). This clearly shows that marriage is a divine agenda that not even sin can destroy. Even though it ruptured the original communion between man and woman, it did not destroy it. Nonetheless, there are several passages indicating the indissolubility of marriage as well as an injunction to abide in love as married couples. In the first place, Jesus in his teaching, recreated marriage as a permanent union of husband and wife ordained by God (Matthew 19:6-11). More so, St. Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians, enjoins husbands and wives to live in love as exemplified in Christ’s love for the church (Ephesians 5:22-6).

Theological Dimensions of Marriage

In this segment of this work, some fundamental dimensions of marriage as contained in some scriptural passages in both the Old and New testaments are discussed in detail. These dimensions include marriage as: a covenant, sacrament, contract, vocation and celebration.

a. Marriage as a Covenant

According to Roberts (2007), covenant denotes the special relation between God and humankind and between people (especially in marriage), and is deeply embedded in creation; giving it significance and purpose. Indeed, covenant is a type of familial bond based on an oath. The Hebrew word for covenant *berit* means to “bind” or to “fetter” and in its etymology the word means to bind together by blood (Leviticus 1:5). Similar to the Israelite’s connotation of Yahweh as the husband to Israel; His chosen bride (Isaiah 54:5) and being portrayed as the jealous husband, Israel as an unfaithful wife, He (Yahweh) is willing and ready to set aside His righteous anger, to offer pardon on repentance, and through a new covenant more perfect than the first to accept Israel (Hosea 2:17-20). This explains the fact that marriage is a deliberate union of two parties ready to ensure their togetherness for life.

In essence however, a covenant is a contract between two parties established by God who is also the witness and the same one safeguarding the union. From this standpoint, marriage is a covenant that is entered into by the husband and the wife before God as a witness. Since it is ultimately God who has joined the marriage partners together, the

husband and the wife vow to each other abiding loyalty and fidelity till death do them part. By implication, a marriage entered into before God involves three persons: a husband, a wife, and God. For this reason, it is not self-interest, human advantage, or an unfettered commitment to personal freedom that governs the marriage relationship, but the husband and wife's joint commitment to conduct their marriage based on God's design and sovereign plan (Köstenberger, 2011).

Köstenberger (2004) thereafter pointed to the fact that covenantal marriage is not only permanent, sacred, intimate, and mutual, but is also exclusive based on the following biblical texts Genesis 2:22–25 and 1 Corinthians 7:2–5. Hence, no other relationship should interfere with the marriage commitment between husband and wife. Furthermore, he stated that all forms of sexual relations outside wedlock are illegitimate and should be considered so while making reference to the book so Songs of Solomon. He writes:

Marriage can best be described as a covenant (or a creation ordinance with covenantal features), a sacred bond between a man and a woman, instituted by and publicly entered before God (whether or not this is acknowledged by the married couple) normally consummated by sexual intercourse. (Köstenberger, 2004, 91)

Scripturally, marriage is a sacred bond that is characterized by permanence, sacredness, intimacy, mutuality and exclusiveness and must be respected as such.

b. Marriage as Sacrament

Marriage as an institution ordained by God is accompanied by his graces. Generally, Christians hold the belief that at the exchange of vows, God seals the bridegroom and his wife in love to live together till do death do them part. (Mk 10:9). More so, in cooperating with the grace of God to live together in love and fidelity, the married couples continue to enjoy the blessing of God of which bearing offspring is one among many of such great divine gifts. In the New Testament Jesus established the same truths that is contained in the book of Genesis when God instituted marriage. He said:

Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate." (Mt: 19:4-6)

It is in these words of Jesus that we find the essence of the Sacrament of Marriage in the Church: a sacred union, instituted by Christ, between a man and a woman.

Consequently, Jesus' presence at the wedding feast at Cana validates the marriage union between a man and His wife (John 2:1-11). Significant to His presence on that wedding

feast was His attendant to the need of the couple for wine as they were running short of it to entertain their guests. This act of companion shown by Jesus illustrates His willingness to bless married couples who before God and other Christians present at their wedding, take oath of love and fidelity as promises to each other.

Kasper (1981) went further to state that, the sacramental nature of marriage cannot be proved by using individual words of institution. It is more important therefore, to explain that marriage is a sacrament because it is fundamentally related to the saving work of Jesus Christ. Hence, St. Paul upheld the view that those who are married in the Lord experience and mirror the love which Jesus has for his Church (1 Corinthians 7:39; Ephesians 5: 21-33).

c. Marriage as Contract

Although the terms contract and covenant do not totally oppose each other but the latter encompasses the former because certain contractual agreement must be met to attain the ultimate covenant for which Christian marriage is built. Biblical reference to the contract of marriage as found in Genesis 24 when the servants of Abraham were instructed by Him to go to his kinsmen to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac. In verse 15 of that chapter, we are told that God guided the servants to a maiden named Rebekah. Thereafter, haven discovered that she was from Abraham's lineage, the servants went to see her family and after been asked if she would like to marry Isaac, she responded in affirmation and was then married to him. As was the custom, the servant gave garments and gold to Rebekah and to her brother and mother as gifts for accepting their proposal. (Genesis 24:52-53). The payment was a dowry paid in exchange for Rebekah and to the family (Genesis 24:52-61). This was the legal marriage agreement or marriage contract of the times. Similarly, the book of Genesis gives a narrative about Jacob who decided to work for seven years in order to marry Rachel. Instead of getting married to Leah; whom obviously he did not want, Jacob accepted to work for Laban to get married to Rachel (Genesis 29:18). These instances given therefore explains the fact that albeit Judaism and Christianity hold the position that marriage is more than a contract, it is sometimes evident in some of the preparatory rites for marriage as it were.

d. Marriage as a Vocation

Jesus made it clear that marriage is not for everyone when he said in Matthew 19:11-12:

Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.

For a better understanding of marriage as a vocation, marriage is considered a gift and a task whose elements include: vocation to exist, to love, to the sacramental relationship, to transmission of life, to communion and community of persons, to apostolate and the vocation to holiness.

- i. *Calling into existence:* for a Christian who is learning the mysteries of marriage and who treats marriage as a vocation, the theological aspect of this reality is of great importance. The Creator calls man into existence, which becomes a way of living and of uniting with Him. In such a way God bestows man with the human nature which gives particular emphasis to the intimate relationships of femininity and masculinity as well as to the vocation directed at creating a family human being into existence, distinguished him among other creatures (Gen 1: 26-28).
- ii. *Vocation to love:* the vocation of marriage should refer to the role of love in marriage. Documents of the Second Vatican Council teaches about the value of the personal conjugal love. a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). God is the origins of this love as He, as the first one, loved man (see 1J 4:19). God’s love is revealed as He sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him (1J 4:9).
- iii. *Sacramental relationship:* from the beginning Christ showed the role for marriage and the family in His plan of salvation (see Eph. 5:32). Teaching about marriage He quotes the words from the Book of Genesis adding: “a man shall leave (his) father and (his) mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (see. Mt 17,5; Mk 10,7; 5,31). Baptism of the spouses is the foundation of the dignity of the sacrament of marriage, as it makes them irrevocably belong to the nuptial covenant of God and His Church (Rom 11:29). In the sacrament of marriage Christ gives the man to the woman and the woman to the man in order to make them realize the mystery of salvation which the spouses are to spread all over the world.
- iv. *Vocation for procreation:* family based on marriage is the place meant by God for every human being who is born to this world. This is referenced in Matthew 1:28 as thus: And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that move upon the earth.
- v. *Vocation to community and to the communion of persons:* family as a

community participates in the nature of the Church. It is called “the community of faith, hope and love” which indicates the deeply theological nature of the community of persons in the Church. Furthermore, the Church constitutes a family community called the community of life and love. Speaking of the community of persons we should refer to the Holy Trinity as the basic example of the perfect unity of persons. God’s love and the love of man to woman are the foundation of the conjugal communion. Man and woman are predestined to create *communio personarum*. The theological dimensions to the vocation of community and to the communion of persons is “one flesh which couples share by virtue of marriage (Gen 2:24).

- vi. *Vocation to the apostolate*: apostolate of the laity means the participation of the lay people in the saving mission of the Church through implementing this mission in Church and in the world. Marriage and the family are also present among the targets of apostolate since the Creator of all things has established the conjugal society basis of the human society and, by His grace, has made it a great mystery in Christ and the Church (Eph 5 and 32). Therefore, the apostolate of married persons and families is of unique importance for the Church and civil society”. Continuing the thought, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church indicates that the life in marriage and in the family constitutes a perfect school of apostolate which permeates human life with Christian piety. While learning about their vocation spouses realize that they should “find their proper vocation in being witnesses of the faith and love of Christ to one another and to their children” (LG 35).
- vii. *The call to holiness*: the call to holiness is addressed to everyone, however, at the same time, it is a personal vocation. Therefore, every baptized person can and should treat his life as an occasion to answer God’s call. Wherever it is poured out, it makes its transforming presence felt, often in mysterious ways, even to the point that “the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband” (1 Cor. 7:14). Therefore, it is the mission of spouses to help the unbelieving spouse to discover God’s love while experiencing their common conjugal reality.

e. Marriage as a celebration

The bible presents an aspect of marriage that surpasses the responsibility, the difficulties, the pitfalls and the failures. It gives the picture of marriage as a celebration and a cause for celebration. This celebration factor therefor implies that God not only uses marriage to portray His relationship with his people, but also serves as a picture of the ultimate

celebration at the end of time. At the marriage supper of the lamb, Christ and his people are brought together to a final and inseparable union (Bardsley, 2004). Furthermore, Bardsley, (2004) highlights four characteristic features that describe marriage as a celebration. They are:

- i. *Marriage is a good thing* (Gen. 24:67, Deut. 24:5; 20:7, Prov. 18:2; 19:14, 31:10-31): one major factor for the celebration of marriage established is that since it is not good for a man to be alone, God created a wife for Adam to make it 'good'. This is clearly expressed in the words of Adam after God had created a help maid for him when he said: "this now is the bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."
- ii. *A reason for rejoicing* (Ps. 19:4-5, Is. 61:10, Jer. 33:11, Mat. 9:15): from the following biblical passages, marriage is presented as a public occasion for rejoicing and sustained personal joy.
- iii. *A celebration of love*: The book Songs of Songs (sometimes called songs of Solomon) describes Christ's love for His church and equally enjoins married couples to love each other in the same way. In marriage therefore, God uses the union of husband and wife as showcase the climax of his salvation purposes; since Christ and the church are both united forever.
- iv. *A prophetic picture of the ultimate event of God's calendar* (Eph. 5:25-27): The use of the word bridegroom by Jesus Christ creates a joyful anticipation for a more perfect celebration at the end of time. Even though many people today see marriage as everything but permanent, it is indeed a real-life object lesson of the love God has for his people, of the joy-filled, eternal union of Christ and his church.

Recommendations

In order to other to enrich this sphere of theological studies, the following recommendations are made:

- a. Irrespective of the different denominations we have as Nigerian Christians, there should be an untainted interpretation of the core foundations of marriage as an institution of love ordained by God himself that is free from ambiguity.
- b. However, married couples should not neglect the emotional, financial, physical and spiritual availability of themselves to each other.
- c. There should be seminars and workshops for married couples that will afford them the opportunity to work on their weaknesses and strengthen their love for one another by churches.

Conclusion

The various dimensions of marriage traced from scriptures explains to some extent the different orientations held by different Christian denominations today. Nonetheless, the different notions of marriage discussed in this work portray one vital point; which is the fact that God is the creator of marriage between a man and a woman for the purpose of companionship and subduing the earth as commanded. Hence, irrespective of the various explanations held by Christians today, God's creation of marriage is appreciated and regarded as a beautiful gift of God to humanity.

Nonetheless, there are obviously many crisis facing marriage and family life in this dispensation. Although having political, social, and economic undertones, the spiritual perspective drawn from the Bible provides an original and authentic explanation to the intention of God for instituting marriage. Conspicuously, the Bible teaches that God instituted marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman to live together as husband and wife for a lifetime in His image to subdue the earth and take care of it. Thus, blessing married couples with offspring for His glory and the good of humanity. These theological dimensions discussed in this paper therefore serve as a pointer to the original plan of God for the institution of marriage as well as the foundation on which every Christian marriage ought to emulate.

Consequently, a healthy society is possible when couples relying on God's grace produce offspring whom they are expected to nurture in the fear of God and compliance to his ordinances so as to continue in the cycle of building healthy Christian families who would in turn create positive impact in the society.

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